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DESTROYER OF WORLDS:
WAR AND APOCALYPSE IN THE NUCLEAR EPOCH

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ABSTRACT

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Destroyer of Worlds: War and Apocalypse in the Nuclear Epoch

Destroyer of Worlds is an interdisciplinary study of the nuclear epoch, emphasizing its theological and philosophical origins and implications. Its core argument is that the purpose of the Manhattan Project was to end war in general, not hasten the end of a particular war. The scientists and politicians who collaborated on the atomic bomb's creation believed that its war-time detonation would be a form of revelatory annihilation, triggering a miraculous chain-reaction which would convert humanity to pacifism. Though they successfully invented and deployed the new superweapon, they failed to engineer their miracle. The dissertation goes on to ask why, examining how the world and humanity were forever changed by the burning of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and also the ways in which they remained the same by closely reading primary historical documents, philosophical and political commentaries, and an array of art objects, both literary and visual.

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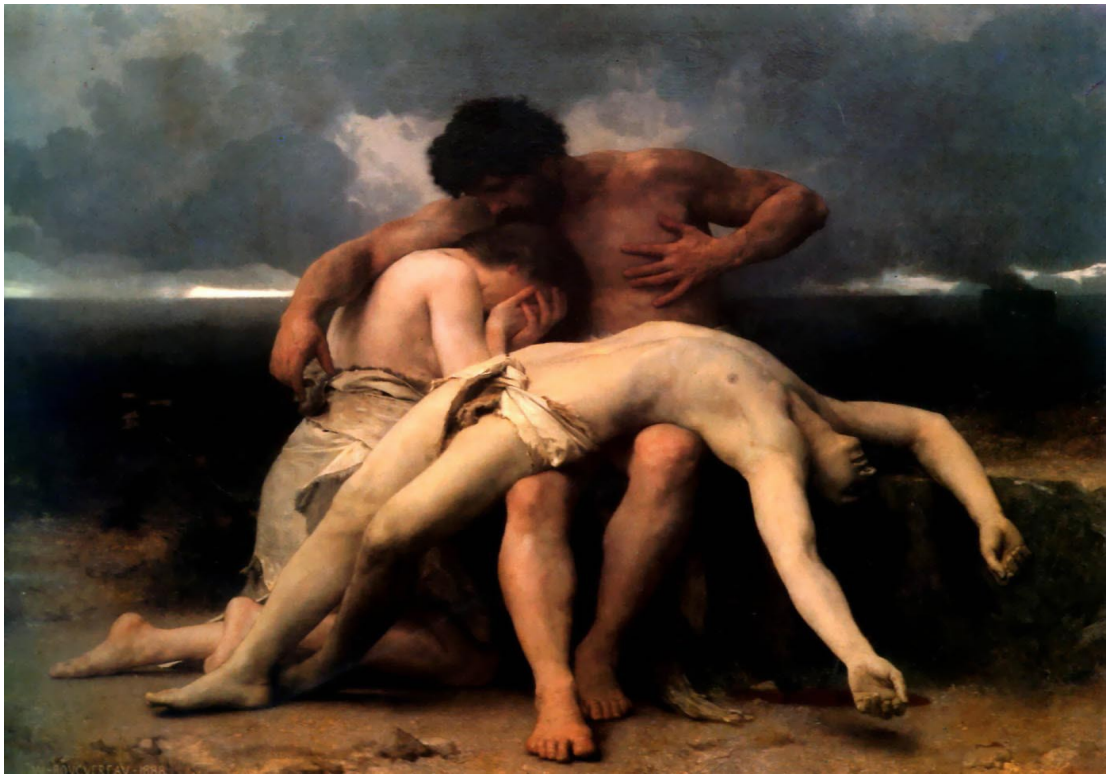
First and foremost, I would like to thank my committee members: Joseph Natoli, David Marriott, and Robert Meister. This dissertation reflects each of them and in so many ways would not be possible without their excessively generous intellectual and existential support. I suspect that from time to time they will see themselves (or a version warped by my mind) in these pages and cringe. My apologies, gentlemen—perhaps you taught me too well. For my students in Santa Cruz, at universities both visible and invisible, who were such noble companions in the great adventure of thought lo these seven years, I also offer my deepest gratitude. Finally, I wish to thank Norman O. Brown, or his wild spirit, which visited me often as I wrote this in a library made of concrete and glass, a building swarmed by groves of the giant redwood trees he loved, full of the books he still haunts with adoration.

Now, I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.

—J. Robert Oppenheimer

Introduction: Why War?



The plain truth is that people want war. They want it anyhow: for itself, and apart from each and every possible consequence. It is the final bouquet of life's fireworks. The born soldier wants it hot and actual. The non-combatant wants it in the background, and always as an open possibility, to feed his imagination. War is human nature at its uttermost. We are here to do our uttermost. It is a sacrament. Society would rot without the mystical blood-payment.

—William James, "Remarks at the Peace Banquet"

We are still waiting, still unsure, as the great nuclear cataclysm prophesied by so many in the years after 1945 remains a non-event. Everything that this so-called "destroyer of worlds" once destroyed has been rebuilt (and rebuilt again many times over). Interstate war is far less common now and less bloody, though it remains quite costly and must be constantly threatened, even when nations are at peace. Perhaps it is the appearance of peacefulness that keeps us from asking, "why are we still here, despite all the forewarning?" Was it madness that drove the wild-eyed man draped in sandwich boards to proclaim, in the previous century, that the world would soon be consumed in the fires of nuclear war? Now that the world has outlasted visionaries like him, is it safe to declare their vision false? Even this question seems past its time. These days the culture industry is transfixed by a different order of nightmares; in politics, the sign of the enemy threat has assumed other forms; and as for the doomsday prophets roving our city streets, they now carry clipboards and warn of other immanent catastrophes. But what happened to the nuclear issue in the years after attention shifted elsewhere? Did the world grow safer with each passing day? Did the perilous risks of nuclear armament diminish over time? Did the bomb cease being the indisputable backbone of

international relations? And are we at risk, if responding in the affirmative, of mistaking the non-event of the past for the guaranteed continuation of our present? That unthinking conflation—believing that the world will not burn simply because it has not already burned—is at the heart of the many problems addressed by the present study, now that the appearance of a peaceful nuclear stalemate, insofar as it dampened the burning questions of war, may have become a danger to itself.

When the non-event of nuclear war is attributed to something other than dumb luck, which is to say, when it is claimed to be the direct result of human control, it is linked to either a deterrent balance of terror or to an idealistic "taboo" against nuclear weapons use normatively imposed by political and religious stigmatization.[1] On some accounts the nuclear taboo has transcended its apparent origin in the brutish logic of

1 The dumb luck theory was offered up by former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara: "Errol Morris, in *The Fog of War*, asks McNamara what he thinks protected humanity from extinction during the Cold War, when the United States and Soviet Union permanently threatened each other with mutual annihilation. Deterrence? Not at all, McNamara replies: 'We lucked out.' Twenty-five or thirty times during this period, he notes, mankind came within an inch of the apocalypse [sic]." Quoted by Jean-Pierre Dupuy in *The Mark of the Sacred*, trans. M.B. DeBevoise (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 184. Deterrence is the older of the latter two explanations, a position well-articulated by Kenneth Waltz in *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959). For the more recent theory of the taboo as springing from normative design, see Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

deterrence and become a positive expression of altruistic human intent. There is, however, another way to account for the taboo, one that retains a deep bond with the murderous logic of deterrence theory and emphasizes the darker side of human desire that often overwhelms our good intentions. This obscene underside of the taboo returns the concept to its modern roots in Freudian psychoanalysis and the sociological theology of René Girard.[2] Both thinkers, despite their many differences, trace taboos back to the sacred, which implies (typically violent) sacrificial expenditure. The taboo is for them an effect of the sacred, one intended to arrest the impulse to kill or engage in incest, for example. To prohibit these horrors, they argue that society must pay a steep, bloody price. In other words, the desire to kill or engage in illicit sex must be ritualistically sated, not repressed or wished away, as that would only postpone the inevitable.

Approaching the nuclear taboo through the work of Freud and Girard, the

2 The canonical texts for these articulations of the taboo are Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*: Resemblances Between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics, trans. A.A. Brill (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1919) and René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977). Dupuy, in particular, is deeply influenced by the latter: "The arguments that I present in this book grow out of my struggle for more than thirty years now to come to grips with the thought of René Girard." Dupuy, *Mark of the Sacred,* 15.

sacred can therefore be understood to *contain* violence in three senses of the word: encompassing the originary blood sacrifice of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the prophylactic functions of deterrence, and those extraordinary acts of violence required when enemies, acting "irrationally," are undeterred by the threat of annihilation.[3] That said, the present analysis does not set out to artificially press the entirety of the nuclear problematic into either a Freudian or Girardian framework. Their thinking on the sacred is only tangentially related to the dissertation's theoretical edifice, though the dissertation does, in the end, uncover much in the complex history of the bomb that would confirm what Freud observed among the savages of *Totem and Taboo*. For now, their contributions should only be taken as a necessary counterpoint to the more vogue explanations for the nuclear non-event that credit the role of human intentionality. The split between the two accounts of the nuclear taboo raises a host of questions. Would it be a potentially grave mistake to consider ourselves the active authors of the taboo in the present and not its distant inheritors? How does one locate

3 Dupuy, *Mark of the Sacred*, 193. This is a modification of the argument that there are two senses in which the sacred "contains" violence: the violence implicit in the originary act of sacrifice and the consequent taboo.

the historicity of the taboo? Is history after 1945 the period of time that comes after the last nuclear war or the time that comes before the final one? Was the atomic bombing of Japan the sacramental seal which brought the era of inter-imperial conventional warfare to a close or did the bombers unleash a new and unprecedented period of violence, an all-consuming progression of war, the fire to end all fires, towards which the present moment fatalistically counts down? Without coming to grips with the source of this apparent taboo against the use of nuclear weapons, how can we be sure that the sense of omnipotence which the non-event has afforded us thus far is trustworthy in the long run?

At bottom, these contrary readings of the nuclear taboo diverge on the foundational question of desire: what do we *really* want? Or, more pointedly, to what extent does intentionality reflect *the real* of desire? Of course deterrence presupposes an answer, but with one important caveat, an implicit limitation—though what we want is to liquidate our adversaries, this desire can be curbed by the fear of death. We will not kill ourselves in order to kill, but absent the immediate risk of death, we will kill in order to maximize gains at the expense of our rivals. In contrast, the hopeful version of

the taboo theory insists that what we want is peace, and that violence can be restrained by the energies of pacifism if they are applied with cunning. The nuclear taboo is presented as the actualization of a collective wish for peace. Or, pace Freud and Girard, is the taboo necessary because war—an all-out nuclear war as the final bouquet of life's fireworks—is war what we really want when we pretend to be satisfied with calls for peace? Do we sometimes kill in order to feel more alive, no matter the consequences, without hope for remuneration? For them, the plain truth is that the prohibition against incestuous sex is only necessary because it is, on occasion, both desirable and possible, as someone like Oedipus could attest to. Others, such as young Pierre in Georges Bataille's novel *Ma Mère*, are driven further still.[4] His sexual desire for his mother is not subdued by knowledge. Unlike Oedipus, he willfully overcomes the incest taboo and joyously mocks the law. His desire even transcends death, as Pierre finally bids adieu to his mother's corpse in the last scene by ejaculating into her casket. The existence of the taboo implies a prior thirst for oblivion, the desire to kill and be killed, a desire that burns so hot that it cannot be cooled by concern for self-preservation. If the all too

4 Georges Bataille, *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man*, tran. Austryn Wainhouse (London: Marion Boyars. 1989).

human desire for murderous violence is to be curtailed, forces much stronger than rationality, altruism, and the survival instinct must be deployed, and even then, the world is full of people like Pierre who remind us that even the most sacred taboos are not unassailable.

Not only does the combined work of Freud and Girard on the taboo allow us to think the non-event otherwise, it also sets us on an entirely different trajectory when we fold the nuclear issue back into the larger and enduring questions of war that have accompanied human civilization from the very beginning, questions that must retain their original theological, political, and philosophical scope if they are to be asked in earnest. Unfortunately these are questions whose formulation still requires a further clarification of terms, as *taboo* is but one of the overwrought and distorted words that must be carefully restored if the dissertation is to build its argument on solid ground. The other key terms degraded by the vast literatures on the nuclear peril and by their usage in modern parlance are *holocaust* and *apocalypse*. Giorgio Agamben provides this instructive etymological history as he attempts to sever the link between the word "holocaust" and the Nazi "Final Solution" in his work *Remnants of Auschwitz*:

> "Holocaust" is the scholarly transcription of the Latin *holocaustum* which, in turn, is a translation of the Greek term *holocaustos* (which is, however, an adjective, and which means "completely burned"; the corresponding Greek noun is *holocaustoma*). The semantic history of the term is essentially Christian, since the Church Fathers used it to translate—in face with neither rigor nor coherence—the complex sacrificial doctrine of the Bible (in particular, of Leviticus and Deuteronomy) . . . early on, the Church Fathers used the terms in its literal sense as a polemical weapon against the Jews, to condemn the uselessness of bloody sacrifices (Tertullian's text, which refers to Marcion, is exemplary: *Quid stultius . . . quam sacrificiorum cruentorum et holocaustomatum nidorosurum a deo exactio*? "What is more foolish than a god who demands bloody sacrifices and holocausts that smell of burnt remains?" *Adversus Marcionem* 5, 5; cf. also Augistine, C., *Faustusm*, 19, 4).[5]

The attempted extermination of the European Jewry by the Nazis, if it can even be associated with something like a purpose, should not be mistaken for ritual burning, a blood sacrifice offered up to God, says Agamben. The term's anti-Semitic history in early Christian usage only adds insult to etymological error. Agamben's critique does however link the term back up with the primary components of the taboo, darkly conceived—"bloody sacrifices" and the "smell of burnt remains" offered up to God. The pejorative dimensions of this worn-out signifier are also worth retaining for they

5 Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*: The Witness and the Archive, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2002), 28-9. And later, on p. 31: "Not only does the term imply an unacceptable equation between crematoria and altars; it also continues a semantic heredity that is from its inception anti-Semitic. This is why we will never make use of this term."

imply their own cutting question for the killers who partake in such rituals: could a God appeased by blood be worth worshiping?

The last of the warped terms in need of restoration—apocalypse—derived from the Greek *apocálypsis*, means uncovering, a lifting of the veil, a sudden appearance of the invisible from within the visible, a revelation.[6] More specifically, it is a revelation that allows for the traversal of worlds. This, according to Jacques Derrida, is precisely what cannot possibly occur post-1945, what is structurally foreclosed in "the nuclear age," when every assertion of truth represents nothing more (or less) than an untested leap of faith:

> One can no longer oppose belief and science, *doxa* and *episteme*, once one has reached the decisive place of the nuclear age, in other words, once one has arrived at the critical place of the nuclear age. In this critical place, there is no more room for a distinction . . . Nor even for a truth in that sense. No truth, no apocalypse. (As you know. Apocalypse means Revelation, of Truth, Un-veiling).[7]

These lines bring us closer to the deeper meaning of "destroyer of worlds," the turn of

6 See also Malcolm Bull, "Apocalypse," in *Seeing Things Hidden* (London: Verso, 1999), 47-99.

7 Jacques Derrida, "No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)" in *Diacritics* 14, No. 2 (Summer 1984), 24.

phrase made famous by Oppenheimer on his enormously popular post-war publicity tour. The data that proves what the nuclear age will have been is by definition irretrievable, just as the belief that projects what the age will be cannot bear witness to what it finally becomes. Humanity is now deprived of the opportunity to pass into another world so as to gain adequate perspective on this one. For Derrida, the atomic bomb did not bring about the next iteration of a world so much as it put a permanent stop on the prior temporal procession of worlds. Beyond the end of history, the "ahistorical horizon:"

> a nuclear *epoch* (by nuclear "epoch," I also mean the *epoche* suspending judgment before the absolute decision) . . . is not an epoch, it is the absolute *epoche*; it is not absolute knowledge and the end of history, it is the *epoche* of absolute knowledge . . . the historical and ahistorical horizon of an absolute self-destruction.[8]

Derrida later replaces the word age with the more appropriate term, epoch, adding the following qualification: what is revealed by the emergence of the nuclear epoch, for Derrida, is the end of revelation, classically understood. There will be "no apocalypse, not now."[9] His careful use of the word apocalypse keeps its proper distance from the

8 Ibid, 27.

9 Ibid.

idea of eschatology, the study of the last, the *eschatos*, the final ending, the foreboding anticipation of total death without renewal. The apocalyptic is unconcerned about the end due to his fixation on the impossible possibility of new worlds which would emerge in the time before the coming *eschaton*, thereby postponing it.

After restoring the terms taboo, holocaust, and apocalypse to their roots, new answers can be supplied for many of the old and still deeply troubling questions prompted by the expectation of nuclear war. More importantly though, the conceptual and etymological restoration also allows for an altogether different analytic trajectory, one that cuts across and supersedes our long-standing debates over nuclear proliferation, custodianship, and use. The lines of inquiry pursued by the dissertation are not only novel but necessary. Without them, much of the nuclear epoch, particularly the story of its emergence, would remain shrouded in mystery. Take for example the case of the Polish physicist Joseph Rotblatt, who resigned from the Manhattan Project after the fall of Berlin. What remains mysterious is why he was the only one to quit, given that so many of the Project members in the post-war years framed their work as a response to the looming threat of a Nazi war machine equipped

with nuclear armaments. If the motives were all essentially reactive, why did this group of scientists, many of whom self-identified as pacifist or anarchist, press on after it was clear that Germany had been neutralized? More troubling still, why did they continue to pursue the atomic bomb when it was obvious to the Allied powers that Japanese surrender (and thus the end of the war) was imminent? The argument advanced here is that the Manhattan Project was not essentially reactive. Its core members were galvanized by a vision that had nothing to do with subduing a particular enemy or hastening the end of a specific war. They believed in what they were doing regardless of the immediate historical circumstances. Their actions were not oppositional but affirmative.

After fleshing out a new history of the Manhattan Project that illuminates these enabling beliefs, the dissertation goes on to examine the ways in which the Project enjoyed limited success in inspiring the work of those scientists, philosophers, and artists for whom the atomic bombings Japan constituted an evental rupture that changed everything. The profound difficulty in approaching the thought of these individuals subjectivated by what the vision of nuclear war revealed to them is that such subjects,

by definition, insist their transformative inner experience relativizes everything which preceded it. Hence in their eyes every epistemological and ontological issue must be re-framed by the nuclear apocalypse (and not vice-versa). For them, any attempt to frame the deep implications of the bomb with an exogenous philosophical framework fails before it ever gets underway. What further complicates the study of these faithful subjects is that many of them are embedded in the material history of the bomb's creation and first use. The premiere thinkers of the atomic bomb acted upon their thoughts with what they believed to be a prophetic mandate. As the dissertation closely reads the story of the atomic bomb, philosophy, prophecy, art, and politics all dramatically collide in historical time. The challenge is to analyze the bomb from within that knotted history, to think the theology of the atomic bomb, for example, not from the standpoint of potted religious critiques but in terms of the beliefs that united H.G. Wells, J. Robert Oppenheimer, and Harry S. Truman; to discuss it philosophically but not in terms of a remote connection to some prefabricated epistemology or ethics; to assess it politically but well outside the partisan, zero-sum schema of support or condemnation. To deny the unprecedented nature of these modes

of thinking and speaking by an over-determining act of interpretation is at best to obscure them and at worst invalidate them. Failing to register the uncanny embeddedness of these ideas and their authors in the machinations of world history also deprives them of their full significance.

It is of course much easier to assess the embeddedness of Continental thought in the fight against National Socialism—how that assortment of European philosophers both commented on and were ensnared by struggle against Nazism. The many searing philosophical indictments of Nazism and its death camps in that intellectual tradition, like Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* or Franz Neumann's *Behemoth*, join ranks in the historical record with the philosophers who actively opposed the Third Reich as soldiers on the front or members of an underground resistance, like Albert Camus and Simon Weil, as well as those who were held captive during the war and those who perished in its midst, like Walter Benjamin and Valentin Feldman.[10] To isolate one side from the other, to consider either the lived

10 Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment,* trans. Edmund Jephcott and ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism 1933-1944* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

engagement with this history or the intellectual commentary separately, to gloss over their interpretation, would be to grossly misrepresent both. What is striking about the philosophy attendant to this period of strife is that it also expressed itself in the non-textual, on the concrete terrain of material experience. In constant flux, one side informed and shaped the other. Examples abound. For instance, the horrific side of bureaucratic rationality exposed by Hannah Arendt in her treatise on the trial of Adolf Eichmann can also be read in the death of Henri Bergson, who succumbed to a bout of bronchitis brought on by waiting, in the freezing cold, to register as a Jew even after the Vichy regime offered to excuse him from Nazi registration on the basis of his prior conversion to Catholicism.[11]

The point is that the remarkable individuals featured in the pages of this dissertation were not *of* their times so much as they *were* their times. Continental thought, albeit to a much lesser degree, given that the formative events happened so far removed from the European continent, is also embedded in the historical emergence and formation of the nuclear epoch. This is a topic that scrambles discursive registers,

11 Simon Critchley, *The Book of Dead Philosophers* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), 219.

driving scientists and politicians to make philosophical and theological arguments, leading philosophers invoke the name of God while drafting manifestos and petitioning nation-states, and calling artists to sound the trump of both revelation and revolution; of course the same phenomena is superficially illustrated by the ongoing crossover from academia to nuclear statecraft (deterrence theory, after all, was a university creation imported to Washington D.C. along with its creators). As with the above example of the combined philosophical and literal fight against Nazism, many philosophers commented on the bomb from the outside looking in, but there were also occasions of direct collision, featured in the subsequent chapters, in which the line between commentary and involvement blurred: Georges Bataille's correspondence with and effect on Marguerite Duras (author and screenwriter of *Hiroshima mon amour*), Günther Anders's interactions with Claude Eatherly (pilot of the reconnaissance aircraft *Straight Flush* that accompanied the *Enola Gay* on its famous bomb run), and the Manhattan physicist Leo Szilard and his visionary reading of H.G. Wells. Yet the high point of this interpenetration of life, thought, and world history manifested in the decade before the war in the form of open letters exchanged by Albert Einstein and

Sigmund Freud in the early 1930's. They were later published and widely distributed by a subsidiary of the League of Nations in German, French, and English in 1933 under the title, "Why War?"[12]

"Is it not significant," asked Albert Einstein in the first unpublished letter, that people like "Jesus, Goethe, and Kant . . . have been universally recognized as leaders, even though their desire to affect the course of human affairs proved quite ineffective?"[13] Three figures—Christ, the great German writer and statesmen, and the modern philosopher—all of them leaving a legacy of revolutionary change while proving largely ineffectual in their own times. Must their contemporary counter-parts resign themselves to similar fates: ignored, martyred, dying without witnessing the material impact of their thought? What if such people, living contemporaneously, had

12 A footnote provided by Strachey on p. 273 of "Why War?" in his *Collected Papers*, Vol. V, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1959): "*Warum Krieg? w*as the title of an interchange of open letters between Professor Albert Einstein and Freud. This formed one of a series of interchanges arranged by the International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation under the auspices of the League of Nations, and was first published simultaneously in German, French, and English in Paris in 1933." The open letters were bracketed by personal notes from Einstein to Freud, the first soliciting his participation and the last warmly thanking him for his reply.

13 Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions,* trans. Sonja Bargman and ed. Carl Seelig. (New York: The Modern Library, 1994), 114.

banded together and actively tried to manipulate the governmental and social orders of their day? This is precisely what Einstein proposed to Freud, in the name of ending a world in which the naturalized idea of war serves as the governing principle of human affairs, something that societies believe they must necessarily cope with, natural disasters not unlike bad weather or plagues. As of yet, Einstein wrote, an "intellectual elite does not exercise any direct influence on the history of the world," but he, Freud, and others could break new ground.[14] He thought (and rightly so) they could change the world, though Einstein did acknowledge that pledging oneself to a group in this manner came with risks, that

> [s]uch an association would, of course, suffer from all the defects that have so often led to degeneration in learned societies; the danger that such a degeneration may develop is, unfortunately, ever present in view of the imperfections of human nature. However, and despite those dangers, should we not make at least an attempt to form such an association in spite of all dangers? It seems to me nothing less than an imperative duty![15]

After registering the risk of co-optation, Einstein appealed to Freud as if he were a luminary like Kant or a good shepherd like Christ, who may, quite unlike either,

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid, 115.

decisively impact the world while still alive. Not only could Freud do this if he so desired, Einstein considered his participation "nothing less than an imperative."

However Einstein admitted in the private letter that he was not extending Freud a ground floor invitation. Rather, Freud was being recruited to voice public support for an association of intellectuals which had already been deployed in secret, occupying positions of political power and scientific prestige all over world, committed to the "fight against war:"

> Once such an association of intellectuals—men of real stature—has come into being, it might then make an energetic effort to enlist religious groups in the fight against war. The association would give moral power for action to many personalities whose good intentions are today paralyzed by an attitude of painful resignation. I also believe that such an association of men, who are highly respected for their personal accomplishments, would provide important moral support to those elements in the League of Nations who actively support the great objective for which that institution was created.[16]

The association that Einstein alluded to in these lines—"Der Bund," a loose-knit group of believers in the marriage of science and religion formed by Leo Szilard who dedicated themselves to actualizing the dream of world peace through the abolition of war—is discussed at length in the dissertation's first chapter. The members of this

16 Ibid.

association, many of them refugee physicists, would later propose and subsequently populate the ranks of the Manhattan Project, and in this moment, through Einstein's overture, they sought guidance and an endorsement from Freud, a thinker who would come to have a tremendous impact on many of the Continental philosophers who would later issue damning critiques of the bomb and the scientists who built it.

Einstein soon provided the platform for Freud's response, which he hoped would serve as a public affirmation of solidarity, in an open letter which asked the question, "Is there any way of delivering mankind from the menace of war?"[17] The task of engineering deliverance, as Einstein was among the first to admit, faced dire odds: "It is common knowledge that, with the advance of modern science, this issue has come to mean a matter of life or death for Civilization as we know it; nevertheless, for all the zeal displayed, every attempt at its solution has ended in a lamentable breakdown."[18] Einstein had a solution in mind, a solution which gave his generic pacifism a very pointed political agenda. In this letter, as with the one that preceded it, he issued a call

17 Einstein, "Why War? An Exchange of Letters Between Freud and Einstein" accessed July 29, 2015, http://www.freud.org.uk/file-uploads/files/WHY%20WAR.pdf.

18 Ibid.

for world government, something like the League of Nations but more fully capable of guaranteeing the political conditions that world peace requires. Einstein brought his letter to a close by restating his initial question in more psychoanalytic terms: "And so we come to our last question. Is it possible to control man's mental evolution so as to make him proof against the psychosis of hate and destructiveness?"[19] Even if war has been outlawed and banished by the taboo, would it be possible for humanity to finally rid itself of its violent psychoses and end the cyclical eruptions of carnage?

Freud began his open reply by embracing Einstein as a kindred thinker concerned with "a problem on the frontiers of what is knowable" and agreed with him about the urgent need for global peace and a world government dedicated to (and capable of) enforcing it.[20] By responding to Einstein in this way, Freud was already tacitly acquiescing to what Einstein had asked of him, using his intellectual celebrity to stump for global governance and world peace. Before responding directly to Einstein's questions, he provided a disclaimer, noting that the subject at hand is better reserved for

19 Ibid.

20 Freud, "Why War?," 273.

the statesman trained in the arts of war and politics but that he would nonetheless hazard an answer from the standpoint of a clinical psychoanalyst. Freud first insisted that some violence is good, like the wars responsible for the rule of law historically overcoming rule by brute force. More than that, Freud reminded Einstein that law itself owes its power to the force of violence which backs it, writing, "We shall be making a false calculation if we disregard the fact that law was originally brute violence and that even to-day it cannot do without the support of violence."[21] Only a few years earlier, in his seminal *Civilization and its Discontents,* Freud had this to say about the "truth" behind the passions that drive war:

> The element of truth in all this, which people are so ready to disavow, is that men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbor is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. *Homo homini lupus* ['Man is a wolf to man.' Derived from Plautus, *Asinaria* II, iv, 88.] Who, in the face of all his experience of life and of history, will have the courage to dispute this assertion? As a rule this cruel aggressiveness waits for some provocation or puts

21 Ibid, 280.

> itself at the service of some other purpose, whose goal might also have been reached by milder measures. In circumstances that are favorable to it, when the mental counter-forces which normally inhibit it are out of action, it also manifests itself spontaneously and reveals man as a savage beast to whom consideration towards his own kind is something alien. Anyone who calls to mind the atrocities committed during racial migrations or the invasions of the Huns, or by the people known as Mongols under Jenghiz Khan and Tamerlane, or at the capture of Jerusalem by the pious Crusaders, or even, indeed, the horrors of the recent World War—anyone who calls these things to mind will have to bow humbly before the truth of this view.[22]

Thus for Freud, the most viable solution to the problem of human aggression was diversion. In his reply to Einstein he wrote, "In any case, as you yourself have remarked, there is no question of getting rid entirely of human aggressive impulses; it is enough to try to divert them to such an extent that they need not find expression in war"[23] In closing, Freud mentioned another potential cure, far less likely to succeed but also vastly more powerful, perhaps even miraculous—let the fire rage and it will burn itself out:

> How long have we to wait before the rest of men turn pacifist? Impossible to say, and yet perhaps our hope that these two factors—man's cultural disposition

22 Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1962), 58-9.

23 Freud, "Why War?," 283.

> and a well-founded dread of the form that future wars will take—may serve to put an end to war in the near future, is not chimerical. But by what ways or byways this will come about, we cannot guess. Meanwhile we may rest on the assurance that whatever makes for cultural development is working also against war.[24]

This "well-founded dread" capable of converting humanity to pacifism was precisely what Einstein thought the Manhattan Project would manufacture. Whereas Freud committed himself to pioneering diversionary tactics, Einstein returned to his camp emboldened in his dedication to the project of total conversion. Not only would the superweapon inspire dread, it would also endow a world government with sufficient force, as a nation flouting international law would theoretically risk annihilation. In 1934, Einstein proclaimed: "May the conscience and the common sense of the peoples be awakened, so that we may reach a new stage in the life of nations, where people will look have on war as an incomprehensible aberration of their forefathers!"[25] In the same vein he would later write, in the aftermath of the century's second Great War, that "The atomic scientists, I think, have become convinced that they cannot arouse the

24 Ibid, 287.

25 Einstein, "The Heirs of the Ages," 122.

American people to the truths of the atomic era by logic alone. There must be added that deep power of emotion which is a basic ingredient of religion."[26]

The pivotal idea born out of this open correspondence, that war could potentially secrete the antidote to its poison, that the burning desire for violence cannot be suppressed but may paradoxically be the key to war's erasure, set the nuclear epoch in motion well before "the gadget" was built.[27] The remainder of the dissertation tracks the historical unfolding of this idea, the pursuit of a form of war so horrific that it would produce a "well-founded dread," beginning with the first chapter, "Burn, and Make Me New," which focuses on the passage of time before the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan. The next chapter, "The Infernal Return," deals with the immediate aftermath of the bombing, the post-war years in which Freud and Einstein's dream of world government and a truly enduring peace died. "Still Remains," the third and final chapter, addresses itself to the distant aftermath, a period of time that extends from 1959 into the present. Each of the chapters feature individuals subjectivated by what the

26 Einstein, "Atomic War of Peace," 144.

27 "The gadget" was the code-name for first atomic bomb detonated in the Trinity test.

vision of nuclear war revealed to them, first in terms of the prophetic expectation of another world, then as a reaction to the sights of ruination at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and finally through representations of the event, even its simulacra. Together the three chapters tell the story of the nuclear epoch, albeit in a unconventional way. What distinguishes the present story from more conventional accounts is its attempt to allow the principal characters to speak for themselves, rather than narrating a history on their behalf. Many of their confessions, particularly those extracted from diaries and letters, are quite intimate. What is so profoundly interesting about them is not the ideas they came to symbolize but the changes they underwent, how the bomb forever marked them or how it eventually left them cold.

Wherever possible, the dissertation clings to the material, historical unfolding of the nuclear epoch at the expense of abstract theoretical speculation. That said, there are some ideas that sweep across the entirety of the work, often remaining in the background but nonetheless fundamental to the overall argument. The most significant of these is the largely unstated, though exhaustively documented, link between the imaginary and the real that enables the creative imagination (of the artist, the

philosopher, and the scientist) to prefigure and actually bring about the erosion of what was once deemed impossible. Time and again, the dissertation affirms a deep insight of Henri Bergson's:

> I believe in the end we shall consider it evident that the artist in executing his work *is creating the possible as well as the real* . . . as reality is created as something unpredictable and new, its image is reflected behind it into the indefinite past; thus it finds that it has from all time been possible, but it is at this precise moment that it *begins to have always been possible*, and that is why I said that its possibility, which does not precede its reality, will have preceded it once the reality has appeared.[28]

Bergson may seem inspirational in these lines, but in light of the explication of the nuclear epoch presented here, we should also take warning. Yes, the dreams of literature may pave the way through the apparently impossible, but the world often adds its own twist to the story. Good intentions, especially in the difficult quest for peace, often backfire.

The conclusion provides a final meditation on the themes of revelation and nuclear war by way of the Jonah paradox, which asks—in the future-perfect tense—what nuclear war will have meant, the more prophetic version of the open question

28 Henri Bergon quoted in Dupuy, *Mark of the Sacred,* 202.

(for now) that haunts the nuclear faithful. Once again Freud anticipated this dissertation in writing, at the very end of *Civilization and its Discontents*:

> The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction. It may be that in this respect precisely the present time deserves a special interest. Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man. They know this, and hence comes a large part of the current unrest, their unhappiness and their mood of anxiety. And now it is to be expected that the other two 'Heavenly Powers,' will make an effort to assert himself in the struggle with his equally immortal adversary. But who can foresee with what success and with what result?[29]

We are still hanging on the very edge of Freud's prophetic question, only now the battle of these immortal foes threatens to extinguish itself. In endeavoring to respond to Freud and to the question of "Why War?" more generally, there is a dedicated effort in these pages to not lose sight of this being a problem which resides "on the frontiers of what is knowable." The dissertation proceeds nevertheless with a story that must be told while there is still time to tell it.

29 Freud, *Civilization*, 92. "They know" through "adversary" are lines Freud "added in 1931—when the menace of Hitler was already beginning to be apparent."

I. **Burn**, **and Make Me New**: The Manhattan Church of Revelatory Annihilation

Batter my heart, three person'd God; for you
As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee, and bend
Your force to breake, blowe, burn, and make me new.

—John Donne, "Holy Sonnet XIV"

The Battered Heart of J. Robert Oppenheimer

In 1962, when asked in a letter from his former supervisor on the Manhattan Project, General Leslie R. Groves, if he codenamed the first atomic site "Trinity" in reference to the geographical features unique to the Jornada del Muerto (or "Route of the Dead Man") Desert basin in Alamogordo, New Mexico where the test explosion occurred, Oppenheimer replied, "I did suggest [the codename], but not on [that] ground . . . Why I chose the name is not clear, but I know what thoughts were in my mind. There is a poem of John Donne, written just before his death, which I know and love. From it a quotation:

> As West and East
> In all flatt Maps—and I am one—are one,
> So death doth touch the Resurrection."[30]

He continued, "That still does not make Trinity: but in another, better known devotional poem, Donne opens, 'Batter my heart, three-person'd God,' beyond this I have no clues whatsoever."[31] The verse of a metaphysical poet sourced the codename,

30 J. Robert Oppenheimer quoted in Richard Rhodes, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986), 571. Donne, "Hymn to God, My God, In My Sickness" and "Sonnet XIV."

31 Rhodes, ibid. The poem was included in the second posthumous publication of Donne's "Holy Sonnets," *Divine Meditations,* in 1635. It appeared as "Sonnet X" in that revised sequence and as

though Oppenheimer, nearly twenty years later, failed to remember or perhaps deliberately withheld the reasons why. The response, at once considerate and enigmatic, exhibited both his profound love of literature and the epic range of his famous intellect, but crucially, what he alluded to with this mysterious poetic reference was the abridged form of a belief structure, one not explicitly Christian but nonetheless based, in accordance with the theme of resurrection that unites the two Donne poems, on a heart-battering sequence of blood sacrifice, redemption, and salvation. Presiding over the creation of the atomic bomb and enabling its miraculous war-time detonation was Oppenheimer's "hymn to God:"

> Be this my text, my sermon to mine own
> "Therefore that he may raise, the Lord throws down."[32]

Given Oppenheimer's ambiguous reply, historians and biographers have, in recent years, speculated on the reasons why these lines from Donne would have occupied his mind at that time, attempting to fill the space his letter left blank. Some align the trinitarian aspects of the poem with the divine trinity Oppenheimer

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"Sonnet XIV" in the original Westmoreland manuscript of 1620.

32 Donne, "Hymn to God."

encountered in the *Bhagavad-Gita* (as in Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva the destroyer), which he was actively translating from Sanskrit while stationed in Los Alamos.[33] Others prefer a more literal and directly biographical explanation, arguing that Oppenheimer's citation is an oblique reference to his ill-fated love affair with Jean Tatlock, who committed suicide in January of 1945.[34] Apart from the sheer impossibility of spilling the contents of his mind as it existed then, these attempts at deeper attribution mislead for two reasons. First, rather than relaying upon biographical detail to explain the allusion to Donne, one should use that idea of blood sacrifice and resurrection to flesh out Oppenheimer's skeletal biography. In essence, "One cannot use the life to interpret the work. But one can use the work to interpret the life."[35]

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33 For more on the link between the *Bhagavad-Gita* and the Trinity explosion, also the impact of sacred Hindu texts on Oppenheimer's thought in general, see J.L. Heilbron, "Oppenheimer's Guru" in *Reappraising Oppenheimer*: Centennial Studies and Reflections, eds. Cathryn Carson and David A. Hollinger (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) and James Hijiya, "The *Gita* of J. Robert Oppenheimer" in the *Proceedings American Philosophical Society* 144, No. 2 (June 2000).

34 The speculative connection between Tatlock's suicide and the Donne poem is posited by two recent histories: Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin, *American Prometheus*: *The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005): 105-142 and 249-54 and Gregg Herken, *Brotherhood of the Bomb: The Tangled Lives and Loyalties of Robert Oppenheimer, Ernest Lawrence, and Edward Teller* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002), 129-30: "For reasons that Oppenheimer decided to keep obscure, he had named the test site Trinity—a secret tribute to Jean Tatlock, who had committed suicide at her San Francisco apartment the previous January."

35 Susan Sontag, "Introduction" to Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans.

Second, they imply that the significance the poems lies in their pointing elsewhere, when their content (as opposed to their biographical context) is what remains paramount. Read together, especially when read against the backdrop of first atomic detonation, they express the paradoxical idea of death as a life-giving, productive force, that "dying leads to death but might also lead to resurrection—as the bomb for Bohr and Oppenheimer was a weapon of death that might also end war and redeem mankind —is one way the [poems express] the paradox."[36] The idea itself is key, not who or what may have inspired the reference.

As for Tatlock, her role in this story which runs through the Donne poems is better thought in terms of the warning recently issued by Alain Badiou, that the philosopher, who by definition is also an "accomplished scientist, an amateur poet and a political activist" must "accept that the realm of thought is never sealed off from the violent onslaughts of love."[37] Oppenheimer, a "theoretical physicist who was also a

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Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: New Left Books, 1979), 9.

36 Rhodes, *Making of the Atomic Bomb*, 572.

37 Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Love*, trans. Peter Bush (London: Serpent's Tail Press, 2012), 2.

poet, who found physics, as [Hans] Bethe [said], 'the best way to do philosophy.'"[38] He was without question a philosopher in Badiou's expansive sense: a poet and translator, a scientist of the first rank, a true believer, and until his security clearance was publicly revoked, an active and effective politico. He was also exposed to "the violent onslaughts of love," but Oppenheimer was clearly referring to a great deal more than Jean Tatlock when he confessed to Lansing Lamont, just days before the first test, "Lord, these affairs are hard on the heart."[39] Four months after Tatlock's suicide, Oppenheimer received news of another unexpected death. To honor the passing of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the fallen war-time president, he gave a public eulogy for the Los Alamos community:

> We have been living through years of great evil, and of great terror . . . It is in such times of evil that men recognize their helplessness and their profound dependence. One is reminded of medieval days, when the death of a good and wise king plunged his country into despair, and mourning. In the Hindu scripture, in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, it says, "Man is a creature whose substance is faith. What his faith is, he is." The faith of Roosevelt is one that is shared by millions of men and women in every country of the world. For this reason it is possible to maintain the hope, for this reason it is right that we should dedicate

38 Rhodes, *Making of the Atomic Bomb*, 676.

39 Lansing Lamont, *Day of Trinity* (New York: Atheneum, 1965), 225.

ourselves to the hope, that his good works will not have ended with his death.[40] Faith, as Oppenheimer understood it, is what substantiates and determines human subjectivity. Still, the question remains: what faith substantiated his humanity and weighed on his mind at that time? Was it always left vague and hidden away from his contemporaries, during the war and after? Is it simply impossible to know, or more to the point, irrelevant to the study of what the Manhattan Project was and the "gadget" it created?

The argument in this opening chapter is that these questions concerning the Donne poems, once answered, begin to unravel a forgotten story at the heart of the Manhattan Project, a story that begins with romance and ends in tragedy, a story in which science and literature collide, and ultimately, a story that accounts for both *why* the atomic bomb was built and *how* this unprecedented collaboration—of pacifists and generals, anarchists and politicians, soldiers and scientists—became possible. "Burn and make me new:" without the the core belief Oppenheimer recognized in this line, the United States would not have invented and dropped atomic bombs in 1945. It is what

40 Bird and Sherwin, *American Prometheus,* 290.

unified the Los Alamos personnel, whom Oppenheimer, despite so many apparent individual differences, characterized as "a remarkable community, inspired by a high sense of mission of duty and of destiny, coherent, dedicated, and remarkably selfless."[41] Secrecy required that many of the thousands of people who worked under the direction of the Project did not understand the fullness of their mission, only the discrete task or problem with which they were immediately faced, and in much the same way, those on the periphery of the mission had but a dim and fragmented sense of the destiny envisioned by those individuals who had access to a more complete understanding, especially Oppenheimer, Secretary of War Henry Stimson, and President Truman. Still, in ways that almost defy belief, the key participants on record, from the scientists in Los Alamos and Chicago to the politicians on the Hill monitoring their work, members of the select Interim Committee which advised and oversaw the nuclear program, and high-ranking military brass were united by their faith in a paradoxical ethics of slaughter, what historian John W. Dower refers to as "'idealistic annihilation,' whereby demonstrating the appalling destructiveness of an atomic bomb on real,

41 Oppenheimer quoted in John W. Dower, "Science, Technocracy, Beauty & Idealistic Annihilation" in *Hiroshima: Ground Zero 1945* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2011), 120.

human targets was rationalized as being essential to the prevention of future war, or at least future nuclear war."[42]

Dower describes this stratagem as "rudimentary deterrence theory," conventionally understood. He associates it with "the violence that threads through

42 Ibid, 131. What makes Dower's argument persuasive is that he replaces simplistic, causal explanations that absolved, denied, or assigned culpability with the blameless acknowledgment of a "terrible logic" which blended an array of potential justifications in the minds of those politicians, scientists, and soldiers who made the bomb runs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki possible, a logic at once "unique to the circumstances of that moment and at the same time not peculiar at all." He writes on pp. 131–2: "This continuum of resort to brute force defies simple explanation, but the dynamics behind use of the first nuclear weapons against Japan provide a window on the interplay of political, institutional, and psychological imperatives that contribute to impelling such policies. It is possible to see a terrible logic in the use of the bombs that is unique to the circumstances of that moment and at the same time not peculiar at all. This logic begins with (1) ending the war and saving American lives. It no longer ends there, however, but extends to additional considerations, including the following: (2) fixation on deploying overwhelming force, as opposed to diplomatic or other less destructive alternatives including, most controversially, an unwillingness to back off from unconditional Japanese surrender; (3) power politics in the emerging Cold War, notably playing the new weapon as a 'master card,' as Stimson put it, to intimidate the Soviet Union in eastern Europe as well as Asia; (4) domestic political considerations, in which using the bomb was deemed necessary to partisan post-hostilities attacks on Truman and the Democratic administration he inherited from Roosevelt for wasting taxpayers' money on a useless project—and simultaneously to build support for postwar nuclear and military projects; (5) scientific 'sweetness' and technological imperatives—coupled with (6) the technocratic kinetics of an enormous machinery of war—which combined to give both developing and deploying new weaponry a life of its own; (7) the sheer exhilaration and aestheticism of unrestrained violence, phenomena not peculiar to modern times but peculiarly compelling in an age of spectacular destructiveness; (8) revenge, in this instance exacted collectively on an entire population in retaliation for Pearl Harbor and Japan's wartime atrocities; and (9) "idealistic annihilation," whereby demonstrating the appalling destructiveness of an atomic bomb on real, human targets was rationalized as essential to preventing future war, or at least future nuclear war."

modern times to the present day."[43] He maintains that idealistic annihilation is thus fundamentally consistent with a preexisting portfolio of demoralizing tactics which are deployed with the specific aim of securing peace through overwhelming displays of military strength. However, his characterization of this murderous ethic—acts of violence committed in the name of bringing violence to a halt—when applied to the beliefs of Oppenheimer and his colleagues, contains the qualifier, "at least future nuclear war," suggesting that these later devotees of idealistic annihilation pragmatically hedged against the Utopian scenario in which war itself is vanquished and somehow anticipated (and perhaps even prepared us for) the globalized system of nuclear deterrence that eventually came to pass. In his account, this paradoxical ethic—killing for life—was but one strand in a complex web of justifications. It was not a primary cause nor was it anything new. According to Dower, this belief in the peaceful effects of an atomic bombing is nothing more than another iteration of an old form of violence. "Idealistic annihilation" is therefore linked in his analysis to the cost-benefit logic of utilitarianism: some death is worthwhile if it saves more lives in the aggregate.

43 Ibid, 130-1.

Malthusian rationalizations of war are also similar in this way, as they accept limited carnage in the short-run in order to avert a later calamity which would be exponentially worse. Dower contends that the ethic embraced by Oppenheimer and his colleagues was practical and based on precedent. Though he and others did hold out some hope for an unprecedented achievement of peace, they accepted that the nuclear stalemate would make for a less violent world.

Implicit in this formulation is an assumption that cuts across the vast and varied literature on the Manhattan Project—that it was a success, that the post-war world that the Project personnel intended to engineer is indeed the one that actually arrived. What Donne's sonnet reveals, to the contrary, is the extent to which the Project was thought of as a catastrophic failure by its leader, despite the technical accomplishment of the atomic bomb's invention. When the smoke cleared, the world produced by the bomb was neither the one they expected nor a simple continuation of what came before. Based on a close reading of their avowed intentions and the literature which inspired their faith in the new weapon, the belief structure that unified the creators of the atomic bomb is more accurately described as *revelatory* annihilation: a sacrificial

expenditure of blood that miraculously transforms the world, a second coming in which the red thirst of nations is finally quenched and permanent peace reigns supreme. The beliefs held by these men of politics, science, and the sword, flouted the bounds of empiricism and embraced the creative imagination, where the appearance of the miraculous, the altogether new, is not an impossibility. These theological currents even overcame what was left of the taboo against (and President Truman's well-documented prewar aversion to) the indiscriminate killing of women and children. Together these collaborators on the Manhattan Project envisioned the creation of a compassionate form of deterrence, one based on a universal abhorrence of war sparked by the horrific new heights of military devastation, not fear of enemy reprisal. For them, there was no middle ground between salvation and damnation or between invention and use: the weaponization and deployment of atomic power would either save the world or end it.

Revelatory annihilation, as distinct from the simple idealism and cost-benefit rationale present in the more old-fashioned justifications of slaughter, did have an earlier advocate, one whom the Manhattan scientists were all well aware of at the time. Alfred Nobel (of the Nobel Prize) had similar faith in the effects of dynamite, that its

brutality would trigger a mass revelation that banishes the spectre of war forever. In a letter to Bertha von Suttner, an anti-war activist and author of the novel *Lay Down Arms!,* Nobel wrote, "Perhaps my factories will end war quicker than your congresses: on the day that two army corps can mutually annihilate each other in a second, all civilised nations will surely recoil with horror and disband their troops."[44] Of course dynamite failed to bring war to an end. Unable to acknowledge the defeat of his vision, Nobel augmented his earlier notion of revelatory annihilation, arguing that once bombs have the capacity to overcome the distance between front-line and homeland, peace will reign: "War must be made as deadly to the civilization populations back home as it is for the troops on the front lines. Let the sword of Damocles hang over every head, gentlemen, and you will witness a miracle—all wars will be stopped instantly . . ."[45] In the final analysis, Nobel only conceded that dynamite never proved powerful enough. If, however, the power of a bomb crossed a certain threshold of lethality and spectacular destructiveness, the basic logic would hold. Years later, President John F.

44 Kenne Fant, *Alfred Nobel*: A Biography (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2012).

45 Ibid.

Kennedy referenced the very same mythological sword in a speech on disarmament delivered to the General Assembly of the United Nations:

> Today, every inhabitant of this planet must contemplate the day when this planet may no longer be habitable. Every man, woman and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles, hanging by the slenderest of threads, capable of being cut at any moment by accident or miscalculation or by madness. The weapons of war must be abolished before they abolish us.[46]

Nobel could not have said it better himself. What Kennedy did not understand is that creators of the atomic bomb intended to back the world in a corner and force it, under threat of total annihilation, to change, to be converted by the belief that every form of war in a world of atomic bombs is untenable. What he mistook for a political position was, underneath it all, a fate.

Nobel and his successors on the Manhattan Project wanted a great deal more than the bilateral disarmament pursued by Kennedy after the Cuban Missile Crisis; they sought the total abolition of war, a miracle made possible by the potential abolition of humanity. Albert Einstein, in an address given on the occasion of the Fifth Nobel Anniversary Dinner at the Hotel Astor, only months after the atomic bombs were

46 John F. Kennedy, "Address Before the General Assembly of the United Nations," September 25, 1961.

dropped on Japan, referenced the precedent set by Nobel's unwavering faith in the revelatory power unleashed by explosives and acknowledged the heightened stakes:

> Physicists find themselves in a position not unlike that of Alfred Nobel. Alfred Nobel invented the most powerful explosive ever known up to his time, a means of destruction par excellence. In order to atone for this, in order to relieve his human conscience, he instituted awards for the promotion of peace and for achievements of peace. Today, the physicists who participated in forging the most formidable and dangerous weapons of all times are harassed by an equal feeling of responsibility, not to say guilt. And we cannot and should not slacken in our efforts to make the nations of the world, and especially their governments, aware of the unspeakable disaster they are certain to provoke unless they change their attitude toward each other and toward the task of shaping the future. . . The war is won, but the peace is not . . . May the spirit that prompted Alfred Nobel to create his great institution, the spirit of trust and confidence, of generosity and brotherhood among men, prevail in the minds of those upon whose decisions our destiny rests. Otherwise, human civilization is doomed.[47]

Prior to the atomic bomb, the damage inflicted by Nobel, should he prove wrong, was limited to the routine carnage of combat from which the species had always recovered. After the physicists alter the equation, however, the continued existence of humanity depends on Nobel having been right all along. Per Einstein, if the miracle fails to occur, if the bomb is a spiritual dud, in terms of its inability to spark a chain reaction that

47 Einstein, "The War Is Won, But the Peace Is Not" in *Ideas and Opinions*, 128-9.

results in mass conversion, then the historical reign of atomic weaponry—the so-called "nuclear epoch"—will only end by the suicidal ending of human history itself.

Reflecting back upon the first explosion at Alamogordo, nearly twenty years later, Oppenheimer said, "When it went off, in the New Mexico dawn, that first atomic bomb, we thought of Alfred Nobel, and his hope, his vain hope, that dynamite would put an end to wars.[48] Especially here, as Oppenheimer revisits his days in Los Alamos, it is essential to note the distinction between the avowed beliefs of this period before the bombs were dropped and what became of those same beliefs after the war's end. The transition into the post-war years marks a radical shift in how these individuals would narrate their experience of the Manhattan Project and the faith that guided their actions at the time. In this instance, Isidor Isaac Rabi was left with altogether different impression of Oppenheimer's immediate reaction to the Trinity bomb. He was not somber and reflective, as he would later claim, but according to Rabi, prideful: He was in the forward bunker. When he came back, there he was, you know, with his hat. You've seen pictures of Robert's hat. And he came to where we

48 Rhodes, *Making of the Atomic Bomb*, 676.

were in the headquarters, so to speak. And his walk was like 'High Noon'—I think it's the best way I could describe it—this kind of strut. He'd done it.[49] His cowboy strut was a replication of Nobel's vanity, not its measured indictment.[50] Oppenheimer, like Nobel before him, devoutly believed in revelatory annihilation at the time of the test. In the moments after seeing the first atomic fireball, hot and actual, his faith was not diminished. He did not and could not comprehend Nobel's (and by implication his own) vanity in the days before the Fat Man and Little Boy were sent abroad.

As his longtime colleague at the Institute for Advanced Study, Freeman Dyson, observed many years after the war, "in later life [Oppenheimer] never spoke of himself directly, but he occasionally expressed his inner thoughts obliquely by quoting poetry."[51] And Laurence: "Los Alamos would go down in history as Oppie's greatest poem."[52] To think the significance of his oblique reference to Donne, one must try to

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49 Ibid.

50 See also Charles Thorpe, *Oppenheimer: The Tragic Intellect* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 161: "In expressing the meaning of the new atomic power, Oppenheimer fashioned his reaction at the Trinity atomic bomb test into an iconic moment. The story of his personal response to Trinity went through different permutations as Oppenheimer molded it as an oratorical device."

51 Freeman Dyson, *The Scientist As Rebel* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2006)

52 William I. Laurence, *Dawn Over Zero* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946)

set the poems against the backdrop of the beliefs that subjectivated him and others in these years before the war's end, when faith in revelatory annihilation took on a new life and rendered the creation of a superweapon not impossible. A grave error is committed by historians of the atomic bomb when they allow post-war rationalizations to stand in for earlier messianic expectations. What that substitution obscures is a pivotal moment in twentieth-century political theology, wherein science and militarism join forces with Judaism and Christianity in a bid to forever rid the world of the scourge of war. This mission, this missionary work, was rooted in a sacred text that promised the miraculous and gave rise to a new order of prophets, church-builders, and disciples united by a belief which annulled the bitter partisan and sectarian rivalries that would have otherwise divided them. Everyone knows how the story ends, with giant clouds planted on Japan. Its beginnings are much more obscure. This is a story of people roused by the throes of warfare, frenzied by the dream-lands of literature and technological possibility, who, on the strength of their beliefs, became willing to wager the world and did. No, the atomic bomb was not addressed to the second Great War or to the Soviet Union. It was addressed to the God of another world that had not yet

never arrived. In this, Oppenheimer and his flock left all precedent behind and marched toward the unknown with the faith of the blind.

Der Bund—"The Snare That Would Someday Catch the Sun"

This latest (and perhaps the last) chapter in the story of revelatory annihilation began in 1903 when "the future Nobel laureate in physics Frederick Soddy [gave] a talk before the Royal Corps of Engineers on atomic power as the superweapon of the future."[53] Then, as early as 1908, a rash of science fiction novels seized upon this idea, depicting scenarios in which an awesome new superweapon creates "eternal peace via catastrophe."[54] The most influential of these by far, *The World Set Free,* which coined the term "atom bomb," was published by H.G. Wells in 1914. In the book, which is "dedicated to Frederick Soddy's Interpretation of Radium," Soddy plays a leading role, and in one noteworthy scene, a Japanese plane on a bomb run to San Francisco crashes into the Pacific just miles from the California coast, leading the principal characters to

53 Sven Lindquist, *A History of Bombing*, trans. Linda Haverty Rugg (New York: The New Press, 2001), 6. Soddy would eventually denounce nuclear weapons as a signatory of the *Mainau Declaration* of July 15, 1955.

54 Examples include: Roy Norton, *The Vanishing Fleets* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1908), Hollis Godfrey, *The Man Who Ended War* (New York: Little, Brown & Company, 1908), J. Hamilton Sedberry, *Under the Flag of the Cross* (Boston: C.M. Clark, 1908). For a discussion of these texts and the broader theme of "eternal peace via catastrophe," see also the narrative path "The Dream of a Superweapon" that Lindquist threads through his book "as a labyrinth with twenty-two entrances and no exit." Lindquist, *History of Bombing,* v.

consider the omnicidal implications of atomic warfare. They foresaw a new, unconventional system of deterrence based on endless vertical proliferation: "the threat of war means the accumulation of more and more atomic bombs."[55] After some deliberation, they decide that the "old game's up."[56] The rules of engagement and battlefield stratagems which once governed conventional warfare—"the old game"—no longer apply. The desire to produce bombs will be limitless, the threat of their use omnipresent. This radical change in the situation of war, which conditions the situation of international relations, resulted in global political conversion. At a summit in Brissago, Italy, the remaining heads of state cede their sovereign power to a new world government to be backed by atomic force. A foreboding anticipation of the doomsday scenario proved essential in triggering the bomb's revelatory chain reaction. As Wells brings his story to a close, the revelatory promise of a limited nuclear war is finally realized:

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55 H.G. Wells, *The World Set Free: A Story of Mankind* (London: MacMill and Co., 1914). For a survey of superweapon literature and a discussion of Szilard's reaction to the Wells novel see also H. Bruce Franklin, *War Stars: The Superweapon and the American Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

56 Ibid.

> The catastrophe of the atomic bombs which shook men out of cities and businesses and economic relations shook them also out of their old established habits of thought, and out of the lightly held beliefs and prejudices that came down to them from the past. To borrow a word from the old-fashioned chemists, men were made nascent; they were released from old ties; for good or evil they were ready for new associations . . . The moral shock of the atomic bombs had been a profound one, and for a while the cunning side of the human animal was overpowered by its sincere realisation of the vital necessity for reconstruction. The litigious and trading spirits cowered together, scared at their own consequences; men thought twice before they sought mean advantages in the face of the unusual eagerness to realise new aspirations, and when at last the weeds revived again and 'claims' began to sprout, they sprouted upon the stony soil of law-courts reformed, of laws that pointed to the future instead of the past, and under the blazing sunshine of a transforming world. A new literature, a new interpretation of history were springing into existence, a new teaching was already in the schools, a new faith in the young.[57]

In this world of Wells's imagination, the carnage of atomic warfare induces a moral shock which liberates humanity from its predatory past. The core institutions of human civilization are reconstructed, the old customs reconsidered, and the old transgressions redeemed. Rising from the ashes, human civilization is born again, the transition made complete by a generational shift that solidifies a new interpretation of history, a new form of teaching, and a new faith. What strikes the nascent, fire-born world as impossible is not what it became after the bombing but what it was beforehand.

57 Ibid.

The fantastic possibilities of science were the basis of fiction for Wells, but in the decades to come, elements of his fiction would manifest as science. Discoveries in particle physics, predicted by Wells, inspired a wider belief in his vision. The instillation of a new faith was precisely the effect that *The World Set Free* would have on the atomic bomb's craftsmen, many of them young. The novel provided a spiritual *lingua franca* that cut across and superseded their national, political, and religious particularities. Those who did not read the book surely received its lessons second-hand from Oppenheimer and its other champions on the Manhattan Project. Though the novel's influence was widespread, none were more profoundly and directly impacted by *The World Set Free* than Leo Szilard. His recollection of his first reading:

> In 1932, while I was still in Berlin, I read a book by H.G. Wells. It was called *The World Set Free*. This book was written in 1913, one year before the World War, and in it H.G. Wells describes the discovery of artificial radioactivity and puts it in the year 1933, the year in which it actually occurred. He then proceeds to describe the liberation of atomic energy on a large scale for industrial purposes, the development of atomic bombs, and a world war which was apparently fought by an alliance of England, France, and perhaps including America, against Germany and Austria, the powers located in the central part of Europe. He places this war in the year 1956, and in this war the major cities of the world are all destroyed by atomic bombs.[58]

58 Leo Szilard, *Leo Szilard: His Version of the Facts, Selected Recollections and Correspondence,* eds. Spencer R. Weart and Gertrude Weiss Szilard (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978), 16. See also Franklin,

Some years pass,

> I was no longer thinking about [*The World Set Free*], . . . until I found myself in London about the time of the British Association [meeting] in September, 1933. I read in the newspapers a speech by Lord Rutherford. He was quoted as saying that he who talks about the liberation of atomic energy on an industrial scale is talking moonshine. This sort of set me pondering in the streets of London, and I remember that I stopped for a red light at the intersection of Southampton Row. As I was waiting for the light to change and as the light changed to green and I crossed the street, it suddenly occurred to me that if we could find an element which is split by neutrons and which would emit *two* neutrons when it absorbed *one* neutron, such an element, if assembled in sufficiently large mass, could sustain a nuclear chain reaction . . . The thought that this might be in fact possible became a sort of obsession with me.[59]

Wells could not have hoped for a more ideal reader than Szilard, someone capable of breaking down the distance between literature and reality—a character, like Soddy, who existed in both worlds. That Wells grasped the atomic bomb and anticipated the

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War Stars, 133: "Wells' forecast in *The World Set Free* that artificial induction of atomic disintegration in a minute amount would be achieved in 1933. This was precisely the year in which Irene and Frederic Joliot-Curie did first induce artificial radioactivity. Meanwhile, Hungarian physicist Leo Szilard had read *The World Set Free* in 1932, while working at the Institute of Theoretical Physics of the University of Berlin. He fled Germany when Hitler came to power, also in 1933. That fall, while ruminating about Wells' novel and Lord Rutherford's assertion that atomic energy was mere 'moonshine,' Szilard suddenly conceived of a way to sustain a nuclear chain reaction, making it possible to 'liberate energy on an industrial scale, and construct atomic bombs.'"

59 Szilard, *Recollections and Correspondence*, 17.

emergence of the science behind it is impressive in the twenty-first century, even shocking, but not unexplainable, given the novels and scientific rhetoric that circulated in his time. The situation for Szilard, whose landmark accomplishment in particle physics manifested what was once only imagined in literature is entirely different. The total effect that this would have on him or anyone else with who undergoes a parallel experience, is impossible to speculate on, but we do know, at the very least, that *The World Set Free* would inform the thinking behind Szilard's political maneuvers and structure his ethical logic. At least until 1944, he was devoutly faithful to this work of science fiction, as a total message and in its discrete parts, where his own life had once merged prophetically with the pages.

Because Wells had anticipated his discovering the nuclear chain reaction, he also became Szilard's advisor on subsequent problems, instructing him on all the fateful implications of his discovery, including how his patent should be kept secret:

> In the spring of 1934 I had applied for a patent which described the laws governing such a chain reaction. This was the first time, I think, that the concept of critical mass was developed and that a chain reaction was seriously discussed. Knowing what this would mean—and I knew it because I had read H.G. Wells—I did not want this patent to become public. The only way to keep it from becoming public was to assign it to the government. I assigned this

patent to the British admiralty.[60]

The coincidence of Szilard's discovery and its anticipation by Wells produced a spill-over effect: one successful prediction lent credibility to the others. However, when commenting in his recollections on the influence the Wells novel had on him, Szilard wrote, "This book made a very great impression on me, but I didn't regard it as anything but fiction. It didn't start me thinking of whether or not such things could in fact happen. I had not been working in nuclear physics up to that time."[61] Crucially, what Szilard is referring to in this passage—the thing that "could in fact happen"—is not the miracle of post-war conversion but his initial discovery of the chain-reaction.

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60 Szilard, *Recollections and Correspondence*, 18. The footnote for this passage supplied by the editors: "Szilard turned to the Admiralty only after the War Office had turned him down with the statement that 'there appears to be no reason to keep the specification secret so far as the War Department is concerned.'" J. Coombes, Director of Artillery, to Claremont Hayes & Co. (Szilard's patent attorneys), October 8, 1935, Szilard Papers. And in Franklin, *War Stars*, 133: "Influenced by *The World Set Free*, he decided to keep the process secret by patenting it and assigning the patent to the British Admiralty: "This was the first time, I think, that the concept of critical mass was developed and that a chain reaction was seriously discussed. Knowing what this would mean—and I knew because I had read H.G. Wells—I did not want this patent to become public." Then in 1938 the uranium atom was split—in Berlin. As soon as Szilard learned, in early 1939, that fission of uranium had been achieved, he at once grasped the fateful implications: neutrons must be emitted during fission, "and if enough neutrons are emitted in this fission process, then it should be, of course, possible to sustain a chain reaction." "All the things which H.G. Wells predicted appeared suddenly real to me," he recalled, and he therefore resolved that this must be "kept secret from the Germans."

61 Rhodes, *Making of the Atomic Bomb*, 24.

He had been working in the field of chemistry at the time of his first reading, shifting to physics only later for reasons he claimed were unrelated to Wells. Still, the disavowal of the book as "anything but fiction," when applied to his thinking in general, would only reveal the extent to which it was operating on him unconsciously. The other document in which Szilard seems to downplay the book's significance is a letter to Hugo Hirst, founder of the British General Electric company:

> Dear Sir Hugo,
>
> As you are on holiday you might find pleasure in reading a few pages out of a book by H.G. Wells which I am sending you. I am certain you will find the first three paragraphs of Chapter The First (The New Source of Energy, page 42) interesting and amusing, whereas the other parts of the book are rather boring. It is remarkable that Wells should have written those pages in 1914. Of course, all this is moonshine, but I have reason to believe that in so far as the industrial applications of the present discoveries in physics are concerned, the forecast of the writers may prove to be more accurate than the forecast of the scientists.[62]

One could read the "moonshine" comment as proof Szilard did not take the revelatory aftermath in the Wells novel seriously. However, this was most likely a reference to Lord Rutheford's assertion that an industrial application of nuclear chain-reactions would be moonshine, the comment that produced Szilard's eureka moment

62 Szilard, *Recollections and Correspondence*, 28.

waiting for the light at the intersection, and ultimately, consciously or unconsciously, what Szilard said and did in the years leading up to and during the war remained consistent with what he read in *The World Set Free*. One example of the correspondence between what Szilard encountered in the novel and his actions: cloaking his breakthroughs in secrecy. The precautions it led Szilard and others to take back-fired. It was the strange omission of American and British scientific papers being published in the field of particle physics that alerted the Germans and the Russians to the existence of a dedicated atomic weapons research and development program. Wells' anticipation of the chain-reaction discovery legitimized his other claims about the effects of atomic war for his readers. Unfortunately, the actions taken on the basis of his description of the atomic bomb's fateful implications would continue to lead these men astray.

A fuller understanding of the impact Wells had on Szilard requires reference to another work of his, *The Open Conspiracy*: Blue Prints for a World Revolution, which asked the question (also the sub-title of a later, revised edition), "What Are We To Do With Our Lives?"[63] In this manifesto, published in 1928, he wrote,

63 Wells, *The Open Conspiracy: Blue Prints for a World Revolution* (London: Gollancz, 1928).

"*Fundamentally the Open Conspiracy must be an intellectual rebirth.*"[64] Here, H.G. Wells, in the mold of St. Paul, took on the role of church-builder, issuing a call to help found (and turn oneself over to) a new religion, one based on a marriage of faith and science:

> It seems unavoidable that if religion is to develop unifying and directive power in the present confusion of human affairs it must adapt itself to this forward-looking, individuality-analyzing turn of mind; it must divest itself of its sacred histories, its gross preoccupations, its posthumous prolongation of personal ends. The desire for service, for subordination, for permanent effect, for an escape from the distressful pettiness and mortality of the individual life, is the undying element in every religious system. The time has come to strip religion right down to that, to strip it for greater tasks than it has ever faced before. The histories and symbols that served our fathers encumber and divide us. Sacraments and rituals harbour disputes and waste our scanty emotions. The explanation of why things are is an unnecessary effort in religion. The essential fact in religion is the desire for religion and not how it came about. If you do not want religion, no persuasions, no convictions about your place in the universe can give it to you. The first sentence in the modern creed must be, not "I believe," but "I give myself."[65]

More from the *Open Conspiracy*:

> But hitherto religion has never been presented *simply* as a devotion to a

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64 Ibid, 9.

65 Ibid, 17.

universal cause. The devotion has always been in it, but it has been complicated by other considerations. The leaders in every great religious movement have considered it necessary that it should explain itself in the form of history and a cosmogony. It has been felt necessary to say *Why?* and *To what end?* Every religion therefore has had to adopt the physical conceptions, and usually also to assume many of the moral and social values, current at the time of its formation. It could not transcend the philosophical phrases and attitudes that seemed then to supply the natural frame for a faith, nor draw upon anything beyond the store of scientific knowledge of its time. In this lurked the seeds of the ultimate decay and supersession of every successive religion.[66]

And:

Now the most comprehensive conception of this new world is of one politically, socially, and economically unified. Within that frame fall all the other ideas of our progressive ambition. To this end we set our faces and seek to direct our lives. Many there are at present who apprehend it as a possibility but do not dare, it seems, to desire it, because of the enormous difficulties that intervene, and because they see as yet no intimations of a way through or round these difficulties. They do not see a way of escape from the patchwork of governments that grips them and divides mankind. The great majority of human beings have still to see the human adventure as one whole; they are obsessed by the air of permanence and finality in established things; they accept current reality as ultimate reality. As the saying goes, they take the world as they find it. But here we are writing for the modern-minded, and for them it is impossible to think of the world as secure and satisfactory until there exists a single world commonweal, preventing war and controlling those moral, biological, and economic forces and wastages that would otherwise lead to wars. And controlling them in the sense that science and man's realization and control

66 Ibid, 14-5.

> of his powers and possibilities continually increase.[67]

In closing, Wells writes about the first scientists of prehistoric times, killers intent on slaying the mammoth, doing what others considered impossible, doubters who

> laughed at these eccentric beings, or found them annoying and ill-treated them, or [were] seized with fear and made saints and sorcerers and warlocks of them . . . but for the greater part heeded them not at all. Yet they were of the blood of him who had first dreamt of attacking the mammoth; every one of them was of his blood and descent; and the thing they sought, all unwittingly, was the snare that would some day catch the sun.[68]

Once again, Leo Szilard went on to manifest what began in the imagination of H.G. Wells, as his *Open Conspiracy* became *Der Bund:*

> Szilard's originality stopped at no waterline. Somewhere along the way from sixteen-year-old prophet of the fate of nations to thirty-one-year-old open conspirer negotiating publishing rights with H.G. Wells, he conceived of an Open Conspiracy of his own. He dated social invention from "the mid-twenties in Germany." If so, he then went to see Wells in 1929 as much from enthusiasm for the Englishman's perspicacity as for his vision.[69]

In Szilard's own words, *Der Bund*—the order, the confederacy, or the band—would be

> a closely knit group of people whose inner bond is pervaded by a religious and

67 Ibid, 20.

68 Wells, *World Set Free.*

69 Rhodes, *Making of the Atomic Bomb*, 21-2.

> scientific spirit . . . If we possessed a magical spell with which to recognize the 'best' individuals of the rising generation at an early age . . . then we would be able to train them to independent thinking, and through education in close association we could create a spiritual leadership class with inner cohesion which would renew itself on its own.[70]

One of the conditions of the open conspiracy plotted by Wells was the refusal to serve in any war. Szilard does have to modify what he reads in Wells: "The first sentence in the modern creed must be, not 'I believe,' but 'I give myself.'"[71] But they pledge themselves to a cause that requires a means in violation of their new faith. How could they? Wells: "The vision of a world at peace and liberated for an unending growth of knowledge and power is worth every danger of the way."[72] By articulating such positions Wells implicated himself in the creation of a state of exception to his own rule. The utopian depiction of limited nuclear in *The World Set Free* could enable Oppenheimer, for example, to get beyond the vain beliefs of Nobel and embrace an ethic of revelatory annihilation. Prior political and theological differences were

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70 Ibid, 21-2. See also Szilard, "Draft Proposal for a New Organization Called 'Der Bund'" in *Recollections and Correspondence.*

71 Wells, *Open Conspiracy*, 17.

72 Ibid, 193.

annulled by the exceptionality of the superweapon.

Fading into another, larger structure like the Manhattan Project was an essential part of the original plan: "The role of the organization will at first be very important and can then gradually decrease, in the measure in which the Bund itself is built up and finally is in a position to administer itself."[73] A lack of inner structure would not undermine its efficacy if the members remained spiritually bonded: "If such a group, profoundly cohesive in spirit, were to exist, then presumably it would exercise a potent influence on the shaping of public affairs even without any particular inner structure and without any constitutionally determined rights."[74] The organization was dynamic, capable of maintaining internal cohesion despite no formal structure. Their members were encouraged to install themselves in powerful positions, operating under a veil of secrecy. The Manhattan Project was more than simply populated by these individuals. It was the realization of their holy mission, and by enlisting in the Project and aiding it underlying cause (revelatory annihilation), people joined their ranks whether they

73 Szilard, *Recollections and Correspondence*, 30.

74 *Ibid*, 25.

intended to or not. What became a two billion dollar American military venture began as a collection of Hungarian physicists united by a new faith derived from science fiction, a prophetic theology lifted from the pages of H.G. Wells.

The transition from *Der Bund* to Manhattan began when Szilard phoned another expatriate Hungarian physicist, Edward Teller, at his new home in America. The call had interrupted his playing Mozart on the piano for a house guest, another Jewish physicist in exile, Albert Einstein. Szilard cryptically told Teller that he had "found the neutrons."[75] Teller then arranged a meeting with Einstein on Szilard's behalf, which he attended. At this meeting, Einstein affixed his signature to a letter drafted by Szilard, the letter addressed to President Roosevelt which famously set in motion a process that would culminate in the Manhattan Project. "I made one of the great mistakes of my life," Einstein told Linus Pauling years later when the two discussed his early support for American nuclear research and weapons development.[76] In "The World As I See It," an essay he published in 1931, Einstein wrote:

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75 Herken, *Brotherhood of the Bomb*, 25.

76 Martin J. Sherwin, *A World Destroyed: The Atomic Bomb and the Grand Alliance* (New York: Knopf, 1975), 27.

> This topic brings me to that worst outcrop of herd life, which I abhor. That a man can take pleasure in marching in fours to the strains of a band is enough to make me despise him. He has only been given his big brain by mistake; unprotected spinal marrow was all he needed. This plague-spot of civilization ought to be abolished with all possible speed. Heroism on command, senseless violence, and all the loathsome nonsense that goes by the name of patriotism—how passionately I hate them! How vile and despicable seems war to me! I would rather be hacked in pieces that take part in such an abominable business.[77]

In spite of the hostility and unequivocal language of these lines, Einstein played a formative role in the "abominable business" of the Manhattan Project. In much the same way, the radical politics that dominated Oppenheimer's private thoughts and public life prior to the war were overridden by the devil's bargain that the Project appeared to offer: collaboration with mass killing in exchange for permanent peace.

Years later, after the war, at the close of his final sermon for the scientific congregation at Los Alamos, Oppenheimer, in a remarkably telling digression, referenced Abraham Lincoln's writings during the Civil War, and explained that as a younger man, he failed to understand why Lincoln withheld abolitionist rhetoric and obscured his deeper justification for unprecedented bloodshed. As the older, wiser man

77 Einstein, "The World as I See It" in *Ideas and Opinions,* 11.

standing before his audience, Oppenheimer lauded Lincoln for using the fog of war to disguise his unpalatable political vision. He said he came to understand that the Civil War could not be fought in the name of slavery's eradication, but in the hazy and turbulent atmosphere produced by war-time conditions, a previously impossible political goal could be covertly advanced and overtly realized when the fighting stopped, provided one was on the winning side. In the autumn of 1945, conditions were once again seen as right for the impossible to become possible. Still reeling from the chaos and savagery of war, Oppenheimer noted that he and others on the Project believed it was "a time when all over the world men would be particularly ripe and open for dealing with this problem because of the immediacy of the evils of war, because of the universal cry from everyone that one could not go through this thing again, even a war without atomic bombs."[78] As he did with Donne, here too Oppenheimer cited the words and deeds of another to express his inner thoughts and explain his actions. When he used Lincoln to confess his Machiavellian streak, belief in revelatory annihilation was the noble one he kept hidden from an American populace

78 J. Robert Oppenheimer, *Robert Oppenheimer, Letters and Recollections,* Alice Kimball Smith and Charles Weiner eds. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 317.

agonized by the horrors of war.

In sum, Szilard's *Der Bund,* which later became the Manhattan Project, was the culmination of the Open Conspiracy initiated by H.G. Wells. Belief in revelatory annihilation was fundamental to each organization. In articulating his war-abolitionist vision, plotting his Open Conspiracy, and inspiring Szilard, Wells himself participated in the casting of "the snare that would some day catch the sun." He believed that this sun, finally brought under the control of humanity would transform the world, just as Einstein, Szilard, and eventually Oppenheimer all believed that the Project would result in

> the awaking of mankind from a nightmare, an infantile nightmare, of the struggle for existence and the inevitability of war. The light of day thrusts between our eyelids, and the multitudinous sounds of morning clamour in our ears. A time will come when men will sit with history before them or with some old newspaper before them and ask incredulously, "Was there ever such a world?"[79]

79 Wells, *Open Conspiracy*.

A Sun Rising in the West

Only one scientist, the aforementioned Joseph Rotblat, left the Manhattan Project after the Nazis surrendered. His reasons for participating vanished when the Reich was toppled, and he decided that further collaboration would be unethical. The rest of his colleagues, however, remained steadfast. They felt, overwhelmingly, that their continued work was vital as well as ethical—even without the threat of a Nazi bomb, even when it became clear that the Allied forces would prevail. Their solidarity and perseverance after April 1944 would be unexplainable if not for the vision articulated by Wells, which links the creation of atomic bombs and their use to the utopian promise of revelatory annihilation. The spiritual ambition which provided them a universal charge was always larger than ending the war at hand or subduing a specific enemy, however much that enemy was loathed by certain members of the Project. Rotblat's defection was the exception that proved the rule: these were not the eccentric beliefs of a few outspoken and charismatic individuals. This faith in the conversion effects of limited atomic warfare saturated the chain of command, affecting the grunts toiling in the New Mexico desert as much as the American head of state. Of

course other justifications and beliefs were grafted on by individuals as comparatively minor, idiosyncratic additions, but faith in the impending miracle of atomic warfare was what they held in common.

When Szilard arrived in Los Alamos, he donated two books to the official library kept for those stationed in there—*The World Set Free*, of course, and a 1932 novel by the British writer and politician Harold Nicholson, *Public Faces*.[80] Contrary to the peaceful outcome of atomic war prophesied by Wells, Nicholson saw the inherent violence of human nature (manifest in the cyclicity of war) triumphing over good intentions and leading to doom.[81] Whereas the Wells novel was utopian in its depiction of atomic warfare, Nicholson's portrayal was emphatically dystopian: one ends in everlasting peace, the other total ruin. It is clear that Nicholson's tragic vision, though it reminded the workers on the Project of the overwhelming seriousness of their charge, did not rattle their faith in the scenario depicted by Wells. It did, however, leave them

80 See also Franklin, *War Stars*, 134.

81 Ibid: "Nicholson's main theme is that "the unavowed weaknesses of human character" can permit our own weapons to lead to our destruction, and that our survival depends upon our confronting the responsibility imposed by these weapons. In a novel published a decade before the Manhattan Project, in the same year that Szilard was reading *The World Set Free*, Nicholson labeled "the atomic bomb" as "this Manhattan of responsibility."

with an abiding sense that the atomic bomb was to be an all or nothing proposition, the catalyst for a preserving peace or total destruction. Inside the Manhattan Project and for its political and military overseers, science fiction literature allowed for an imagined politico-theological community to cohere. Oppenheimer opened up about the foundational beliefs of the Project's inner circle in an address delivered months after the bombings:

> It is not only among scientists that there are wise or foolish people. I have had occasion in the last few months to meet people who had to do with the Government—the legislative branches, the administrative branches, and even the judicial branches, and I have found many in whom an understanding of what this problem is, and of the general lines along which it can be solved, is very clear.[82]

Secretary of War Harry L. Stimson was perhaps the strongest advocate of revelatory annihilation in the war years. He was the one who possessed the keenest "understanding of what this problem is," in Oppenheimer's view. He singled out Stimson when defending the non-scientific members of the Project to his colleagues at Los Alamos after Hiroshima and Nagasaki were bombed:

> I would especially mention the former Secretary of War, Mr. Stimson, who,

82 Oppenheimer, *Letters and Reollections*, 322.

> perhaps as much as any man, seemed to appreciate how hopeless and how impractical it was to attack this problem on a superficial level, and whose devotion to the development of atomic weapons was in large measure governed by his understanding of the hope that lay in it that there would be a new world. I know this is a surprise, because most people think that the War Department has as its unique function the making of war. The Secretary of War has other functions.[83]

More on Stimson:

> [He] was a wise man who had paid careful attention to all discussions regarding the implications of nuclear weapons. Oppenheimer and the other scientists thus were reassured to hear him say that he and the other members of the Interim Committee did not regard the bomb "as a new weapon merely but as a revolutionary change in the relations of man to the universe." The atomic bomb might become "a Frankenstein which would eat us up," or it could secure the global peace. Its import, in either case, "went far beyond the needs of the present war."[84]

Stimson underwent one of the more dramatic shifts in the post-war years. Before the atomic bombs were dropped, he was perhaps the fiercest political advocate for revelatory annihilation. He then became the most important propagandist, bent on historical revision, arguing that the atomic bombs were dropped to hasten the war's end.

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83 Ibid, 322-3.

84 Bird and Sherwin, *American Prometheus*, 293.

During the war, however, Stimson's effect on others inside the White House and close to the Project was considerable. The impact he had on George Marshall, whose notes from an Interim Committee meeting read more like poetry, was a case in point (the line breaks and emphases are his own):

> Its *size* and *character*
> We don't think it *mere new weapon*
> *Revolutionary Discovery* of Relation of man to universe
> Great History Landmark like
> Gravitation
> Copernican Theory
> But,
> Bids fair [to be] *infinitely greater*, in respect to its *Effect*
> —on the ordinary affairs of man's life.
> May *destroy* or *perfect* International Civilization
> May [be] *Frankenstein* or means for World Peace[85]

The atomic bomb would be miraculous or monstrous, ushering in the utopia of Wells or the dystopia of Nicholson. Marshall considered the atomic bomb unequivocal, unprecedented. It was not simply a new weapon or new technological breakthrough but a revolutionary reordering of being and the cosmos—an apocalypse.

Both Roosevelt and Truman were persuaded that the miracle of revelatory

85 Rhodes, *Making of the Atomic Bomb*, 642.

annihilation could be realized through the use of atomic bombs, but unlike Roosevelt, Truman was predisposed to this belief in the prophetic function of literature. Thirty five years prior, while still a farmer in Missouri, he copied some lines from the Tennyson poem "Locksley Hall" onto a piece of small yellow paper and had carried it with him in his wallet ever since. The poem imagined a time when a military's ability to rain down death from the skies would pacify a warring world of nation-states and lead to federated global governance. Upon hearing that America had won what he referred to as "a two billion dollar bet," President Truman pulled the yellow paper out of his wallet at the Potsdam conference and recited those words:

> . . . and there rain'd a ghastly dew
> From the nations' airy navies grappling in the central blue . . .
>
> Till the war-drum throbb'd no longer, and the battle-flags were furl'd
> In the Parliament of man, the Federation of the world."[86]

86 Alfred Tennyson, "Locksley Hall." See also Franklin, *War Stars*, 84: "In 1910, a twenty-six year old Missouri farmer copied those ten lines prophesying that the rain of 'ghastly' weapons from airships would bring peace and inaugurate 'the Federation of the world'; he carried this copy with him for decades. In July 1945, on his way to Potsdam, President Harry S. Truman pulled the yellowed slip of paper from his wallet and recited those lines," and p. 82: "[Peace through air-power] was of course the ideology that became dominant as part of the triumph of industrial capitalism. A classic rendition of this creed in its heyday appeared in the futuristic vision of Tennyson's 1842 dramatic poem 'Locksley Hall.' Aircraft make 'the heavens fill with commerce' and then bring about a final war in the air that leads to universal peace and unity."

When he first heard the chilling reports of eye-witnesses to the Trinity test, he described it in his diary in terms of the fires foretold by Old Testament prophecy, not cutting-edge science. Though wrought by human hands, Truman attributed the weapon's creation and use to his Christian God: "I realize the tragic significance of the atomic bomb . . . It is an awful responsibility which has come to us . . . We thank God that it has come to us, instead of to our enemies; and we pray that He may guide us to use it in His ways and for His purposes."[87]

Those outside the Project, unaffected by the radical beliefs it incubated, like General Dwight D. Eisenhower, tended to disagree with Stimson. The two men met for drinks at Stimson's home after the war effort was refocused on the Pacific Theater. Eisenhower told Stimson then that he opposed dropping the bomb on Japan, and privately, he noted his disdain for the theological rhetoric which permeated the mission:

> The cable was in code, you know the way they do it. "The lamb is born" or some damn thing like that. So then he told me they were going to drop it on

87 Quoted by Franklin in "Fatal Fiction: A Weapon to End All Wars" in *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* 45, No. 9 (November 1989), 24.

> the Japanese. Well, I listened, and I didn't volunteer anything because, after all, my war was over in Europe and it wasn't up to me. But I was getting more and more depressed just thinking about it. Then he asked for my opinion, so I told him I was against it on two counts. First, the Japanese were ready to surrender and it wasn't necessary to hit them with that awful thing. Second, I hated to see our country be the first to use such a weapon. Well . . . the old gentleman got furious. And I can see how he would. After all, it had been his responsibility to push for all the huge expenditure to develop the bomb, which of course he had a right to do, and *was* right to do. Still, it was an awful problem.[88]

The objections he raised to Stimson were also being made at that time by others inside the project, albeit for different reasons, but what Eisenhower fails to mention (or perhaps even consider) is the prospect of permanently ending war, which would theoretically overwhelm his arguments against the bomb's use. His dismissal of Stimson and his opposition to the use of the atomic bomb was untouched by the precepts of revelatory annihilation. Eisenhower was also blind to what had occurred earlier that summer in New Mexico, an experience that instantly converted the last of the holdouts, like Groves and through him, Truman.

If Eisenhower had seen the Trinity blast or read the reports of those who did, perhaps he would have been more amenable to believing that it could be a catalyst for

88 Rhodes, *Making of the Atomic Bomb*, 688.

world peace, the Project's real objective for which the world war was nothing more than convenient cover. There was a sense in which the destructive and world-changing power of the atomic bomb had to be seen in order to be believed after the first atomic explosion turned the surrounding desert sands into a sea of green glass and brought the heat of the noon-day sun to the coolness of the desert night. The Trinity test marked the point in this story of revelatory annihilation wherein reality ceased to mirror literature and became stranger than fiction. The night before, anxiety ran rampant as an incoming storm threatened to derail the early morning proceedings. Many of the scientists claimed to have laid awake all night, and not a soldier was stirring, due in part to the precautions taken against carnal passion at Los Alamos: "Groves authorized only cold showers for his troops; their isolated duty would win them eventual award for the lowest VD rate in the entire U.S. Army. The well water, fouled with gypsum, made a sovereign purgative. It also stiffened the hair."[89] One of the notable scientist, Emilio Segrè, passed the hours reading André Gide's *The Counterfeiters* until he fell asleep. He managed to sleep through the worst of the storm but was awakened "by an

89 Ibid, 654.

unbelievable noise whose nature escaped [him] completely."[90] In his words, "As the noise persisted, Sam Allison and I went out with a flashlight and, much to our surprise, found hundreds of frogs in the act of making love in a big hole that had filled with water."[91]

The morning of, in the early hours before dawn, after the thunderstorm had passed, the scientists put on welding goggles and lathered themselves with sun tan lotion, preparing "to look the beast in the eye." As Edward Teller remembered it:

> "We were told to lie down on the sand turn our faces away from the blast, and bury our heads in our arms. No one complied. We were determined to look the beast in the eye . . . I wouldn't turn away . . . but having made all those calculations, I thought the blast might be rather bigger than expected. So I put on some suntan lotion." Teller passed the lotion around and the strange prophylaxis disturbed one observer: "It was an eerie sight to see a number of our highest-ranking scientists seriously rubbing sunburn lotion on their faces and hands in the pitch-blackness of the night, twenty miles from the expected flash."[92]

The American physicist Robert Wilson on being converted by what he saw: "When it went off . . . we saw what was just a tremendously overpowering vision . . . Seeing the

90 Rhodes, *Making of the Atomic Bomb,* 667.

91 Ibid.

92 Ibid, 668.

mountain small beside it. Seeing . . . some kind of beauty, but awesome . . . And that was something that, once that had happened, I was a different person from then on."[93]

Back at base camp, Segrè imagined himself to be witnessing the initial stage of an eschatological wipe-out:

> The most striking impression was that of an overwhelmingly bright light . . . I was flabbergasted by the new spectacle. We saw the whole sky flash with unbelievable brightness in spite of the very dark glasses that we wore . . . . I believe that for a moment I thought the explosion might set fire to the atmosphere and thus finish the earth, even though I knew that this was not possible.[94]

General Groves recounted his impression of the atomic explosion in his "Report on the Alamogordo Atomic Bomb Test," which was completed on July 18th and sent to Truman at Potsdam:

> The effects could well be called unprecedented, magnificent, beautiful, stupendous and terrifying. No man-made phenomenon of such tremendous power had ever occurred before. The lighting effects beggared description. The whole country was lighted by a searing light with the intensity many times that of the midday sun. It was golden, purple, violet, gray and blue. It lighted every peak, crevasse and ridge of the nearby mountain range with a clarity and beauty

93 *The Day After Trinity*, DVD, directed by John H. Else (1981; Chatsworth: Image Entertainment, 2002).

94 Rhodes, *Making of the Atomic Bomb,* 673.

> that cannot be described but must be seen to be imagined. It was that beauty that great poets dream about but describe poorly and inadequately. Thirty seconds after the explosion came first, the air blast pressing hard against the people and things, to be followed almost immediately by the strong, sustained, awesome roar which warned of doomsday and made us feel that we puny things were blasphemous to dare tamper with the forces heretofore reserved to the Almighty. Words are inadequate tools for the job of acquainting those not present with the physical, mental and psychological effects. It had to be witnessed to be realized.

Finally, the explosion as I. I. Rabi saw it:

> We were lying there, very tense, in the early dawn, and there were just a few streaks of gold in the east; you could see your neighbor very dimly. Those ten seconds were the longest ten seconds that I ever experienced. Suddenly, there was an enormous flash of light, the brightest light I have ever seen or that I think anyone has ever seen. It blasted; it pounced; it bored its way right through you. It was a vision which was seen with more than the eye. It was seen to last forever. You would wish it would stop; altogether it lasted about two seconds. Finally it was over, diminishing, and we looked toward the place where the bomb has been; there was an enormous ball of fire which grew and grew and it rolled as it grew; it went up into the air, in yellow flashes and into scarlet and green. It looked menacing. It seemed to come toward one. A new thing had just been born; a new control; a new understanding of man, which man had acquired over nature.[95]

95 Ibid, 672.

The Chicago Reformation

Even before the Trinity explosion, the idea that the atomic bomb would have to be seen in order to be believed was ubiquitous. The psychic effects of a an atomic explosion, set off by "a vision which was seen by more than the eye," were of primary concern to American war-planners, not the elimination of specific industrial military targets. After all, saturation bombing had already proved effective as a means of decimating Japanese industrial centers, so much so that special care had to be taken in the Pacific theater to keep potential atomic target cities pristine. The U.S. strategy emphasized spectacle and the psychological wounds inflicted upon those who witnessed the bombing in Japan firsthand and those who encountered it in the news. The position was clarified in the minutes of an Interim Committee meeting on potential targets held in May of 1945 when its members addressed the "Psychological Factors in Target selection:" "It was agreed that psychological factors in the target selection were of great importance. Two aspects of this are (1) obtaining the greatest psychological effect against Japan and (2) making the initial use sufficiently spectacular for the importance of the weapon to be internationally recognized when publicity on it is released."[96] They

96 Memorandum for Major General L. R. Groves, "Subject: Summary of Target Committee Meetings

concluded that "In this respect Kyoto has the advantage of the people being more highly intelligent and hence better able to appreciate the significance of the weapon."[97] The residents of Hiroshima would be less likely to grasp this significance, they reasoned, but that city would make for the better photo-op: "Hiroshima has the advantage of being such a size and with possible focusing from nearby mountains that a large fraction of the city may be destroyed."[98] There, the natural surroundings would maximize the force of the bomb in addition to dramatically framing photographs of the city in ruins, providing a sense of depth and epic scale.

If the bombing was primarily intended to serve as a theologically charged public relations campaign, a revealing of the new weapon that would produce revelation, the question became, could those same ends be achieved through a non-violent exhibition of the bomb's destructive capacity? Whether or not the cause of revelatory annihilation was better served by a simulation or actual bomb runs divided the faithful. The orthodoxy of Oppenheimer's vast congregation splintered in the last year of its

on 10 and 11 May 1945," May 12, 1945.

97 Ibid.

98 Ibid.

existence over this issue of blood sacrifice as being essential or non-essential to revelation. In the spring of 1945, when the new weapon became technically realizable, a debate raged within the Project. Must the people of Japan be burned—in a literal holocaust—for the miracle to occur? Was human carnage essential to securing a messianic outcome, they asked, or would a virtual demonstration of the atomic bomb's unprecedented might suffice in bringing war to a permanent end?

As the months passed and the question became more nuanced and hotly contested, it produced an internal schism, with the breakaway position captained by Leo Szilard and supported by a host of others in the scientific community (primarily his colleagues at the Chicago Metallurgical Laboratory and at the Project's outpost in Oak Ridge, Tennessee). The other side, the clear majority, was championed by Oppenheimer, who had the ear of the scientific community, and Stimson, the most influential voice on the Hill. In terms of historical unfolding, this objection to the bomb runs in favor of a simulation proved inconsequential. Even if Szilard would have been able to convince Oppenheimer that summer that spilling blood was unnecessary and turn the rest of the scientists at Los Alamos against the bomb runs, there is no

reason to believe that Truman and his advisers would have heeded their counsel.[99] Still, the cleavage represented by the Chicago Reformation forced these individuals to refine their beliefs. Their respective positions were hardened under the pressure of internal contestation. Crucially, neither side ever considered (or used as a stand-alone argument) the idea that atomic bombing may be immoral in itself. What Szilard and others articulated was not a plea to spare Japanese lives. Their argument hinged on the virtual demonstration being the best way to achieve the form of international recognition that would allow a post-war America to broker the terms of world peace, as it had done in Brissago in the pages of *The World Set Free.* The irreparable erosion of diplomatic prestige was what concerned them, certainly not an aversion to mass killing, which was what they signed up for.

Szilard's protestant break with Manhattan Project orthodoxy occurred once it became clear to him that the atomic bomb would be successfully detonated, if not by the United States, then by some other nation and in all likelihood sooner than anyone

99 Another conceit: the peaceful demonstration of new superweapon for the Russians that Szilard lobbied for as an alternative to the bombing of Japan actually took place, as two Russian spies witnessed the Trinity explosion.

expected. Since the question of when had been resolved, he dedicated himself to the question of how the atomic bomb should debut, deciding in the end that a virtual demonstration of its destructive capacity provided the strongest hope for world peace. His was a lonely crusade at first. He began by attempting to directly lobby the President, securing an audience with Roosevelt that was voided by his untimely death. Truman was harder to access. After repeated requests to speak with Truman were denied, Szilard was diverted to the office of Leslie Groves, then the private residence of Stimson. Both men were instructed to hear him out in hopes that it would pacify his dissent. Their patronizing approach had the opposite effect. He began to agitate more. After his visit with Stimson, Szilard scheduled a meeting with Oppenheimer upon learning that they would soon be in Washington D.C. at the same time. His pleas to spare Japan or to at the very least issue an unambiguous warning to the Japanese leadership and people, would once again fall on deaf ears, but Oppenheimer's blunt response was telling:

> Back in Washington, Szilard made another attempt to block the use of the bomb. On May 30, hearing that Oppenheimer was in the capital for a meeting with Secretary of War Stimson, Szilard phoned General Groves' office and made an appointment to see Oppenheimer that morning. Oppenheimer

> considered Szilard a meddler, but decided he had to hear him out. "The atomic bomb is shit," Oppenheimer said after listening to Szilard's arguments. "What do you mean by that?" Szilard asked. "Well," Oppenheimer replied, "this is a weapon which has no military significance. It will make a big bang—a very big bang—but it is not a weapon which is useful in war."[100]

The atomic bomb as shit could also be read in the description supplied by the official correspondent dispatched by the *New York Times.* In the Trinity explosion he saw "a giant ball of fire rise as though from the bowels of the earth . . . Awe-struck we watched it shoot upward . . . becoming ever more alive as it climbed skyward through the white clouds. It was no longer smoke, or dust, or even a cloud of fire. It was a living thing, a new species of being, born right before our incredulous eyes."[101] The atomic bomb was identified at the start by the leader of the Manhattan Project as being an accursed share, shit—an expenditure without any recuperation of value. And yet, Oppenheimer's declaration was not incompatible with his belief that the bomb would one day be a catalyst for peace. It not being useful in war would be precisely what makes war useless.

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100 Bird and Sherwin, *American Prometheus*, 292.

101 William Laurence, *New York Times*, September 9, 1945.

From that point on, Oppenheimer went beyond disagreeing with and actively campaigned against Szilard's support for a non-violent exhibition of atomic weaponry. Both lobbied their colleagues on the Project heavily. Szilard wrote to his friend Edward Teller, a founding member of Der Bund, who quickly found himself caught between the two rival camps. Teller, in his own words:

> In the spring of 1945 I did become worried about the way the atomic bomb might be used. My apprehension reached a high plateau several months before Hiroshima [actually one month] when I received a letter at Los Alamos from Szilard. He asked my support for a petition urging that the United States not use the atomic bomb in warfare without first warning the enemy. I was in absolute agreement, and prepared to circulate Szilard's petition among the scientists at Los Alamos. But it was my duty, first, to discuss the question with the director of the Los Alamos Laboratory, Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer . . . Oppenheimer told me, in a polite and convincing way, that he thought it improper for a scientist to use his prestige as a platform for political pronouncements . . . I did not circulate Szilard's petition. Today I regret that I did not.[102]

Unbeknownst to Teller, who followed orders and abstained from politics, Oppenheimer was exerting direct political pressure on multiple fronts within the Manhattan Project. His having advocated non-interference from the scientific community while nonetheless advising the government on the use of atomic weaponry

102 Edward Teller and Allen Brown, *The Legacy of Hiroshima* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1962), 13-14.

is one possible explanation for the terrible rift that would later divide he and Teller and lead to the revoking of his security clearance.[103] At this time he was still Oppenheimer's most outspoken defender, though he would be remembered, based on damning testimony provided to Congress in its investigation of Oppenheimer's suspected Communist ties, to be his ultimate betrayer.

Teller's response to Szilard echoed Oppenheimer's call for political abstention among the scientific community: "First of all let me say that I have no hope of clearing my conscience. The things we are working on are so terrible that no amount of protesting or fiddling with politics will save our souls . . ."[104] Teller believed that if the bomb was not used in the present war, it was certainly only a matter of time before the United States or a rival finally did so. In that sense, he maintained the miracle promised by atomic warfare was needed more than ever, more than before, when the existence of the atomic bomb was still only vaguely theoretical. The only chance for survival in a world that would be populated by atomic bombs lay in the bomb's potential to spark a

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103 See Stanley Blumberg and Louis Panos, *Edward Teller: Giant of The Golden Age of Physics* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990), 82-3.

104 Quoted in Dower, "Idealistic Annihilation," 130.

mass shift in human thought which render war extinct:

> I am not really convinced of your objections. I do not feel there is any chance to outlaw any one weapon. If we have a slim chance of survival, it lies in the possibility to get rid of wars. The more decisive the weapon is the more surely it will be used in any real conflicts and no agreement will help. Our only hope is in getting the facts of our results before the people. This might help to convince everybody that the next war would be fatal. For this purpose actual combat-use might even be the best thing.[105]

Teller concluded his letter by saying, "I feel that I should do the wrong thing if I tried to say how to tie the little toe of the ghost to the bottle from which we just helped it to escape."[106]

The schism which divided the Project on the issue of revelatory annihilation widened after Arthur Compton submitted the "Franck Memorandum" (named after James Franck) to the Interim Committee advising against the use of the atomic bomb on a military target in Japan. It argued that "the way in which nuclear weapons, now secretly developed in this country, will first be revealed to the world appears of great, perhaps fateful importance."[107] The report concluded with the assertion that

105 Ibid.

106 Sherwin, *World Destroyed*, 218.

107 "Report of the Committee on Political and Social Problems" submitted by the Manhattan Project "Metallurgical Laboratory" at the University of Chicago, 11 June 1945. The signatories of the so-

> Nuclear bombs cannot possibly remain a "secret weapon" at the exclusive disposal of this country, for more than a few years. The scientific facts on which their construction is based are well known to scientists of other countries. Unless an effective international control of nuclear explosives is instituted, a race of nuclear armaments is certain to ensue following the first revelation of our possession of nuclear weapons to the world . . . We believe that these considerations make the use of nuclear bombs for an early, unannounced attack against Japan inadvisable. If the United States would be the first to release this new means of indiscriminate destruction upon mankind, she would sacrifice public support throughout the world, precipitate the race of armaments, and prejudice the possibility of reaching an international agreement on the future control of such weapons. Much more favorable conditions for the eventual achievement of such an agreement could be created if nuclear bombs were first revealed to the world by a demonstration in an appropriately selected uninhabited area.[108]

To stem the reactionary tide that gathered strength after the submission of the Franck report, the scientific panel appointed by the Interim Committee—Lawrence, Compton, Fermi, Oppenheimer—met in Los Alamos on the weekend of June 16-17 to consider the possibility of a peaceful demonstration of atomic power, and after debating long into the night, they rendered a (ultimately inconsequential) verdict that affirmed the necessity of the bomb runs over Japan insofar as military use provided the

called "Franck Report" were James Franck (chair), Donald J. Hughes, J.J. Nickson, Eugene Rabinowitch, Glen T. Seaborg, J.C. Stearns, and Leo Szilard.

108 Ibid.

best chance of ending the present war with haste and perhaps the only chance of preventing future ones. A moratorium on use may succeed in outlawing atomic warfare, they reasoned, but conventional war would be left intact:

> Those who advocate a purely technical demonstration would wish to outlaw the use of atomic weapons, and have feared that if we use the weapons now our position in future negotiations will be prejudiced. Others emphasize the opportunity of saving American lives by immediate military use, and believe that such use will improve the international prospects, in that they are more concerned with the prevention of war than with the elimination of this specific weapon. We find ourselves closer to these latter views; we can propose no technical demonstration likely to bring an end to the war; we see no acceptable alternative to direct military use.[109]

Even here, inducing Japanese surrender was tied by the panel's findings to the larger task of preventing war altogether. A technical demonstration offered no hope for the discontinuation of conventional wars fought with old-fashioned instruments. That change would only be piecemeal. What they desired, more than ending the war at hand, was a conversion without reserve, a clean break from the murderous origins of the human. Direct use represented the best chance at accomplishing this feat, according to the panel.

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109 Quoted in Rhodes, *Making of the Atomic Bomb*, 696-7.

Their report prompted another rejoinder from the opposing camp, a reply from Chicago which became known as the "Szilard petition," a further elaboration of the position staked by the Franck report. It was sent to the President on July 17th, but Truman never saw it.[110] It argued that military use would weaken the moral standing of the United States and in so doing undermine the possibility of peace:

> Thus a nation which sets the precedent of using these newly liberated forces of nature for purposes of destruction may have to bear the responsibility of opening the door to an era of devastation on an unimaginable scale. If after this war a situation is allowed to develop in the world which permits rival powers to be in uncontrolled possession of these new means of destruction, the cities of the United States as well as the cities of other nations will be in continuous danger of sudden annihilation. All the resources of the United States, moral and material, may have to be mobilized to prevent the advent of such a world situation. Its prevention is at present the solemn responsibility of the United States—singled out by virtue of her lead in the field of atomic power . . . The added material strength which this lead gives to the United States brings with it the obligation of restraint and if we were to violate this obligation our moral position would be weakened in the eyes of the world and in our own eyes. It would then be more difficult for us to live up to our responsibility of bringing the unloosened forces of destruction under control.[111]

Again, Szilard's objection had nothing to do with the morality of bomb runs or with an

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110 Szilard and 69 co-signers petitioned the President of the United States on July 17, 1945.

111 U.S. National Archives, Record Group 77, Records of the Chief of Engineers, Manhattan Engineer District, Harrison-Bundy File, folder #76.

aversion to the eradication of human life. His concern was that a degraded moral position would hamper America's ability to negotiate world peace before its monopoly on the new superweapon ran out. His larger concern was the new world situation in which sudden annihilation would be a constant threat. He was adamant that America could not simply turn back the clock. Sooner or later, the atomic bomb would introduce itself to humanity. Virtual demonstration was understood by Szilard to be the surest revelatory trigger. Combat-use would actually undermine lasting peace by contaminating the fateful moment of disclosure with human blood.

Rival interpretations of revelatory annihilation grounded this debate. One side maintained that demonstrating power while preserving prestige was essential to building international consensus, now that the arms race was officially underway. The other side insisted on the notion that instantaneous conversion required real live human carnage. This doubling down on the importance of a blood sacrifice to revelatory annihilation in the period of time that elapsed after the creation of atomic weaponry and before the bomb runs over Japan also appeared in Stimson's correspondence with James Conant, then President of Harvard University, with whom he discussed the use

versus demonstration question. Stimson told a journalist in 1947:

> . . . one of the principal reasons [Conant] had for advising me that the bomb must be used was that *that was the only way to awaken the world to the necessity of abolishing war altogether.* No technological demonstration, even if it had been possible under the conditions of war—which it was not—could take the place of the actual use with its horrible results . . . I think he was right and I think that was one of the main things which differentiated the eminent scientists who concurred with President Conant from the less realistic ones who didn't.[112]

Humanity has never suffered from a lack of reasons to abolish war, but since the atomic bomb proved viable, Conant argued that the choice became necessity. The former chemistry professor considered use, "actual use with its horrible results," our last hope. What remained of the war was a closing window of opportunity. This was thought by Stimson to be the more "realistic" approach to sparking revelation, really the "only way to awaken the world." The spectacle had to be horrific; people had to die in awesome fashion if others were to finally wake up.

Leo Szilard failed to reform the faith he helped disseminate. He lost the argument, but years later, he did get the last word. As Oppenheimer turned time and again to poetry and sacred literature to veil his thoughts, Szilard returned to science

112 Stimson quoted by Sherwin in *A World Destroyed*, 200. Emphasis added.

fiction. In 1949, he penned a short story which ran in the *University of Chicago Law Review*, in which he, Stimson, and Truman are tried as war criminals after America loses a limited nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union.[113] The charges apply to the creation of the bomb and its first use against Japan. Written in the first person, Szilard contemplates his guilt while under arrest in this imagined future, when the creators of atomic warfare would be called to answer for the violence they unleashed upon the world. He was the most supreme example of what literature can do, what it can bring about after it flares in the imagination of its recipient. Perhaps the failure Szilard felt he had to atone for was in expecting others to be so moved, not understanding then what he came to accept later: "Since people have no imagination whatsoever, they cannot imagine in peacetime that there should be war, and if the war goes on for a few years, they cannot imagine that there will ever be peace."[114] His protestant reformation failed. It could not contain the Manhattan conspiracy founded on the very beliefs he once disseminated. That the blood sacrifice would have occurred anyway does not diminish

113 Szilard, "My Trial as a War Criminal," in the *University of Chicago Law Review* 17, No. 1 (Autumn 1949): 79-85.

114 Ibid, *Recollections and Correspondence*, 6.

the historical significance of Szilard's protestant faction.

When Manhattan Appears

Could the miracle of conversion envisioned by Wells be bought with a Japanese blood payment? The deep insight of Kenneth Waltz in his landmark 1959 work on the sources of armed conflict—what the human annihilation of World War II actually revealed—is that *war does not pay.* States do not collect a profitable return on warfare, spiritual or otherwise. It depletes their coffers faster than it fills them, and yet "war recurs. The beast in man may glory in the carnage; the reason in man rebels."[115] Wars are about recklessly spending, not cautiously investing—about animality, not human dignity. Atomic power may provide the most compelling reason yet to challenge the apparent normalcy of international conflict, says Waltz, but the decision calculus that leads states to war was never reasonable to begin with. Fear of death, even when complemented by a rational assessment of the (increasingly worsening) odds, cannot serve as the basis for permanence peace:

> Advancing technology makes war more horrible and presumably increases the desire for peace; the very rapidity of the advance makes for uncertainty in everyone's military planning and destroys the possibility of an accurate estimate

115 Kenneth Waltz, *Man , the State, and War*: *A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 224.

> of the likely opposing forces. Fear and permanent peace are more difficult to equate. Each major advance in the technology of war found its prophet ready to proclaim that war is no longer possible: Alfred Nobel and dynamite, or Benjamin Franklin and the lighter-than-air balloon. There may well have been a prophet to proclaim the end of tribal warfare when the spear was invented and another to make a similar predication when poison was first added to its tip. Unfortunately, the prophets have all been false. The development of atomic and hydrogen weapons may nurture the peace wish of some, the war sentiment of others . . . The fear of modern weapons, of the danger of destroying the civilization of the world, is not sufficient to establish the [necessary] conditions of peace.[116]

War as the structuring principle of world affairs was not challenged but enhanced by the atomic bomb. In the end, the Manhattan prophets proved false, like Nobel and Franklin before them. But the question remains: what would be sufficient to establish conditions of peace as something other than the momentary cessation of war? Is the fact that the conversion experience prophesied by Wells, Szilard, Teller, Stimson, Truman, and Oppenheimer has not yet occurred itself definitive proof that it never will? Is our modern faith in the reliability of deterrence not similarly premised, in that one believes the world will not blow up today on the basis that it did not do so yesterday?

As with capitalism in the field of economics so too with realism in international

116 Ibid, 235-6.

relations—when proponents of each system, like Waltz, make normative claims on the here and now, they also tend to make naturalizing claims on the past. The present order of things is at once how it should be, how it has always been, and by implication how it always will be. In this barrage of arguments lies a recursive trap, a dangerous hall of mirrors, whose falsity does not inhibit its constitutive effect on the world as we know it. Histories of the Manhattan Project that erase the difference between the retrospective thinking of Waltz and the revelatory thinking of Oppenheimer, function as a mirror, even and especially when they appear to be windows that look out on what was. These mirrors assure us of the credibility of a world based on something "MAD," the world bequeathed to us by the Manhattan Project, but at what cost?[117] And where does that mirrored hallway lead to? Might there also be a risk in smashing the mirror? If the terror of balance in deterrence is stabilized by nothing but illusion, the fantasy that the Project succeeded may be essential to prolonging our terrestrial existence. On the other hand, once the narcissistic feedback loop is interrupted, we may begin to see in the past not reassuring versions of ourselves but embodied critiques of what we have since become.

117 M.A.D. is an acronym for "mutually assured destruction."

One thing the story of revelatory annihilation does clarify is that the unsayable real of an atomic international order founded on the naturalization of self-interested rationality is that the "unthinkable" act is eminently thinkable. This form of thinkability has nothing do with the supposed irrationality of external threats. Nor is it a form of thinkability that seeks military advantage, a thinkability still subject to rational dissuasion. This justification of nuclear war resides within the bounds of instrumental rationality and Westphalian statecraft; it is mutually endorsed by science and the redemptive spirit. Not cold or bloodthirsty but inspired by art, energized by compassion, touched by God, and bent on the promise of eternal peace. That future war, fought in the name of peace, with love for humanity, would not be a perversion of what Manhattan Project intended but a continuation of their holy mission. What's more, they understood that their creation would leave us with no other choice: lay down arms or die. To let their belief structure slip into the dustbin of history, in the twenty-first century, could be tantamount to facing a death sentence without ever having been read the verdict. Oppenheimer understood that a spectre was born out of the gadget, and that this phantasm, in the long run, would elude every precautionary

technique of containment and breathe real fire into the world. Our only chance of survival would take the form of an ongoing struggle for war's abolition, as the risk of war returning, on the grandest scale (nuclear omnicide), would be ever-present.

One member of Manhattan congregation, I. I. Rabi, proclaimed after witnessing the Trinity explosion: "suddenly the day of judgment was the next day and has been ever since."[118] And so it is that every day we are judged by our relation to fire —the atomic bomb being its supreme manifestation. The explosion in the desert founded a new world, but everyone knew that the next atomic detonation would be the one to either shape it into the world imagined by Wells, transformed by "a blazing sun" into a place of everlasting peace, or it would be the first explosion in an omnicidal series, the world that Nicholson foresaw, the Frankenstein scenario in which the monster we once created and tried in vain to domesticate one day turns grotesque, savage. It is worth remembering that the sub-title of Mary Shelley's first publication of *Frankenstein* was "*The Modern Prometheus.*"[119] In that story, the miracle of

118 I.I. Rabi quoted by Albert Wohlstetter, "Perspective on Nuclear Energy" in *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* 24, No. 4 (April 1968), 2.

119 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (London: Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor & Jones, 1818). The term was originally coined by Immanuel Kant in reference to Benjamin Franklin's work on electricity, calling him "The Prometheus of modern times."

resurrection occurs—death turns into life—but the new life is alienated, spiteful, and turns murderous. It could be said, in much the same way, that the dreamy miracle of creation at Alamogordo turned into nightmares of destruction, soothed only by the false worship of a false sun, the sun that burst in the name of Trinity, a fireball stolen from the Gods, the same fire which now lights the "Route of the Dead Man" that humanity set itself upon in the New Mexico desert that day in 1945.

While they argued over how news of the bomb should be disclosed to the rest of the world, by virtual demonstration or direct application, everyone agreed on these being the only possible outcomes: "World Peace" or "Destroyer of Worlds." Their work would leave humanity with no choice between conversion and death. What goes unsaid in the branding of Oppenheimer and his constituents as false prophets (given the non-appearance of mass conversion) is the implied consequence of their failure, the other destiny in which the profane theft of fire—nourishing the illusion of our omnipotence—is the fateful cause of our undoing. Oppenheimer famously went on to associate his reaction to the Trinity explosion with Vishnu, who tells the Prince he is the "Destroyer of Worlds." These are the words of a false prophet confessing, a man

who died in a world unchanged by the miracle that he produced and all the sacrifices that went into it. In this way he agreed with Waltz's assessment, and that in his vanity he thought that this would be the horror show of horror shows that made war untenable. But just as there is a risk in confusing what Oppenheimer and others believed in the aftermath with what they believed in the beginning, so too is there a risk in over-determining the failure of the Project. Perhaps revelation is still possible, that in the time that remains, the world may yet be changed, that Oppenheimer's great poem—the bomb as his hymn to God—may one day ring true.

Toward the end of the Project, many who joined on the basis of their work being a pathway to their own and humanity's salvation, were, especially after the successful test, beginning to think gravely about the possibility of collective damnation, knowing full well that "no amount of political trifling would save [their] souls" and that there was no way "to get the [holy] ghost back in the bottle." The monster had been turned loose; it was too late for politics or prayer. Vannevar Bush, who sat on the Interim Committee and helped initiate the Manhattan Project, met with Oppenheimer in Los Alamos two nights before the test. Bush recorded the impression Oppenheimer

left on him that Saturday night in July, as he recited a passage from the *Gita,* no longer discussing his salvation in terms of a new world to come but being spared from divine wrath based on the noble intentions he had at the beginning:

> His was a profoundly complex character . . . So my comment will be brief. I simply record a poem, which he translated from Sanscrit [sic], and which he recited to me two nights before [Trinity]:
>
> In battle, in forest, at the precipice in the mountains,
> On the dark great sea, in the midst of javelins and arrows,
> In sleep, in confusion, in the depths of shame,
> The good deeds a man has done before defend him.[120]

Even after Trinity, an embattled Oppenheimer remained on the banks of that dark great sea, the fog of war all about him, fending off shame, unsure of what was to come. He came to understand that Truman jumped the gun at Potsdam when he declared that America won its bet. The real wager, worth much more than two billion dollars, had yet to be made. Oppenheimer had nothing but the goodness of his past deeds, done in the name of revelatory annihilation, to provide him solace in the vast darkness that would not depart his days until the die were truly cast on the battlefield. Before then, he was a prophet at the mercy of his God, alone in the darkness, contemplating Donne:

120 Rhodes, *Making of the Atomic Bomb*, 663.

"Batter my heart . . . That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee and bend your force to break, blowe, burn."

It remains harder than ever and far more important than ever to contact the beliefs that secretly directed the Manhattan Project in those days, to really occupy the mind of someone like Oppenheimer or Truman, who believed, against impossible odds and in defiance of all known precedent, that everything about the world they once knew was destined to change "When Manhattan appears over [Japan]."[121] Hiroshima and Nagasaki would burn so the rest of the world could be made new. And so it was that in Nevada, on that cloistered military compound, once news of the Little Boy's successful detonation began to spread,

> Los Alamos tried to celebrate one of those events with a big party. Ambivalence accompanied success: not only was the party a dismal flop but people later disagreed about when it took place. Some said everyone was too exhausted after Alamogordo; others that no one celebrated Hiroshima. In after years, Oppenheimer recalled only that he had dropped by briefly, found a usually cool-headed young group leader vomiting in the bushes outside, and thought, "The reaction has begun."[122]

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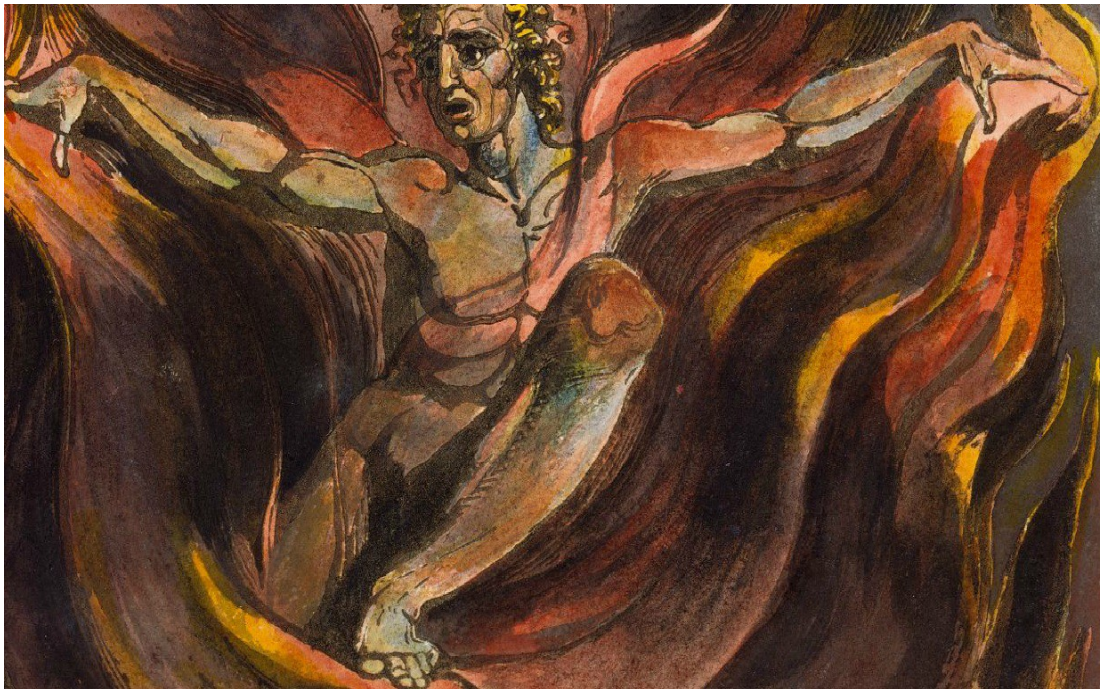
121 Harry S. Truman, *Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman*, ed. Robert H. Ferrell (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 54.

122 Alice Kimball Smith, *Letters and Recollections*, 292.

II. **The Infernal Return**: On Some Motifs in Nuclear War



The flames sawed in the wind and the embers paled and deepened and paled and deepened like the bloodbeat of some living thing eviscerate upon the ground before them and they watched the fire which does contain within it something of men themselves inasmuch as they are less without it and are divided from their origins and are exiles. For each fire is all fires, and the first fire and the last ever to be.

—Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West*

"A Jap Burns"

The issue of *Life* magazine already in circulation when President Truman publicly revealed the existence and first use of atomic weaponry on Hiroshima, at a time when it was a staple in households, schools, and waiting rooms throughout much of America, featured a lone U.S. fighter plane on the cover and included a one-page story, told primarily in pictures, under the heading "A JAP BURNS," with the sub-title "He refuses to leave Borneo hiding place so flamethrower kills him."[123] The six images that document the Japanese man's incineration were accompanied by a series of captions (such as, "WITH LIQUID FIRE EATING AT SKIN JAP SKITTERS THROUGH UNDERBRUSH") and this text:

> When the 7th Australian Division landed near Balikpapan on the island of Borneo last month they found a town strongly defended by Japanese. As usual, the enemy fought from caves, from pillboxes, from every available hiding place. And, as usual, there was only one way to advance against them: burn them out. Men of the 7th, who had fought the Japs before, quickly applied their flamethrowers, soon convinced some Japs that it was time to quit. Others, like the one shown here, refused. So they had to be burned out. Although men have fought one another with fire from time immemorial, the flamethrower is easily the most cruel, the most terrifying weapon ever developed. If it does not suffocate the enemy in his hiding place, its quickly licking tongues of flame sear

123 "A JAP BURNS" in *Life*, August 13, 1945, 34.

his body to a black crisp. But so long as the Jap refuses to come out of his holes and keeps killing, this is the only way.[124]

In these lines and surrounding images, that unprecedented weapon which Truman described as "a new and revolutionary increase in destruction" to the extent that it constituted the "the greatest destructive force in history," took its place alongside other landmark war technologies and extended those allied military campaigns already dedicated to the burning of Japanese people and cities, with flamethrowers by troops on the ground and saturation fire-bombings from above (which claimed more lives than the Fat Man and Little Boy).[125] Even the atomic incineration of a city lasted as novelty for only three days, when Nagasaki was torched by the more powerful plutonium bomb.

What Truman described as new was, in a sense, already bracketed by precedent and repetition on both sides, already swallowed up by infernal forms of recurrence—historical motifs recycled by "men [who have] fought one another with fire from time immemorial," always championing while secretly building the next "most cruel" and

124 Ibid.

125 Truman, "Statement by the President of the United States," August 6, 1945.

"most terrifying weapon ever developed," which will also burn the body of the enemy "to a black crisp." Between Truman's historic declaration and the ready-made context supplied by *Life* magazine stands the question: did something *really happen* in Hiroshima, something new, something unforeseen *and* unforeseeable, whose appearance would change everything, or rather was nothing more than the latest installment of *what always happens* in war, what in essence has been happening from the very beginning? In October of 1945, Truman clarified his position in an address to Congress:

> The discovery of the means of releasing atomic energy began a new era in the history of civilization. The scientific and industrial knowledge on which this discovery rests does not relate merely to another weapon. It may some day prove to be more revolutionary in the development of human society than the invention of the wheel, the use of metals, or the steam or internal combustion engine. Never in history has society been confronted with a power so full of potential danger and at the same time so full of promise for the future of man and for the peace of the world. I think I can express the faith of the American people when I say that we can use the knowledge we have won, not for the devastation of war, but for the future welfare of humanity.[126]

This "new era in the history of civilization" appeared to Truman to be setting humanity at a crossroads: either the discovery, now an open secret, would be rigorously de-

126 Truman, "Special Message to Congress on Atomic Energy," October 3, 1945.

contextualized—that is, set apart from the past carnage of wars and the technological breakthroughs of prior historical periods and not thought of as merely another weapon in an indefinite series or yet another fiery blast indistinguishable from those explosions that preceded it or would follow such that full responsibility could be taken and the promise of peace realized—or an unprecedented danger would be risked.

The opposing view, bent on contextualizing the discovery of the atomic bomb and its first use, was held by Truman's British counterpart, Winston Churchill. Even before the weapon had been technically realized, Churchill determined that the new superweapon would merely amplify and not fundamentally alter the fighting of world wars or the terms of international diplomacy, stating that "this new bomb is just going to be bigger than our present bombs. It involves no difference in the principles of war. And as for any post-war problems there are none that cannot be amicably settled between me and my friend President Roosevelt."[127] After the incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he openly praised the atomic bombs as miraculous, peace-inducing instruments. In his words, "To avert a vast, indefinite butchery, to bring the

127 Gerard J. DeGroot, *The Bomb: a Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 69.

war to an end, to give peace to the world, to lay healing hands upon its tortured peoples by a manifestation of overwhelming power at the cost of a few explosions, seemed, after all our toils and perils, a miracle of deliverance."[128] For Churchill the atomic bomb was in keeping with what Theodore Adorno, reflecting back on the second Great War, referred to as the "logic of history" that is "as destructive as the people it brings to prominence: wherever its momentum carries it, it reproduces equivalents of past calamity. Normality is death."[129] There could be nothing abnormal about more death or a bigger bang in war; there was however something miraculous about the way these explosions appeared to expedite Japanese surrender at minimal cost to the Allied forces.

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128 Rhodes, *Making of the Atomic Bomb,* 697.

129 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life,* trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1978), 56. This mode of thinking history is also the basis for the motto "never again," which abounds in human rights discourse: "A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen. When we want to find reasons for it, this imperative is as refractory as the given one of Kant was once upon a time. Dealing discursively with it would be an outrage, for the new imperative gives us a bodily sensation of the moral addendum—bodily, because it is now the practical abhorrence of the unbearable physical agony to which individuals are exposed even with individuality about to vanish as a form of mental reflection. It is in the unvarnished materialistic motive only that morality survives." Adorno, *Negative Dialectics,* trans. E.B. Ashton, (New York: Continuum, 1992), 365.

This second chapter is about what became of revelatory annihilation in the immediate aftermath of the atomic bombings, moving from an analysis of the miracle that the Manhattan Project thought itself to be engineering to a study of how those effects were framed as miraculous or mundane once they finally materialized. Somehow, the two atomic bombs fired as planned, but the revelatory chain-reaction they were supposed to initiate stalled out. Why? Were Oppenheimer and Szilard good scientists but, as disciples of Wells and Nobel, poor theologians? Was the bomb's audience to blame, not its creators, or did people not change because the world had remained the same, the novelty of the bomb swallowed up by context as soon as it was beheld? Or is the ongoing failure of mass conversion not evidence of their shortcomings but our own, we who are still living in the wake of what their unprecedented labors unleashed? What further complicates this line of questioning is that in the post-war years, many of the believers in revelatory annihilation, notably Truman and Stimson, eventually sided with Churchill. In 1947, Stimson published an article that argued, rather convincingly, that the bombing was a necessary evil which prevented over "a million" allied casualties.[130] Without the long-awaited miracle or a

130 Henry L. Stimson, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb" in *Harper's Magazine* (February

strategic alibi to soothe his guilty conscience, Truman defended his actions to himself, in his own diary, on the basis that he had no choice in the matter and that the moral failings of the Japanese military justified the use of atomic weapons without warning: "Nobody is more disturbed over the use of atomic bombs than I am but I was greatly disturbed over the unwarranted attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbor and their murder of our prisoners of war. The only language they seem to understand is the one we have been using to bombard them. When you have to deal with a beast you have to treat him as a beast. It is most regrettable but nevertheless true."[131] Surely the rationale behind Truman's final authorization of the atomic bombings cannot be reduced to a simple revenge motive (they had it coming), but privately, after revelation failed to materialize and dream of global governance was lost, he maintained that his beastly

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1947). The propaganda effort is discussed at length by Gar Alperovitz in *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), esp. pp. 427–97. Just one year prior, however, members of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, which Stimson assembled and presided over, had officially concluded: "Based on a detailed investigation of all the facts, and supported by the testimony of the surviving Japanese leaders involved, it is the Survey's opinion that certainly prior to 31 December 1945, and in all probability prior to 1 November 1945, Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated." Ibid.

131 DeGroot, *A Life*, 104.

decision was compelled by the beast who provoked him, not hope for another world. His dehumanizing rhetoric paralleled the sub-human description of "the Jap" in the *Life* spread who refused to give up and come out of hiding, so like a termite, like a beast without reason, he had to be smoked out of his hole and burned alive. Are these disavowals of revelatory annihilation definitive proof that it was false worship to begin with, or was the infidelity of Truman and Stimson itself implicated in the faith's post-war demise?

Later in the chapter, what begins as a political dispute over contextualization which occurs in the months after the bombing becomes a transcendent philosophical question cased in theology, a question that still hangs ominously over the twenty-first century. Churchill and Adorno's conception of infernal recurrence was rooted in a cyclical conception of war and death by fire—"each fire is all fires." They interpreted the political miracle of the atomic bomb as an end, bringing the latest eruption of horrific violence to a close. Their dissenters saw it as a beginning, the founding of a new world in which our old ways would have to be revolutionized. The dispute is given an added theological depth by considering the newness of atomic bombs

alongside a range of prophecies, antinomian and orthodox, that see in every flame a portent of the final blaze which will consume creation—"each fire is all fires, and the first fire and the last ever to be." The conclusion revisits a heretical literature on the infernal return which merges the human and divine by way of fire—the flame everlasting that is said to burn within the core of the body, rendering it capable of majestic work, creative and destructive—"the fire which does contain within it something of men themselves inasmuch as they are less without it and are divided from their origins and are exiles." Like that "worm whose love is death," this argument tunnels its way from prehistory to the days of Heraclitus and Seneca on through the pages of Nietzsche and illuminated plates of William Blake, only to emerge once again in the depths of the twentieth century through the writings of Blanchot, Georges Bataille and his "fellow traveler on the Dionysian path," Norman O. Brown.[132] Does the appearance of nuclear war in 1945 alter the onto-theological significance of fire as it was understood by this lineage of flame-kissed heretics. Does it restructure their claim on the prophetic tradition?

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132 William Blake, "Sick Rose" *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (New York: Orion Press, 1967), pl. 39.

The political, philosophical, and theological question of the aftermath: should one contextualize or de-contextualize the atomic bombings? Is their eventfulness, in the final analysis, precluded by the prophecy of recurrence laid down in Ecclesiastes so long ago, that "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun," even the appearance of another sun?[133] Does Hiroshima represent an epochal shift that relativizes the significance of that which preceded it, giving rise to an entirely new situation, or was that event rightly contextualized in terms of processes (of war, mass-death, technological advancement) always already at work? That is to say, is there a prophetic claim laced within the lines of these reflections on the infernal return which anticipates and fully absorbs the significance of nuclear war's world historical debut, or did the burning of Japanese cities by atomic flame signal an epochal shift that compels us to fundamentally reconsider the old forms recurrence, as they persist now in an entirely new historical situation? Is this an entirely new situation wherein even the reappearance of an old motif would no longer be the same? Or is death by fire, the cataclysmic death from above, in the end,

133 Ecclesiastes 1:9.

nothing more than one of the oldest stories in the Book?

Stark and Dreadful and Inescapable

The member of the Manhattan Project who kept the faith that Truman and Stimson would later abandon (and obscure their former allegiance to), was its famous scientific leader, J. Robert Oppenheimer, who continued to believe that the atomic bomb forever changed the world even though the miracle that he expected to manifest after the world first glimpsed the full extent of the atomic horror never appeared. Still, he considered the bomb to be a revelatory device, in that grasping its significance required a conversion experience, that what one could not see what it really was unless one was changed by the act of seeing it in action. Even as member of his congregation defected, Oppenheimer remained steadfast in his beliefs; he kept faith in the bomb as an instrument of revelatory annihilation, a trigger for political subjectivation, a total game-changer, something so miraculous that it would one day pacify world politics once and for all. He initially believed that the spectacles and the stories depicting the explosions would instantaneously produce revelation. The people of the world would be moved in the way that the scientists and soldiers were in Alamogordo: "When it went off . . . we saw what was just a tremendously overpowering vision . . . once that had happened,

I was a different person from then on."[134] A rational argument was not thought of as necessary by Oppenheimer, but in the months after August in 1945, he felt compelled on at least two occasions to articulate what he considered to be the truths of the new world that the atomic bomb had just created, the truths that any fool could now see. The first manifestation came in the form of a cover letter to the Interim Committee, which accompanied the Science Panel's recommendations for post-war planning in the field of atomic research and weapons development; the second was a speech, really a farewell address, that he gave to the Association of Los Alamos Scientists (his former flock) in the fall.

The letter and finalized report, which Oppenheimer insisted on hand delivering to his superiors in Washington D.C., arrived at five conclusions. First, it warned that sooner rather than later, the same scientific knowledge that was cultivated and harvested by the Manhattan Project would soon deliver a super weapon far more powerful than the atomic bombs used against Japan. Second, given the inevitability of horizontal proliferation, military and diplomatic counter-measures would always prove

134 *The Day After Trinity.*

insufficient, never fully nullifying the threat of an atomic first-strike, thus leaving the nation and world forever exposed to mass death. Third, the letter explained that American hegemony in nuclear research and weapons development, regardless of its substantial head-start, cannot be guaranteed over the long run. Taken together, the first three findings anchored the fourth, which contained within it an immediate call for sweeping and revolutionary alterations to U.S. foreign policy:

> The development, in the years to come, of more effective atomic weapons, would appear to be a most natural element in any national policy of maintaining our military forces at great strength; nevertheless we have grave doubts that this further development can contribute essentially or permanently to the prevention of war. We believe that the safety of this nation—as opposed to its ability to inflict damage on an enemy power—cannot be wholly or even primarily in its scientific or technical prowess. It can be based only on making future wars impossible. It is our unanimous and urgent recommendation to you that, despite the present incomplete exploitation of technical possibilities in this field, all steps be taken, all necessary international arrangements be made, to this one end.[135]

The central message was unambiguous. All efforts must be made to prevent war and make future wars impossible, lest America risk the world. The final point was a plea for the veil of secrecy to be lifted so that the scientists who worked on the Project could

135 Oppenheimer, *Letters and Recollections*, 294.

publicly explain the necessity of abolishing war.

During his stay in the nation's capital Oppenheimer was, for the first time since the Manhattan Project began, unable to secure an audience with anyone of consequence. Supremely frustrated, he reported back to Lawrence on his failed attempt to deliver the letter:

> While I was in Washington two things happened, both rather gloomy: the President issued an absolute Ukase, forbidding any disclosures on the atomic bomb—and the terms were broad—without his personal approval. The other was that Harrison took our letter to [Secretary of State James] Byrnes, who sent back word just as I was leaving that 'in the present critical international situation there was no alternative to pushing ahead the MED [Manhattan Engineer District] program full steam ahead.' This may have been somewhat garbled in transmission, but I fear not . . . I do not come away from a profound grief, and a profound perplexity about the course we should be following.[136]

For Oppenheimer, the claim that there was "no alternative" to "the critical international situation" could only be made by someone who did not sufficiently grasp the ways in which that same international situation had fundamentally changed. He also understood that if the revelation failed to register at the commanding heights of world politics, converting the masses down below would be unlikely, if not impossible,

136 Ibid, 301.

especially if the scientific community was muzzled by military secrecy and thus unable to articulate its intimate understanding of how the world had been transformed. By the end of his stay, Oppenheimer had every reason to believe that the miraculous dream of revelatory annihilation was dead.

Yet nearly two months later, on November 2nd, Oppenheimer addressed the scientists at Los Alamos, responding directly to the Secretary of State's assessment, which paralleled the logic of "A JAP BURNS" in its stubborn insistence that war remains possible and bracing for the next war is indeed "the only way." To the contrary, Oppenheimer argued, "It is clear to me that wars have changed . . . it is clear to me that this is a situation where a quantitative change has all the character of a change in quality, of a change in the nature of the world."[137] He then went on to specifically refute those claims made by Churchill and others who placed atomic bombs within the context of "men [fighting] one another with fire from time immemorial:"

> There are others who try to escape the immediacy of this situation by saying that, after all, war has always been very terrible; after all, weapons have always gotten worse and worse; that this is just another weapon and it doesn't create a great change; that they are not so bad; bombings have been bad in this war and

137 Ibid, 318.

> this is not a change in that—it just adds a little to the effectiveness of the bombing; that some sort of protection will be found. I think that these efforts to diffuse and weaken the nature of the crisis make it only more dangerous. I think it is for us to accept it as a very grave crisis, to realize that these atomic weapons which we have started to make are very terrible, that they involve a change, that they are not just a slight modification: to accept this, and to accept with it the necessity conditions for those transformations in the world which will make it possible to integrate these developments into human life.[138]

There was for Oppenheimer no escape from "the immediacy of this situation," which was "not just a slight modification" of what preceded it but a radical departure. In order for humanity to live alongside the atomic bomb, it too would have to change, accommodating itself to the new situation by way of a total subjective metamorphosis, a transformation that would recast the political and theological mold of humanity. Minor tinkering and other piecemeal attempts to address the post-war crisis of the atomic threat would only make the situation more dangerous by implicitly domesticating its revolutionary implications. There was in Oppenheimer's speech the beginning of an argument that would be echoed onto the present: failing to adequately think the new world brought about by the Manhattan Project is precisely what dooms the species.

Albert Einstein, an early supporter of nuclear research and weapons

138 Ibid.

development despite his avowed pacifism, whose lament for the bombing of Hiroshima occupied the front page of the *New York Times* the day after, asserted a similar counterpoint to contextual logic embraced by Churchill and Byrnes. According to Einstein, "The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything except our way of thinking. Thus we are drifting toward a catastrophe beyond conception. We shall require a substantially new manner of thinking if mankind is to survive."[139] Bertrand Russell issued a similar statement on atomic weapons, which he began composing on the day that Nagasaki was bombed: "The prospect for the human race is somber beyond all precedent. Mankind are faced with a clear-cut alternative: either we shall all perish, or we shall have to acquire some slight degree of common sense. A great deal of new political thinking will be necessary if utter disaster is to be averted."[140] Their agreement on this issue formed the basis of the Russell-Einstein Manifesto, which called for the immediate disarmament of nuclear arsenals: "Here, then, is the problem

139 Different variations of this quote by Einstein, typically attributed to a statement he made in 1946 appear in almost each of the works on nuclear bombs cited in this dissertation. Regardless of whether or not Einstin actually made the comment, its association with him has become a staple in the literature, and it is often invoked by authors in this field as a way to challenge the thinking of their readers.

140 Betrand Russell, *The Glasgow Forward*, August 18, 1945.

which we present to you, stark and dreadful and inescapable: Shall we put an end to the human race; or shall mankind renounce war? People will not face this alternative because it is so difficult to abolish war."[141] Einstein signed the document just three days before his death.

If this entirely new situation is not grasped by a new form of thought, we risk total annihilation—this is a foundational idea for those converted by the bomb, especially for Einstein, Russell, and Oppenheimer. A conversion to a new way of thinking brought about by the bomb was necessary in their view should the species hope to endure. If in the aftermath we remain unchanged, no treaty, missile defense system, noble leader, symbolic act of deescalation, or attempt at disarmament will alter the inevitability of an omnicidal nuclear war. A lack of miraculous conversion would offer humanity hard proof that it was now living out the Frankenstein scenario, truly a modern Prometheus facing eternal punishment. With this in mind, Oppenheimer fiercely criticized even those people who shared his political goals on the grounds that they did so for the wrong reasons: "I think these things create a new situation, so new

141 Einstein–Russell Manifesto, issued in London, July 9, 1955.

that there is some danger, even some danger in believing, that what we have is a new argument for arrangements, for hopes, that existed before this development took place."[142] Even the conviction that war should end is rendered irrelevant by a situation in which war, as Oppenheimer believed, was now structurally impossible.

For revolutionary political action to be effectual in the aftermath, it had to be accompanied by a total subjective revolution. Oppenheimer even dismissed arguments for positions he nonetheless agreed with (and previously would have supported) on the grounds that their supporters did not, as evidenced by a lack of genuine conversion, take the new situation sufficiently into account. Being in political agreement was not enough:

> By that I mean that much as I like to hear advocates of a world federation, or advocates of a United Nations organization, who have been talking of these things for years—much as I like to hear them say that here is a new argument, I think that they are in part missing the point, because the point is not that atomic weapons constitute a new argument. There have always been good arguments. The point is that atomic weapons constitute also a field, a new field, and a new opportunity for realizing preconditions.[143]

142 Oppenheimer, *Letters and Recollections*, 318.

143 Ibid.

The idea that wars necessarily recur was one such precondition that had to be dispensed with in the wake of this new field's constitution. For Oppenheimer it represented the load-bearing pillar of an old regime of thought instantly antiqued by the creation atomic bomb, and it had to be exiled from the political landscape if humanity was to survive. The new precondition is that war must not recur, and it must now immerse itself into every level of thought and human interaction:

> I think when people talk of the fact that this is not only a great peril, but a great hope, this is what they should mean. I do not think they should mean the unknown, though sure, value of industrial and scientific virtues of atomic energy, bur rather the simple fact that in this field, because it is a threat, because it is a peril, and because it has special characteristics, to which I will return, there exists a possibility of realizing, of beginning to realize, those changes which are needed if there is to be any peace. Those are very far-reaching changes. They are changes in the relations between nations, not only in spirit, not only in law, but also in conception and feeling.[144]

Oppenheimer expressed some optimism at the close of his final address to the Los Alamos community. Even then, shortly after the war, there was still reason to believe that miracle he expected to follow the atomic incineration of Japanese cities would come. War could still be ended:

144 Ibid, 318-9.

> Certainly you will notice, especially in the message to Congress, many indications of a sympathy with, an understanding of, the views which this group holds, and which I have discussed briefly tonight. I think all of us were encouraged at the phrase "too revolutionary to consider in the framework of old ideas." That's about what we all think . . . I think, to say it again, that if one solves the problems presented by the atomic bomb, one will have made a pilot plant for [the] solution of the problem of ending war.[145]

Of course in the months and years that followed, the obsolete framework re-asserted itself. The question haunted the former disciples of revelatory annihilation in the aftermath of war was how: how did the old ideas win out in the new world? Why is it that the miracle plotted by the Manhattan Project never arrived, even though the situation of warfare changed in precisely the way they expected it would? And must they, in the years after 1945, cloak what was new about their prophetic ideas in old

145 Ibid, 323-4. The relevant portion of the address by President Truman to which Oppenheimer refers: In international relations as in domestic affairs, the release of atomic energy constitutes a new force too revolutionary to consider in the framework of old ideas. We can no longer rely on the slow progress of time to develop a program of control among nations. Civilization demands that we shall reach at the earliest possible date a satisfactory arrangement for the control of this discovery in order that it may become a powerful and forceful influence towards the maintenance of world peace instead of an instrument of destruction. . . . The hope of civilization lies in international arrangements looking, if possible, to the renunciation of the use and development of the atomic bomb, and directing and encouraging the use of atomic energy and all future scientific information toward peaceful and humanitarian ends. The difficulties in working out such arrangements are great. The alternative to overcoming these difficulties, however, may be a desperate armament race which might well end in disaster. Discussion of the international problem cannot be safely delayed until the United Nations Organization is functioning and in a position adequately to deal with it.

forms of thought in order to be perceived as war winners, as Allied heroes, not false prophets? Even Oppenheimer fell prey to this at times. Reflecting back on the experience of witnessing the first atomic blast at Alamogordo in 1965, Oppenheimer obscured his true reaction—his prideful cowboy strut—with an esoteric comment on evil, fire, and the paradoxical nature of the new: "We thought of the legend of Prometheus, of that deep sense of guilt in man's new powers, that reflects his recognition of evil, and his long knowledge of it."[146] He went on, in a manner of speaking that only became possible *after* the atomic bomb was seen to be a spiritual dud: "We knew that it was a new world, but even more we knew that novelty itself was a very odd thing in human life, that all our ways are rooted in it."[147] He then disassociated the Manhattan scientists from the vain beliefs of Alfred Nobel and appeared to accept, in this interview famous for his allusion to the *Gita,* that by now people are used to the new, having long ago grown accustomed to the many novelties that war-machines parade before them, conceding that at bottom, "the masses are," as

146 Oppenheimer quoted in Rhodes, *Making of the Atomic Bomb*, 676.

147 Ibid.

Charles Baudelaire observed, "born fire-worshipers. Fireworks, conflagrations, incendiaries."[148] Nothing, said Oppenheimer, not even the threat of imminent destruction, would be sufficient to convert a civilization built on popular reverence for fire.

Does that imply that later in life Oppenheimer went the way of Truman and Stimson in the renunciation of his earlier beliefs? No. He lost faith in the idea that the carnage in Japan would be a catalyst for world-altering revelation, the first globalized apocalypse, but he always insisted, to the bitter end, that the situation had changed and that, if this new world continues to be animated by our old subjective formations, which failed to recalibrate in accordance with these evental shifts, then humanity is rushing towards omnicide. Oppenheimer and others were not simply arguing against the idea that wars recur and that the tools warring states deploy are constantly improving. To the contrary, their beliefs about the atomic bomb hinged on that being absolutely true: the old logic of war and history inside the new situation is what dooms us. This is why he continues on the track of revelatory annihilation in attempting to

148 Charles Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*, trans. Christopher Isherwood (San Francisco: City Lights Press, 1983), 28.

develop tactical nuclear weapons before his security clearance is revoked. The problem with the hydrogen bomb was that it could not be theologically weaponized (outside of an omnicidal nuclear war, it could only be threatened), whereas Oppenheimer believed the carnage of nuclear devices retro-fitted for conventional battlefields may still prove specatcular and dreadful enough to incite the miracle. He would later claim under oath that his initial opposition to Teller's hydrogen bomb development had to do with a lack of technical feasibility. In any case, it had nothing at all to do with a moral objection to the heightened scale of destructiveness expected from the H-bomb, as is commonly beleieved.

In the aftermath, in the halls of American political and scientific power, Oppenheimer called for conversion beyond consensus. He thought political unification would fail to build a new world without an underlying (miraculous, sacred) spiritual charge supplying the foundation. He foresaw that political winds would shift but that the miracle of subjectivation would solidify in the minds of the faithful the need to forever abandon war, allowing for a form of community vastly more powerful and durable than any political faction. Thus Oppenheimer demanded spiritual conversion

from those who had already been politically persuaded to join the cause of world government and the fight against war. The revelation that war was over needed to supplant the normative political position that war should end. In this way, he tried to radicalize the reactive subject who appreciated the destructive power of the bomb and the accommodations that must be made but who did not regard the explosions at Hiroshima and Nagasaki as revelatory. Central to Oppenheimer's argument was the idea that this is not merely an issue of political affiliation but a pressing security concern. If he failed in his prophetic charge, if the real explosion, which was intended to occur on a subjective plain, did not fire, the world was lost to the Frankenstein scenario that the leaders of the Manhattan Project so gravely feared. Indeed, when the smoke cleared, war was still possible. The atomic bombings were considered by some in Washington to be a game-changer, but the significance of that change was reduced to a new wrinkle in the old frameworks of policy formulation and strategic planning for the next war.

The Apocalypse Is Disappointing

After the problem of conversion beyond consensus died out as a political cleavage, it resurfaced in philosophical commentaries on the atomic bomb. The question that divided the philosophers who believed that the invention of nuclear weaponry forever changed the world: can one announce this change, speaking the language of revelation, while remaining unchanged in their political, theological, and philosophical orientations? Once again, failure to come to grips with what was revealed is linked to the enhancement of the nuclear peril. The dispute between Oppenheimer and Churchill—the belief that nuclear bombs represent nothing more than a bigger bang versus the idea of an entirely new framework in which the old ideas and fears are illegible—also had a philosophical equivalent. Is humanity henceforth threatened by a new form of all-consuming fire, or is our problem that we are exiled from our fiery origins, that there is something about fire which is intrinsic to who we really are? Would an omnicidal nuclear war disrupt the proper course of humanity, or would it rather constitute the culmination of our collective destiny as a species? Would nuclear war be a dead-end or a homecoming? This philosophical example of what began as a

conversion problem addressed within American politics is similarly tinged with theology in its restaging of accusations of bad faith and the dispute over what was really revealed by atomic annihilation.

The concerns originally raised by Oppenheimer in his final Los Alamos address and his advisory letter regarding the future of the Manhattan project were later taken up by the French post-structuralist Maurice Blanchot in his critical essay on Karl Jaspers's *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Mankind*. Whereas the charge against Truman, Stimson, and Byrnes involved the comparatively minor accustation of betraying the cause they once believed in, the critique of someone like Jaspers was far more significant. He was not a mere turncoat or reactive disbeliever but a false prophet harboring bad faith. First, the offending lines from Jaspers that marked him out as the enemy of those thoroughly subjectivated by what happened in Japan:

> Before insisting on the survival of mankind at any price, one must know the totalitarianism we have experienced and described: a transformation of human existence to the point where men cease to be human. The peace of totalitarianism is a desert constantly laid waste again by force against rebellious human claims. A totalitarian world state would use the atom bomb—which it alone would control—in limited doses and without endangering the life of mankind as a whole. It would use it in a gradation of terror, for purposes of

> extermination or simply to put down a revolt in short order.[149]

He continues:

> If we want to defend ourselves against totalitarianism at the risk of putting an end to mankind, we may be told that all of us must accept humiliations or may come into humiliating situations; that it is proud, antihuman arrogance to reject rather than to incorporate them into the permissible self-assurance of man. The answer to this is that a humiliation that dehumanizes all of existence, every hour in the lives of all, is another matter. Whosoever thinks that life may be worth living in a world that has been turned into a concentration camp must consider that confidence in man is justified only insofar as scope remains for freedom. This scope is the premise of man's potential. Mere life as such, under consummate total rule, would not be the life of animals in the abundance of nature; it would be an artificial horror of being totally consumed by man's own technological genius.[150]

Jaspers claimed to have been subjectivated by the atomic bomb, but he retained his prior sense of adversarial politics and outright refused to set his critique of the bomb above his militant opposition to totalitarianism on the grounds that a totalitarian world free from the threat of nuclear war would not allow for any form of life that would actually be worth living.

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149 Karl Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind,* trans. E.B. Ashton (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 167.

150 Ibid.

Blanchot critiqued the work not on the basis of the outcome Jaspers sought (peace, disarmament, and what he considered to be the full subjective fruition of revelatory annihilation) but the false presuppositions that his otherwise sound conclusions carried forward. In many ways, he agreed quite profoundly with Japsers.[151] For Blanchot, however, only a genuine prophet could witness the arrival of the impossible and remain unchanged, but if the reflective individual (say, a philosopher like Jaspers) declares Hiroshima an event, he must do so because that event fundamentally altered what he previously thought about the world, and if so, then it should have also fundamentally altered how he thinks, such that who he became afterwards would be unrecognizable to who he once was:

> A prophet, perhaps, could say, Let us change, let us change, and remain the same. But a man of reflection: How could he have the authority to alter us to a threat so great that, as he says, it must shatter our existence utterly and, what is

151 Blanchot would quite obviously have agreed with the following, had it been articulated by a convert: "Today the constant presence of the cataclysm as a possibility—indeed, a probability—offers a signal opportunity for reflection as such, and at the same time the one chance for political rebirth that would avert the cataclysm. The stakes of the game should be part of everyone's life, as a call for reflection. There lies the horizon of reality in which we must stand. A refusal to know is already part of the disaster. We hope that all men will know, and that this knowledge will be pervasive and consequential. For pervasive knowledge alone can prevent the calamity. It not only enables individuals to act with purpose; it enables man to change himself and his life, to recast his basic mold." Ibid, 6.

> more, our thinking, while he persists, without contestation or modification, in the same speculative conception to which he was led well before becoming conscious of the unique event, the immanent possibility of universal catastrophe, the appalling innovation, the consciousness of which should alter us fundamentally, and on the basis of which another history should begin—or men themselves end?[152]

Blanchot criticized Jaspers for announcing the revelatory change from the standpoint of political and philosophical sameness, exhibiting Oppenheimer and Einstein's sensitivity to how the new situation is thought inside the old framework, even and especially when it was said to be something entirely new. Conversion required new political subjectivities, not enhanced arguments launched from the old, conventional standpoints. To come to grips with the totality of the transformation, one must be transformed without remainder:

> We simply ask ourselves, Why does a question so serious—since it holds the future of humanity in its sway—a question such that to answer it would suppose a radically new thinking, why does it not renew the language that conveys it, and why does it only give rise to remarks that are either biased and, in any case, partial when they are of a political order, or moving and urgent when they are of a spiritual order, but identical to those that we have heard in vain for two thousand years? One must therefore ask oneself, What are the difficulties that

152 Maurice Blanchot, "The Apocalypse is Disappointing" in *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 102-3.

prevent us from broaching such a question?[153]

Maintaining a belief in the permanence of war in this new situation was for Oppenheimer and Blanchot a form of unconscious nostalgia, which given the new stakes, now risked everything. Blanchot enhanced the call for clarity when he wrote, "we continue out of convenience to express ourselves in an old, unsuitable language. That is the greatest danger. It is even the only one."[154] For him, persisting with the old logic of history in the new situation was the real source of the threat, not the bombs themselves, which would remain idle if not for the obstinacy of popular thinking:

> We must be clearsighted, or try to be. The danger does not really lie in the bomb. It is not in the unwonted development of energy and technology's domination; it is first of all in our refusal to see the change of epoch and to consider the sense of this turning. The threat will grow as long as we have not determined it as a risk. I would even say that the danger is perhaps solely provoked by our old language, a language that obliges us to speak in the style of history and the discourse of representation where the word war continues to be in use, and along with it the old mythical images, the pretensions of prestige, frontier customs and the habits of a politics of heroics, whereas we sense that the very idea of war, as well as the traditional idea of peace, have fallen into ruin.[155]

153 Ibid, 103.

154 Blanchot, *"On a Change of Epoch: The Exigency of Return" in Infinite Conversation,* trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 266.

155 Ibid, 270.

After the debate over eventfulness ran its course politically and the dream of "a single world commonweal, preventing war and controlling those moral, biological, and economic forces and wastages that would otherwise lead to wars " died out, the issue was resuscitated as a subject of profound philosophical concern, most notably by Günther Anders, Jaspers's chief intellectual rival on this subject, whose thought was cast in the mold of Oppenheimer's vision after 1945—in essence, the first and and perhaps only Continental thinker with a claim to have been subjectivated by what the atomic bomb revealed to him.[156] Fifteen years after the ruination of Hiroshima, Anders dedicated himself to systematically affirming Hiroshima's eventfulness. His argument hinged on a lack of any historical continuity that would link the world as it appeared to him to what it once was. If there was indeed a clean break on the level of world history, the philosophical and political meaning of what remainded the same would also change. At issue in his analysis was not how to best frame the event within or through pre-existing modes of thought but how Hiroshima itself puts humanity—everything we once thought and our very capacity to think—in perspective, the original detonation

156 Wells, *Open Conspiracy*, 20.

dividing the great story of civilization into a definitive before and after:

> the idea that atomic weapons could be brought into play tactically presupposes the concept of a political situation which exists independently of and apart from the fact of atomic weapons. That is, however, utterly unrealistic, because the political situation—the expression 'atomic age' is legitimate—defines itself through the fact of atomic weapons. It is *not* the atomic weapons which 'also' occur within the political scene; but, on the contrary, it is the *individual events* which are taking place *within the atomic situation.*[157]

Everything changed in 1945, even the nature of change itself. For Anders, the presence of Hiroshima still remained but it remained only as pure rupture, as the formal break unassimilable to any temporal order which severs this historical epoch from those which preceded it and the larger process of epochal transformation. He summarized his position in "Hiroshima as World Condition:"

> 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 transforms 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

157 Anders, "Commandments in the Atomic Age" in *Burning Conscience*: *The Guilt of Hiroshima* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1962), 16. Elsewhere, in his "Theses for the Atomic Age" in *The Massachusetts Review* 3, No. 3 (Spring 1962), Anders writes on p. 494: Not Atomic Weapons in the Political Situation, but Political Actions in the Atomic Situation: Although it sounds absolutely plausible, it is misleading to say that atomic weapons exist in our political situation. This statement has to be turned upside down in order to become true. As the situation today is determined and defined exclusively by the existence of 'atomic weapons,' we have to state: political actions and developments are taking place within the atomic situation."

> 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 possibility that its "differentia specifica," the possibility of our self-extinction, can ever end but by the end itself.[158]

Hiroshima was the place-name which signified for Anders the chasm between epochs, the end of human history's beginning and the beginning of its end. His rather straightforward argument, stripped of its philosophical decadence, was that under a different set of geopolitical conditions, what happened there could happen anywhere, anytime, thus rendering the terrestrial existence of the species quite literally "conditional," ceaselessly contingent upon a critical number of nuclear bombs remaining idle.

After (in the aftermath of) Hiroshima 1945, Anders believed that this conditionality is the founding truth of an altogether new "world," as another student of Husserl's once defined it: "a name for beings in their entirety. The term is not to be confined to the cosmos, to nature. History, too, belongs to world. Under this term we also include the world-ground, no matter how its relation to world is thought."[159] This

158 Anders, "Theses."

159 Martin Heidegger, "Age of the World-Picture," in *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. and ed. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2002), 67.

idea of Hiroshima as world condition cannot be conflated with the nuclear diplomacy of the Cold War, nor it is ammended or fundamentally altered by the self-identitifcation of subsequent global security regimes. The nuclear epoch is for Anders a periodization which supersedes internal markers; it is what remains brutally constant in spite of political, social, and military realignments. An unrelated omnicidal incident, such as a giant asteroid colliding with the planet and extinguishing human life, would not mark the beginning of a new epoch so much as it would punctatue the last one. Nor would the development of another more powerful weapon mark a point of transition, as this is already the age of the supreme weapon, regardless of the actual form it takes. Even under conditions of virtual disarmament, in which every atomic bomb is wiped from the face of the earth, a trace remains in the form of a lingering techne. Anders insists that though the bombs may disappear, the knowledge required to build them and the desire to use them can never be completely erased. No matter what, the nuclear epoch keeps swallowing the permutations of human civilization until it dies out. This epochal shift, according to Anders, is at the same time a break with the previous epoch and a break with previous modes of declaring discrete epochs. After

Hiroshima, history is divided into three stages:

> "All men are exterminable." Whatever changes have taken place in the world during the ten years since the end of the war, they have not affected the validity of the new proposition: the truth it expresses is confirmed by the general threat hanging over us. Its implications have even become more sinister: for what is exterminable today is not "merely" all men, but mankind as a whole. This change inaugurates a new historical epoch, if the term "epoch" may be applied to the short time intervals in question. Accordingly, all history can be divided into three chapters, with the following captions: (1) All men are mortal, (2) All men are exterminable, and (3) Mankind as a whole is exterminable.[160]

Anders also critiqued Jaspers on the grounds of bad faith but along different lines. Jaspers had asked in *The Future of Humanity* "Is an act that may lead to the extinction if mankind intrinsically evil? Is there a limit to the permissible risk of life? Should the atom bomb be renounced unconditionally? Or can there be a *recurrence* of the sense of Einstein's decision to advise making the bomb when the world was threatened by Hitler's totalitarianism?[161] The reply from Anders:

> *To Threaten with Atomic Weapons Is Totalitarian:* A pet theory broad enough to be embraced by subtle philosophers as well as by brutal politicians, by Jaspers as well as by Strauss, runs: "If it were not for our ability to threaten with total annihilation, we would be unable to hold the totalitarian menace in check."

160 Anders, "Reflections on the H Bomb" in *Dissent*, 3:2 (Spring 1956), 148.

161 Jaspers, *Future of Mankind*, 170.

> This is a sham argument for the following reasons: 1) The atom bomb has been used, although those who used it were not in danger of falling victim to a totalitarian power. 2) This argument is a fossil from the "ancient" days of atomic monopoly and has become suicidal today. 3) The catchword "totalitarian" is taken from a political situation which not only *has* already fundamentally changed, but will continue to change. 4) By threatening with atomic war, thus with liquidation, we cannot help being totalitarian; for this threat amounts to blackmail and transforms our globe into one vast concentration camp from which there is no way out. Thus, whoever bases the legitimacy of this extreme deprivation of freedom upon the alleged interests of freedom is a hypocrite.[162]

If one sides with Anders and Blanchot, Jaspers contradicted himself both theologically and politically. He claimed to have been converted by the bomb but remained the same, and he professed to be against totalitarianism in all its guises and yet he endorsed the totalitarian threat conveyed by nuclear arsenals. His old arguments are fossilized in a world he claimed to be a part of but could not see. The dispute expressed the obverse of pragmatism: agreeing on outcomes is irrelevant without prior agreement on foundations.

The philosophical counter-argument to the theory of Hiroshima as event articulated by Anders was established years prior to this flare up with Jaspers by Georges Bataille, in his critical review of John Hersey's *Hiroshima,* which opened with a

162 Anders, "Theses," 494-5.

provocative formulation of infernal recurrence. "Let's admit it," he admonished, "the population of hell increases annually by fifty millions souls . . . A world war may accelerate the rhythm slightly, but it cannot significantly alter it. To the ten million killed in the war from 1914 to 1918 one must add the two hundred million who, during the same period, were fated to die natural deaths.[163] Hell did not stop expanding after Hiroshima. Furthermore, there was for Bataille nothing particularly noteworthy about the ways in which the victims at Hiroshima suffered:

> If the misfortunes of Hiroshima are faced up to freely from the perspective of a sensibility that is not faked, they cannot be isolated from other misfortunes. The tens of thousands of victims of the atom bomb are on the same level as the tens of millions whom nature yearly hands over to death. One cannot deny the differences in age and suffering, but origin and intensity change nothing: *horror is everywhere the same.* The point that, in principle, the one horror is preventable while the other is not is, in the last analysis, a matter of indifference.[164]

163 Bataille, "Concerning the Accounts," 221.

164 Ibid, 228. Emphasis added. However, the human meaning of Hiroshima's burning, as distinct from the animality of bodily suffering and death, was important to Bataille, who in this passage distances himself from the contextualizing moves represented by Churchill and the dehumanizing descriptors used by Truman and *Life:* "But the death of sixty thousand is charged with meaning, in that it depended on their fellow men to kill them or let them live. The atom bomb draws its meaning from its human origin: it is the possibility that the *hands of man* deliberately hang suspended over the future. And it is a means of action: the fear produced by a tidal wave or a volcano has no meaning, whereas uranium fission a project whose goal is to impose, by fear, the will of the one who provokes it. At the same time it puts an end to the projects of those whom it strikes. It is by representing possible projects, which in turn are intended to make other projects impossible, that an atom bomb

The horrific carnage and mass death had precedent. Arguing for the exceptionality of Hiroshima was, according to Bataille, a cheap form of sentimentality and in the end, dishonest. The cruelties of the Second World War did nothing to alter the underlying situation of death: the lines at the gates of Hell are only getting longer. Death by fire, in whatever form, was in Bataille eye's unremarkable, for "each fire is all fires."

What so moved Bataille about atomic bombs and the idea of nuclear war, contra Anders, was not escalating thresholds of death (individual, collective, the end of a world shaped by humanity) and he disdained moralistic critiques, especially those based on a concern for the suffering of others. For Bataille, what the nuclear bomb revealed was the dark truth of human destiny—not what we have since become due to a twist of fate but what we were from the very start, though we could not see it. Over a decade after his review of Hiroshima, revising his earlier interpretation of Hiroshima's bombing being more of the same, he wrote in another article titled, "Unlivable Earth," that

> We know that we cannot attain this world without denying, without suppressing what we are. But in catching sight of it, we are led to forget its real

takes on a *human* meaning. Otherwise, it would merely have the animal meaning of smoking out termites." Ibid, 226–7.

> spirit, its horrible tribal wars, its tortures, its massacres; or, in a less primitive civilization, the reduction of an unfortunate group of conquered men to slavery, men transported by force, under the lash, toward unspeakable markets. Only by dint of grievous lies can we conceal the accursed truth of history. There is something frightful in human destiny, which undoubtedly was always at the limit of this unlimited nightmare that the most modern weaponry, the nuclear bomb, finally announces.[165]

And later in the same piece:

> The first men, as well as some very primitive savages today, think they are really animals: because animals are, in their mind, the most holy, having a sacred quality, which men have lost. Thus, according to the simplest among us, animals, not men, are gods: animals alone have retained these supernatural qualities, which men have lost. Of course it is hard for us to think that we are becoming completely wretched! And yet . . . we might have a sublime idea of the animal now that we have ceased being certain that one day the nuclear bomb will not make the planet an unlivable place for man.[166]

The deep truth of nuclear war is that it announces the revelation of our lost animality.

By contextualizing the atomic bomb in this way, Bataille was not (in the vein of someone like Churchill) attempting to diminish the significance of atomic bombs. To the contrary, driven by "the will to create a force, starting from an awareness of the misery and the grandeur of this perishable existence that has befallen us," Bataille once

165 Bataille, *Cradle of Humanity*, 176.

166 Ibid, 178.

proclaimed: "STANDING AND FACING DESTINY remains in my eyes the essential aspect of knowledge."[167] For him, the nuclear bomb did not reveal a new situation, as Anders believed, so much as it represented the real of an old situation that seemed preoccupied with continuity but was suicidal from the start. According to Bataille, the nuclear epoch did not threaten humanity so much as it was indistinguishable from humanity. Nuclear war would constitute an infernal return of an animal indifference to death—the sacred core of humanity's origins.

167 Bataille, "The College of Sociology" in *Visions Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939,* trans. and ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 247.

How Shall We Burn?

While the political and philosophical manifestations of the debate over Hiroshima as event or a form of infernal recurrence both touch on theology, there remains the separate issue of whether or not the atomic incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki defies theological precedent. Are the bombings continuous with or an indictment of Biblical prophecy for example? Is it possible that in addition to each fire being all fires, a portent of the last fire was present in the first? Was the system of beliefs that enabled the Manhattan Project a fundamental break with the religious heritages upon which Western civilization was built or was it continuous with them? They understood the religion espoused by Wells to be a radical deviation from the Judeo-Christian tradition, but it was still, in its own way, a religion of the Book. Does the nuclear epoch carry forward the claim made in Hebrews 12:29—"our God is a consuming fire"—or the Bible's grand finale in Revelations 1:14—"his eyes were as a flame of fire." Even Truman, in his diary, invoked the language of the Old Testament when he reflected on the creation of the atomic bomb: "We have discovered the most terrible bomb in the history of the world. It may be the fire destruction prophesied in

the Euphrates Valley Era, after Noah and his fabulous Ark. Anyway we "think" we have found a way to cause the disintegration of the atom. An experiment in the New Mexican desert was startling—to put it mildly . . ." [168] The reference was to Genesis 8:11, when Jahweh, after the drowning of a forsaken world, established a covenant with Noah and his descendants:

> All flesh shall never be cut off again by waters of the Deluge,
> never again shall there be Deluge, to bring the earth to ruin![169]

The covenant established that a Deluge would never again ruin the world. Ruination by other means, however, was not ruled out, hence the world-ending fiery bang foretold in the New Testament: "But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up."[170]

The extent to which the atomic bombing of Hiroshima is consistent with a

168 Rhodes, *Making of the Atomic Bomb*, 690-1.

169 Genesis 8:11.

170 2 Peter 3:10.

logic of history or Hebraic prophecy or a miraculous deviation from them is the subject of an "infinite conversation" that Blanchot had with himself, alternating between the positions that assert and challenge the eventfulness of nuclear warfare, associating it with and distinguishing it from preexisting motifs.[171] His schizophrenic dialogue lays claim to the infinite not because of the everlasting relevance of the issue but on account of its inability to resolve itself. In the end, neither side of the dialogue rises above the other to deliver a final judgment which would illuminate our current nuclear situation, and by implication, without a verdict to pronounce its fate, humanity finds itself tethered to the open question of Hiroshima's eventfulness. Within the conversation, none of the positions assumed by Blanchot consider the possibility that what happened at Hiroshima was uneventful. They only dispute how we come to know it as an event as such, if it can be known, and what the stakes of mis/understanding that really are.

In spite of all their disagreements, the voices inside Blanchot's head agree on this basic point: whether or not that bomb run was the announcement of an eventual death-sentence is something we cannot endure long enough to know. In the first lines

171 Maurice Blanchot, "On a Change of Epoch: The Exigency of Return" in *Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993): 264-81.

of his portrayal of this tragic human drama, one Blanchot says to his other: "Will you allow as a certainty that we are at a turning point?" Speaking in another voice, he replies, "If it is a certainty it is not a turning. The fact of our belonging to this moment at which a change of epoch, if there is one, is being accomplished also takes hold of the certain knowledge that would want to determine it."[172] This is a core theme that echoes throughout this essay and Blanchot's other writings on the bomb: it is characterized by aporias (not unlike his contemporary Jacques Derrida—Blanchot's script performs what Derrida's describes as aporetic, addressing it be means of a willful contradiction). Our nuclear situation is defined by our inability to know it and yet we strive to. "Never are we less able to get around ourselves than at such a moment," the uncertain Blanchot continues, "and the discrete force of the turning point lies first in this."[173] Later, in a pivotal exchange, the discussion circles back to the notion of an infernal return, this time emphasizing its theological dimensions:

> —When, for the first time in the history of the world, one has at hand the material power to put an end to this history and this world, one has already

172 Ibid, 264.

173 Ibid.

> departed historical space. The change of epoch has occurred. This can be simply expressed: henceforth the world is a barracks that can burn.
>
> —You seem to rejoice in this. But are you sure it's the first time? Perhaps you've forgotten the Bible. Biblical man constantly lives from the perspective you describe as new, warned by Jahweh that if men persevere in their practices they will be annihilated and creation abolished. History is born under this threat, the very threat of historical time.
>
> —Then the fire came from above. Today it comes from here below.[174]

Does it coming from below constitute a turning? At Babel, the universal language of humanity allowed for the building of a tower that scraped the heavens and disturbed Jahweh's solitude. Then death came from above, as Jahweh demolished the tower and smashed apart the universality of language. Today, due to the universal language of mathematics and science, death from below threatens to annihilate Yahweh's works and permanently erase the sacred language of divinity. Is this inversion of the threat what counts?

Derrida voiced his agreement with Anders, Blanchot, and Oppenheimer, arguing that the atomic bomb did in fact produce a "new situation" irreducible to the historical periods which preceded it. The atomic bombings of 1945 re-contextualized the conventional in warfare:

174 Ibid, 269.

> Unlike the other wars, which have all been preceded by wars of more or less the same type in human memory (and gunpowder did not mark a radical break in this respect), nuclear war has no precedent. It has never occurred, itself: it is a non-event. The explosion of American bombs in 1945 ended a "classical," conventional war; it did not set off a nuclear war. The terrifying reality of the nuclear conflict can only be the signified referent, never the real referent (present or past) of a discourse or text. At least today apparently.[175]

The appearance of the referent, the material expression to which the term nuclear war refers, would by definition torch the entire process of reference which unites the signifier and its signified in addition to eviscerating the sign system itself. Here too Hiroshima divided history into a before and after, with the "nuclear epoch" obliterating the old categories of periodization, but unlike Anders and more like Blanchot, Derrida emphasized a theological break with the past. If an apocalypse (meaning revelation, in the Judeo-Christian sense) always arrives too soon until it is too late and if the world is indeed fated to an explosive end—a bang not a whimper—then there will be no one left to sift through the ashes, to bear witness after the fact, to encounter it as knowledge and adjudicate what was, finally telling the story of what the first atomic bombing would have prophetically revealed and what the remainder of our world might

175 Derrida, "No Apocalypse," 23.

become.

The defining feature of the nuclear epoch, for Derrida, is that it had formally eradicated the judgmental power of apocalypse, as revelation itself is annulled by the constant threat of destruction without remainder, without an archive, our collective death simultaneous with the cremation of the book, the life-blood of theology in the Abrahamic tradition. No, said Derrida, there will be "no apocalypse, not now." Anders, to the contrary, believed those living in the aftermath to be "usurpers of the apocalypse." Reading Derrida against that belief, one could make the obvious semantic point, that the more accurate term for Anders would be eschatology, but of far greater interest is the way in which this point of contention illustrates the essential difference that distinguishes their positions: whereas Anders considers humanity the thief of divine powers, Derrida would hold humanity responsible for their obsolescence in the new theological situation. This is one way to think the failure of revelatory annihilation: the novelty of the nuclear epoch is that it rendered all such revelations, as they were previously understood, null and void.

However, the form of apocalyptic vision which endures in the nuclear epoch—

when the apocalypse to which Derrida and Blanchot referred is structurally foreclosed —is direct revelation, not a fortune-teller's prediction of what will become of our world of nuclear bombs but an immediate insight into what our present really is. This heretical idea of apocalypse opposes itself to articulations of messianism that long ago sealed off the age of prophecy in anticipation of a last judgment (or a final conflagration) "to come." Of course there is a strong sense in which the faith in revelatory annihilation that enabled the Manhattan Project was always at odds with a Christian orthodoxy which puts prophecy in the past as it awaits the second coming, but the more profound theological argument which implicates the Project surfaces within the prophetic tradition itself. Framed by this tradition, which unites the pre-Socratics with the antinomian Christians and other philosopher-heretics of the modern period, the nuclear bomb appears as a profane manifestation of that world-shattering fire which properly belongs to the divine spirit that courses through humanity, endowing the flesh with sovereign (as in God-like) potential and instilling in thought the power capable of forever changing a world. Exiled from its source, the flame of prophecy once tasked with renewing the world now threatens to extinguish itself. The question of questions

in the nuclear epoch, posed from within the prophetic tradition, is not atomic bomb as revelation versus the continuation or culmination of the past, implying a simple choice between the redundancy of war and the miracle of everlasting peace. No, it was not, as Oppenheimer and others thought: simply a matter of burning or not burning. It was never a question of if but how to burn—will the flames that consume humanity be figurative or literal?

Endless End Time, or At the Horizons Where We Succumb

In the months after the burning of Hiroshima, Bataille wrote "The world, trapped in a corner, is doomed to abrupt metamorphosis."[176] What the atomic revealed to him is that the world as we now know it will be transfigured by fire—one way or the other. Oppenheimer believed the same, but unlike Oppenheimer, Bataille claimed to be unsurprised by the bomb's failure to spark worldwide revelation:

> the relative apathy of the masses is not so surprising. When we encounter nothing but powerlessness, the desire to react exhausts us, and we forget the the margin of unhappiness at stake is not so great, that a core of darkness remains untouchable. Who doesn't want to free the world from fear? It is a task that takes precedence over all others. And yet the most ardent would-be liberators are not so deeply troubled as they would like, while the masses can only shake their heads. The last wars have broken out in spite of the general will; their slaughter revolted the conscience. But the dread they provoked, however great, remained a stupid, inconsistent one . . . and laced with curiosity. Faced with such experiences, whose horror should have, in principle—but in the end, what is this principle?—left the world quaking, the desire to put an end to them is more powerful than it ever was. We live in a darkness without fear and without hope.[177]

The "well-founded dread" that Freud thought would trigger the miracle of war's

176 Bataille, "Concerning the Accounts," 235.

177 Ibid, 221.

extinction was brought into being by the atomic bomb's creators, but it failed to trigger revelation. Drained and dumbstruck, the once mighty human voice, confronted by "most compelling reason ever" to issue a prophetic and revolutionary call, mustered little more than tired political slogans and hollow, moralistic clichés, says Bataille.[178] Though dread sapped the masses of their strength, he argued that the feeling of exhilaration that comes from knowing the world could go up in flames at any moment may yet lift us out of the deadening swamps of apathy and nihilism. More than being afraid or indifferent, one could also be exhilarated by the bomb, according to Bataille, and *that* would be a transformative experience—or more precisely, it could be, if such feelings managed to carry one beyond oneself, beyond concern for self-interest and self-preservation, beyond any concern whatsoever, to a sovereign place of laughter and tears.

For those who believe that the atomic bombings of 1945 signify an evental

178 "The possibility of seeing the world delivered up to uranium obviously justifies some general reaction. And it is strange that, in the malaise in which it called men to holy war (to conquests, to crusades, to religious wars) or to revolution, the human voice, formerly so powerful, no longer has the slightest force, even given the most compelling reason ever. The leaders of the smallest and weakest parties evoke some echoes, but one does not even see born the uprising that would meet the grave concerns of the modern world with anything other than phrases." Ibid, 222.

rupture, not understanding the philosophical and political dynamics of the new situation exposes us to mass death. Their strong critics, like Bataille and Nietzsche, warn us that the world is also risked by the blind worship of (servile) future life at the expense of (sovereign) vitality in the present. Here, the two interpretations of what was revealed at Hiroshima find common ground. Both camps agree that the ever-present danger of nuclear war is indissociably linked to how it is thought and what one believes about it, and both camps gravely fear that death without remainder in the fires of nuclear war will be preceded by a spiritual death, like the death of the coward described by William Shakespeare in *Julius Caesar:* "cowards die many times before their deaths; The valiant never taste of death but once."[179] In the time before the last fire, expressions of the sovereign, fully present and vital, make it possible to believe that when nuclear war does consume terrestrial life, it will result in something more than the uneventful cremation of premature corpses, still functioning bodies drained of the will to live but full of the need to endure. Anders, once again:

> Even to us, who are still living in the existing world, the past, that which merely *was*, seems dead; but the end of mankind would destroy even this death and

179 William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 85.

> force it, as it were, to die a second time, so that the past will not even have been the past—for how would that which merely had been differ from that which had never been? Nor would the future be spared: it would be dead even before being born. Ecclesiastes's disconsolate, "There is nothing new under the sun," would be succeeded by the even more disconsolate, "Nothing ever was," which no one would record and which for that reason would never be challenged.[180]

In this second death, even the prophecy of recurrence written in Ecclesiastes goes up in flames. The implication is that a valiant death would not be meaningless, even if it would not be retrospectively appraised, even nuclear war caused by a heroic attempt to rid the world of nuclear weapons. Salvation may be out of reach, but a good death, a sovereign and not servile death, remains within our grasp.

But as Bataille was the first to admit, our flights into sovereignty through which we may mount an opposition to the forces that draw us closer to nuclear omnicide are fleeting—there and gone in a flash, no victory to capitalize on.. The sovereign instant fades after bursting through homogeneous time. Our efforts in the pursuit of sovereignty are never-ending. In much the same way, for Anders, to be subjectivated by the new situation is to accept that the infernal return, encompassing both prophecy

180 Anders, "Reflections on the H Bomb," 149.

war, will never leave us be, no matter how many fires we put out:

> From now on making will always and for eternity live under the dark shadow of the monster. The apocalyptic danger is not abolished by one act, once and for all, but only by daily repeated acts. This means: we have to understand—and this insight shows fully how fatal our situation actually is—that our fight against the mere physical existence of the objects and against their construction, their try-outs, their storage, turns out to be utterly insufficient. For the goal that we have to reach cannot be not to have the thing; but never to use the thing, although we cannot help having it; never to use it although there will be no day on which we couldn't use it . . . no physical step, no elimination of the physical objects will ever be an absolute guarantee.[181]

The onto-theological and political fight in the nuclear epoch begin anew each time the bell rings on a round of struggle, with the bout continuing on *ad infinitum*. Fighting the literal fire of nuclear war with prophetic fire requires constant vigilance and endless repetition: one cataclysmic act designed to produce a world-altering apocalyptic vision is no longer enough. As Anders makes clear in the above passage, combatants are enlisted in this war without guarantees, in an inexhaustible spiritual battle with real political consequences, wherein every victory is only provisional and every loss could be final.

Anders once again: "Respite, there is but one answer: although at any moment

181 Anders, "Commandments," 20.

The Time of the End [nuclear epoch] could turn into The End of Time, we must do everything in our power to make The End Time endless."[182] To paraphrase Rimbaud, we must persist in our labors, which will never deliver us to a lasting peace, confident that there will come other prophetic workers who shall begin at the horizons where we succumb. We must not cease from mental fight, for if we do, according to Anders, the "abrupt metamorphosis" will not be an apocalypse but a cremation. With this idea of ceaseless struggle we may return to Rabi's divine proclamation issued after his bearing witness to the Trinity explosion, that "suddenly the day of judgment was the next day and has been ever since" in the context of Heraclitus's 72nd fragment: "Fire in its progress will catch all things by surprise and judge them."[183]

182 Anders, "Theses," 494.

183 Rabi, "Perspective on Nuclear Energy," 2.

III. **Still Remains**: Pictures of Hiroshima in Ruin

Nothing, therefore, remains but to direct the gaze, in the perpetual expectation of the final onslaught, on nothing except the extraordinary event in which alone salvation now lies. But this necessary state of intense and uncomplaining attention could, because we are in mysterious contact with the powers besieging us, really call forth a miracle. Conversely, the assumption that things cannot go on like this will one day find itself apprised of the fact that for the suffering of individuals as of communities there is only one limit beyond which things cannot go: annihilation.

—Walter Benjamin, "One Way Street"

HE: You saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing.
SHE: I saw everything. Everything.

—*Hiroshima mon amour*

The Opera of Hiroshima

What is it? A crack in a pane of glass? A snowflake at rest? Is it something beautiful or something broken? We cannot say for sure. Whatever it is, it suggests that something happened before the film begins, an event precedes the first shot which pervades each still that follows. The story of Hiroshima told in this film thus begins with a sense of lateness symbolized by a mysterious image over which the opening credits roll. After the first of the film's many dissolves, we see two naked torsos entangled, forcefully shifting about. Whether these bodies are joined in suffering or ecstasy is, for the moment, unclear. They first appear writhing under a shower of ash. Their skin turns coarse. The ash lightens and begins to shimmer. Finally the skin softens, and the glowing embers dissolve into glistening beads of sweat. Illuminated by swells of light, the amorphous bodies take the form of a man and woman, lost in conversation, lost in one another; "They are lying naked in a hotel room. Naked. Smooth bodies. Intact. What are they talking about? About Hiroshima."[184] Marguerite Duras, the screenwriter, tells us that "we see mutilated bodies—the heads, the hips—

184 Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, trans. Richard Seaver (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 8.

moving—in the throes of love or death—and covered successively with the ashes, the dew of atomic death—and the sweat of love fulfilled."[185] The temporal sequence of the metamorphosis is also vague. Were we watching charred victims in 1945 morph in fast-forward into the bodies of lovers in 1959, or were we watching in reverse, seeing first the charred bodies of the lovers we will encounter many years earlier when they first met in Hiroshima? The mysteries present in this first sequence of images pervade the film. The ambiguity implies that two recurring questions form the shadow of all that we will see: thrown into a situation in which we are always arriving too late we recover from our disorientation by asking first, "what happened," and then, "what time is it?"

This much is clear: She is a French actress cast in a film about Hiroshima, which is shooting there on location, and He is a Japanese architect with business in town. They have just made love in a hotel room. We eavesdrop on the pillow talk. As they begin to speak about the city, about what happened in 1945, the subject of her film,

185 Ibid. In her critical work on Duras, Leslie Hill rightly draws a parallel between this scene and a "similar spectacle of bodily fusion and deathly disarticulation" in Duras's 1950 novel (which was later adapted to film in 1958 by Renè Clèment), *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*: "when the heroine first goes to the cinema on her own, what she sees there, in a description that almost seems to anticipate the opening shots of *Hiroshima mon amour*—showing two anonymous and naked torsos, embracing in medium close-up as their bodies are sprayed with ash, then water . . ." Leslie Hill, *Marguerite Duras: Apocalyptic Desire* (London: Routledge, 1993), 78.

their intimacy wanes. Their bodies are no longer touching. In a flat, unsympathetic tone, He tells her that She has not seen Hiroshima. Calm, but with a defiant voice, She insists that she has seen everything, and from the residue of her recent memories, She recalls for him all that She has seen, from the "iron made vulnerable as flesh" displayed at the local museum to "the survivors and those who were in the wombs of the women."[186] Scenes from the newsreels which circulated shortly after the bombing parade across the screen as she speaks: a dog with a three legs stalking the wreckage, a blackened eye extracted with surgical forceps, scorched cinder blocks stacked beside piles of hair. He repeats that she saw nothing. She pleads with him, speaking of love and memory, horror and forgetting. With a rising hostility he tells her that she "made it *all* up," that she doesn't "have a memory."[187] In this scene, the lovers, worlds apart but erotically entwined, stage in miniature the recurring problematic of the film: what does it mean to witness the event after it occurs, when its ruins are all that remain? Again, in Duras's own words: "Thus their initial exchange is allegorical. *In short, an operatic*

186 Duras, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, 17 and 20.

187 Ibid, 19 and 23.

exchange."[188] This not a war film staged in the Pacific theater, nor even images of atomic war in a movie theater, but an opera based on Hiroshima that is structured like a Baroque mourning-play.

The synopsis that Duras provides for the film, often published alongside the screenplay, with its suggestive brevity and constant reference to antique aesthetic forms, sheds little light on the mysteries compressed into this first scene, but after reading it one does come away with the impression that *Hiroshma mon amour* is a film profoundly alive, in its awareness and anticipation of its viewers.[189] Throughout this chapter I will try to establish a worthy philosophical context for how the film is thinking, making almost no mention whatsoever of what is commonly thought about this film designed to perplex. The first and most obvious question that must be asked is why did Duras and the director, Alain Renais, whose previous film was the very somber and direct *Night and Fog*, a documentary short on the concentration camps at Auschwitz and Majdanek, make a film about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima which

188 Ibid, 9.

189 *Hiroshima mon amour,* DVD, directed by Alain Resnais (1959; Paris, France: The Criterion Collection, 2003).

features an allegory involving two nameless melancholic lovers? The rest of the chapter supplies the long answer to that question, but as for the short answer, first regarding the allegorical form of the story, one must bear in mind that "Allegory . . . is not a playful illustrative technique, but a form of expression, just as speech is expression, and, indeed, just as writing is."[190] Second, as far as the romantic content is concerned—the all too familiar adulterous love story involving strangers who collide on a hotel bed—it is bearing in mind that

> The world of lovers is no less *true* than that of politics. It even absorbs the totality of life, which politics cannot do. And its characteristics are not those of the fragmentary and empty world of practical action, but those that belong to *human life* before it is reduced to servility: the world of lovers is constructed, like life, out of a *series of chances that give the awaited answer to an avid and powerful will to be*.[191]

And:

> Simple and strong life, which has not yet been destroyed by functional servility, is possible only to the extent that it has ceased to subordinate itself to some particular project, such as acting, depicting, or measuring; it depends on the *image of destiny*, on the seductive and dangerous myth with which it feels itself

190 Walter Benjamin, *Origins of the German Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977), 162.

191 Bataille, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. and ed. Allan Stoekl. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 229.

> to be in silent solidarity. A human being is dissociated when he devotes himself to a useful labor, which has no sense by itself; he can only find the plenitude of total life when seduced . . . full existence is tied to any image that arouses hope and terror. THE LOVED ONE in this broken-up world has become the only power that has retained the virtue of returning to the heat of life . . . The lost, the tragic, the 'blinding marvel,' possessed in one's innermost being, can no longer be met anywhere but on a bed.[192]

These passages from Walter Benjamin and George Bataille begin to unravel the mystery at the heart of *Hiroshima mon amour*. The decision to work in allegory was not a cinematic ploy unrelated to the content of the film. The allegorical structure enabled an altogether different mode of expression that the content, both in terms of two nascent lovers tearing each other apart and the evental significance of Hiroshima's bombing, required. For Duras, this was because "Nothing is 'given' at Hiroshima. Every gesture, every word, takes on an aura of meaning that transcends its literal meaning."[193] She believed the same to be true of the love affair in which each glance, every turn of phrase, and all the attractions of a body are so much more than they appear for the lovers involved.

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192 Ibid, 228.

193 Duras, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, 9.

What else unites the individuals engaged in torrid love affairs with the witnesses of Hiroshima? Both may be subjectivated by their encounter, seeing in the affair or the ruins the transformative "image of destiny," full of hope and terror, which changes them forever. Thus there is a strong sense in which Duras and Resnais were not just selecting the best aesthetic technique and subject matter for their purposes; they pursued an allegorical love story because this was the only way to deliver their message about the question of what happened in Hiroshima and how that event still happens to us.

In so many ways *Hiroshima mon amour* is a film more applicable in the twenty-first century than it ever could have been in the twentieth; it is still thinking, its images still exploding in the minds of its audiences, its many mysterious still challenging what we think we understand about the nuclear epoch. In brief, it is a film that, consciously or not, absorbed the mission of revelatory annihilation and dedicated itself to bringing about its miracle through dramatic explosions on an artistic plane. It is a film about the way an event makes an impression. More than that, it tries to make just such an impression on its viewers. Its methods are disorienting, wondrous, and challenging. It

does not convey a simple message, nor does it simply document a historical moment. It is a deep meditation on shadows and light, on illumination and occlusion, on the invisible and the visible, on what can be seen in the ruins of Hiroshima and what necessarily retreats from view. The builders of the atomic bomb sought to trigger the miracle of revelation through the spectacle of horrific carnage. The film, which is about that ambition, also tries to deliver on it.

A Place That Death Preserved

Hiroshima mon amour focuses not on the event itself but its ruins, not the thing but its shadow.[194] The move parallels the writer's conscious shift away from symbolic figuration toward allegorical form, a transition tracked historically by Benjamin in his study of the baroque German mourning-play. The jarring effect which Duras hopes will result from the film's opening scene also figures in Benjamin's analysis: "Where man is drawn to the symbol, allegory emerges from the depths of being to intercept the intention, and to triumph over it . . . Allegories become dated, because it is part of their nature to shock."[195] Audiences expecting Hiroshima to be portrayed in this film through the straight-forward symbolism typical of the period are undermined by what actually arrives on screen: right from the start the camera wavers between a pornographic abstract and a mixture of fictionalized and documentary footage of the ruined city. The ubiquitous mushroom cloud is nowhere to be seen. The shock born of this interception of expectations is intended to produce a blank slate, but as we all

194 Duras's conception of the event is also taken up, in problematic fashion, by Martin Crowley. See his "The Temporality of the Event" in *Duras, Writing, and the Ethical*: *Making the Broken Whole* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000): 58-99.

195 Benjamin, *Tragic Drama*, 183-4.

know, in this particular city, sincerity is the rule. "Everywhere except Hiroshima," Duras tells us, "guile is an accepted convention. At Hiroshima it cannot exist or it will be denounced."[196] In the opening exchange, however, recollections of the event are staged as "an exemplary delusion of the mind."[197] And in tearing away from the symbol, this operatic sequence abridges "one of the principal goals of the film: to have done with the description of horror by horror."[198] Evil and horror do loom large this film, just as they dominated the baroque stage, but only as suggestion, between and beyond the images, never within them.

Where the object for the Greeks was thought to be the container of *eidos*, its significance in allegory depends on the visionary capacity of the viewer to see past its material image: all signs point elsewhere. Significance is no longer intrinsic to the image itself. It gathers form only in the process of a necessarily finite, singular exchange with the viewer who stands before it and makes it her own.[199] But this requires a

196 Duras, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, 10.

197 Ibid, 9.

198 Ibid.

199 Or, as Benjamin would have it: "That is to say it is now quite incapable of emanating any meaning or significance of its own; such significance as it has, it acquires from the allegorist. He places it within

hieroglyphic, as opposed to symbolic, conception of the image which is dialectical: "The desire to guarantee the sacred character of any script—there will always be a conflict between sacred standing and profane comprehensibility—leads to complexes, hieroglyphics. This is what happens in the baroque."[200] The staggering opulence of this period rises alongside Europe's famous theological crisis, one that involved aura's flight from the symbol: "at one stroke the profound vision of allegory transforms things and works into stirring writing . . . In the field of allegorical intuition the image is a fragment, a rune."[201] At this moment in Europe's history, eternal forms are reduced to rubble in dramatic fashion. Years later, Norman O. Brown draws upon the same representational technique to foreground the visible in his own work, reading the idea of the scriptural hieroglyph into all the images which comprise phenomenal reality, a practice fundamental to neo-Platonism and prophetic Islam alike:

> It is all one book

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it, and stands behind it. In his hands the object becomes something different; through it he speaks of something different and for him it becomes a key to the realm of hidden knowledge; and he reveres it as the emblem of this." Benjamin, *Tragic Drama*, 184.

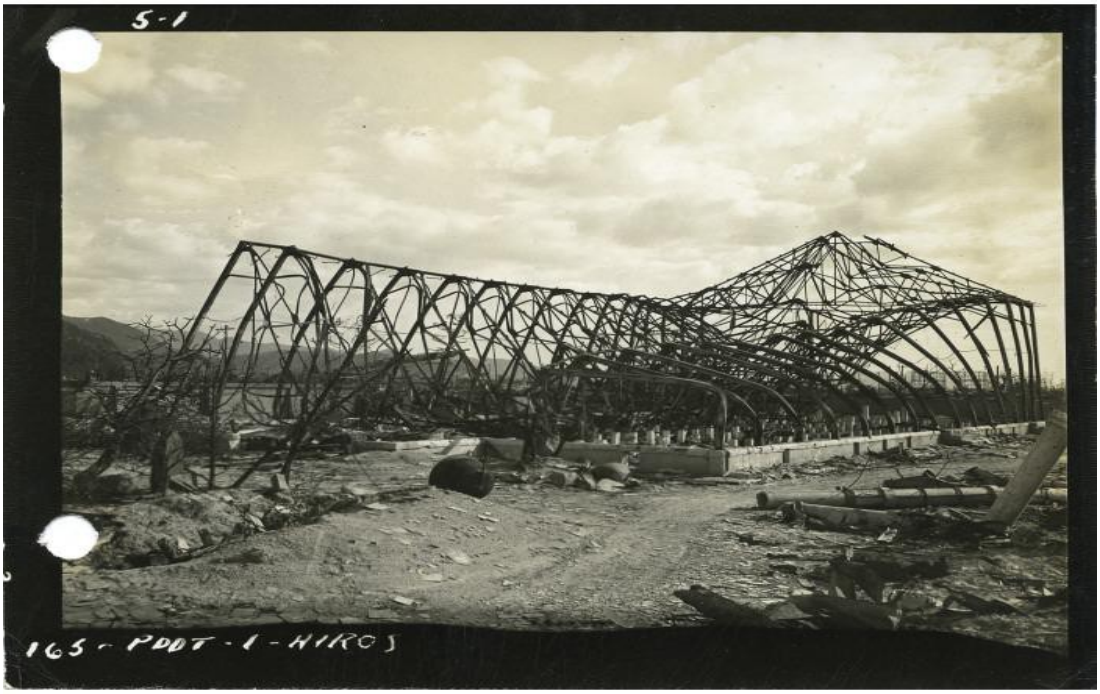
200 Ibid, 175.

201 Ibid, 176.

The book of God's Works and the book of God's Word.
Every phenomenon is scripture
not alphabetic but hieroglyphic.[202]

The symbolic schema, on the other hand, requires that the whole be visible in the part, the material image a reflection of the eternal. In the case of the event, where documentary or empirical methods do not prevail, the symbol is invoked as a stay against any potential indeterminacy in the account, positioning representation someplace beyond the shadow of a doubt. The most prominent example of the symbolic horror genre, at least in the West, remains John Hersey's series of articles for the *New Yorker*, which ran only a few weeks after the bombing, later published in book form under the title, *Hiroshima*. The book, comprised of six interwoven vignettes, each focusing on a survivor of the bombing, is typical of the symbolic character. The bombing figures in this work as tragedy, a horrible intensification of war's explosive history. In encountering the six characters developed by the story, the reader is permitted a synecdochic access to the event, the immensity of "the noiseless flash" and the "fire"

202 Brown, *Closing Time* (New York: Random House, 1973), 99.



revealed in banal minutia: the tedium of the morning commute, precise distances from the epicenter of the blast, solitary wounds, the pain of a few melting into the suffering of many. Present within the symbol, from Hersey back to antiquity, is a conflation of beauty, goodness, and truth. If the naturalistic journalism in *Hiroshima* is indeed

symbolic of the event, this relationship holds true for all time, allowing us to grasp in its form both a knowledge of the bombing and our correspondent ethical position. Here, the good merges with truth eternally. The philosophical heritage of symbolism helps to explain how reading the book became synonymous with a ritual of expiation; if we do not look away from *Hiroshima's* gruesome scenes, our guilt is somehow atoned for.

The critical backlash to Hersey's Hiroshima comes swiftly, in two waves. Dwight McDonald, social critic and then editor of the leftist journal *Politics*, criticizes the work precisely for its failure to live up to the promise of its own symbolic dimensions: Heresy has "no eye for the one detail which imaginatively creates the whole."[203] The following month American author Mary McCarthy writes to the editor, advocating an altogether different critical tack, condemning Hersey not for his failure to deliver a symbol worthy of imagination but for his equivocation of the event that is was: "What [Hersey's piece] did was to minimize the atom bomb by treating it as though it belonged to the familiar order of catastrophes—fires, flood, earthquakes—which we have always had with us and which offer to the journalist, from Pliny down

203 Dwight MacDonald, "Hersey's 'Hiroshima'" in *Politics* (October: 1946).

to Mr. Hersey, an unparalleled wealth of human interest stories, examples of the marvelous, and true-life narratives of incredible escapes."[204] Both maintain their staunch opposition to Hersey's work, but their specific criticisms reveal two strikingly different aspects of this contemporary crisis of the aura. MacDonald finds the account wanting because it fails to stand up to similar treatments of major historical events whereas McCarthy condemns him for the opposite. In dealing with the unconventional event conventionally, he always already destroys what he attempts to represent the very moment he begins to convey it. That is why, for McCarthy, "To treat [Hiroshima] journalistically, in terms of measurable destruction, is, in a sense, to deny its existence . . ."[205] The error, rooted in a false representational schema, is not without consequences: "Up to August 31 of this year, no one dared think of Hiroshima—it appeared as a kind of hole in human history. Mr. Hersey has filled that hole with busy little Japanese Methodists; he has made it familiar and safe, and so, in the final sense, boring."[206] To see the event in Hersey's *Hiroshima* is to see nothing at all. You saw nothing in *Hiroshima*,

204 Mary McCarthy, "The 'Hiroshima' *New Yorker*" in *Politics* (November: 1946).

205 Ibid.

206 Ibid.

she tells us.

What proves decisive in McCarthy's formulation of the event is that in Hiroshima, "the continuity of life was, for the first time, put into question, and by man."[207] The insight forces us to reconsider the link between representation and temporality. For Benjamin, what is unique about the mourning-play is that it presents transient forms as conveyors of eternal presence. According to the Greeks, the symbol preserves eternal mystery and retains the power of its secrets, but these powers are summoned at the expense of a singular event which interrupts the process, as all historical moments for the symbolic character join together in the ebbs and flows of an oceanic eternal. After Hiroshima, in McCarthy's eyes, the eternal which was once seen to accompany humanity indefinitely comes up against a finite limit; whereas for Benjamin the transience becomes the representational precondition for eternity, McCarthy understands representations of the eternal after 1945 obvious reminders of our new found sense of transience and contingency. Any form of representation rooted in a conception of the eternal cannot help but assimilate its portrayal of the event to its interior logic. In her final devastating lines, McCarthy relates this to the crude and

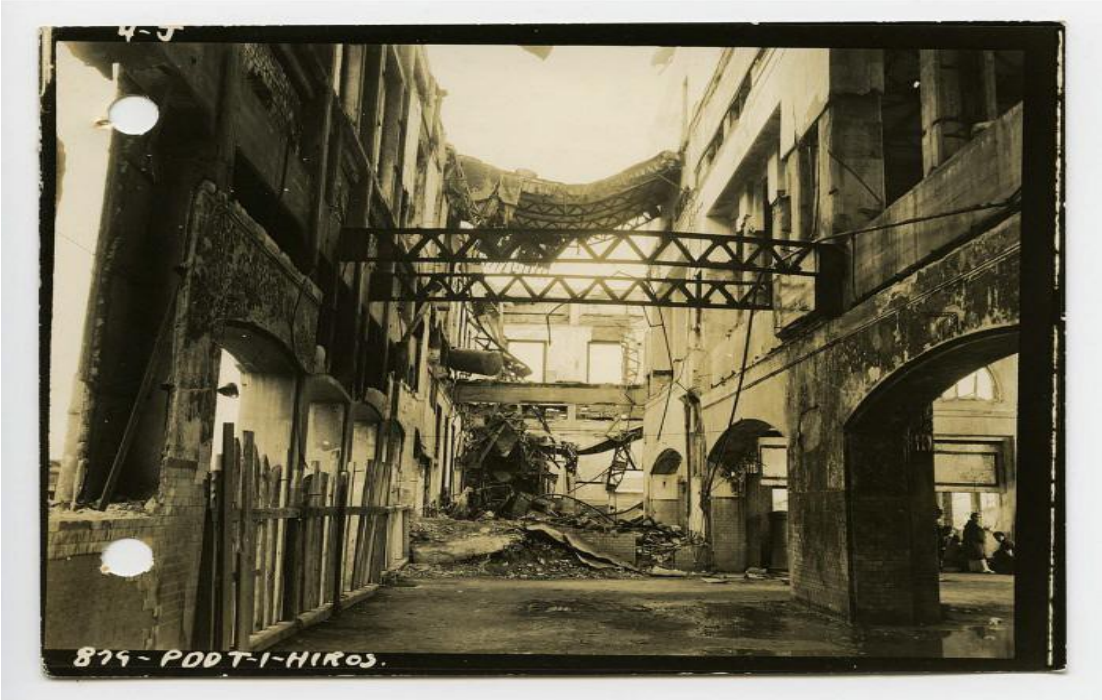
207 Ibid.

inescapable commercialism of Hersey's effort:

> The point is that the *New Yorker* cannot be against the atom bomb, no matter how hard it tries, just as it could not, even in this 'moral emergency,' eliminate the cigarette and perfume advertising that accompanied Mr. Hersey's text. Since the New Yorker has not, so far as we know, had a rupture with the government, the scientists, and the boys in the bomber, it can only assimilate the atom bomb to itself, to Westchester County, to smoked turkey, and the Hotel Carlyle. It is all one world.[208]

The event calls for an alternative if not wholly unprecedented mode of figuration, one that bears within itself the mark of finitude, absence, and rupture as opposed to traditional aesthetic techniques which project business as usual.

208 Ibid.



During the baroque ascendancy of the allegorical form, however, nature is re-imagined, though an emphasis on the eternal endures. Benjamin tells us that: "nature remained the great teacher for the writers of this period. However, nature was not seen by them in bud and bloom, but in the over-ripeness and decay of her creations. In nature they saw eternal transience . . . In the process of decay, and in it alone, the events of history shrivel up and become absorbed in the setting."[209] Death preserves.

209 Benjamin, *Tragic Drama*, 178.

This is the lesson taught by the baroque that sheds light on the crucial point of divergence which sets allegory against symbolism in this period of theological crisis:

> Within the decisive category of time, the introduction of which into this field of semiotics was the great romantic achievement of these thinkers, permits the incisive, formal definition of the relationship between symbol and allegory. Whereas in the symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape.[210]

From this insight Benjamin builds his famous argument relating allegory to the figure of the ruin—the "allegories are, in the realm of thought, what ruins are in the realm of things,"[211]—which for Benjamin also reveals the messianic quality of the natural world, one ripe for redemption, as "an appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue them for all eternity, is one of the strongest impulses in allegory."[212]

This emphasis opposes the baroque to the lesson in Duras's allegory and implicit in McCarthy's letter-to-the-editor, that immortality dies, and what is left of the eternal

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210 Ibid, 166.

211 Ibid, 178.

212 Ibid, 232.

we must try to salvage in the time that remains, an inter-temporal time which precedes the end. Criticism then, as Benjamin already understood, is synonymous with mortification. In his scholarly report, the "outer form" of the Trauerspiel "has died away because of its extreme crudity. What has survived is the extraordinary detail of allegorical references: an object of knowledge which has settled in the consciously constructed ruins."[213] He goes on to proclaim: "Criticism means the mortification of the works. By their very essence [allegorical] works confirm this more readily than others. Mortification of the works: not then—as the romantics would have it—awakening consciousness in living works, but the settlement of knowledge in dead ones."[214] In Duras's libretto, we encounter a stunning example of this mortification as method. She provides a list of images: "(A dog with a leg amputated. People, children. Wounds. Burned children screaming)," which flash across the screen as the actress says: "Hiroshima was blanketed with flowers. There were corn-flowers and gladiolas everywhere, and morning glories and day lilies that rose again from the ashes with

213 Ibid, 182.

214 Ibid.

extraordinary vigor, quite unheard of for flowers till then."[215] And in a rare footnote, Duras adds, "This sentence is taken almost verbatim from John Hersey's admirable report on Hiroshima. All I did was apply it to the martyred children."[216] And finally, the relevant passage from Hersey mortified by the film:

> This was the first chance she had to look at the ruins of Hiroshima; the last time she had been carried through the city's streets, she had been hovering on the edge of unconsciousness. Even though the wreckage had been described to her, and though she was still in pain, the sight horrified and amazed her, and there was something she noticed about it that particularly gave her the creeps. Over everything—up through the wreckage of the city, in gutters, along the riverbanks, tangled among tiles and tin roofing, climbing on charred tree trunks —was a blanket of fresh, vivid, lush, optimistic green; the verdancy rose even from the foundations of ruined houses. Weeds already hid the ashes, and wild flowers were in bloom among the city's bones.[217]

This critical mortification is what endows the film with "the basis for a rebirth, in which all ephemeral beauty is completely stripped off, and the work stands as ruin."[218] And in this melodramatic mourning film, Hiroshima does indeed rise from the

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215 Duras, *Hiorhima Mon Amour*, 19.

216 Ibid.

217 John Hersey, *Hiroshima* (New York: Bantam Classics, 1959), 89.

218 Benjamin, *Tragic Drama,* 182.

ashes, this time appearing as love amidst the ruins: "Their personal story, however brief it may be, always dominates Hiroshima. If this premise were not adhered to, this would be just one more made-to-order picture, of no more interest than any other fictionalized documentary. If it is adhered to, we'll end up with a sort of false documentary that will probe the lesson of Hiroshima more deeply than any made-to-order documentary."[219] To further underscore the need for an allegorical viewing of the film, Duras contends that "If the audience never forgets that this is the story of a Japanese man and a French woman, the profound implications of the film are lost. If the audience does forget it, these profound implications become apparent."[220] By focusing on what still remains of the event at the expense of a symbolic experience of the initial blast, by orienting the story allegorically, Duras is able to build into the architecture of her story the formal characteristics of melancholia in anticipation of a melancholic character, for if the film "becomes allegorical under the gaze of melancholy, if melancholy causes life to flow out of it and it remains behind dead, but eternally secure,

219 Duras, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, 10.

220 Ibid, 109.

then it is exposed to the allegorist, it is unconditionally in [her] power."[221]

This film is a vision wrested from the sight of Hiroshima in ruin which occurs in the distant aftermath, not as an immediate reaction to the bombing itself. Duras positions herself alongside Baudelaire's vision of the rag-picker who worms his way through a ruined, garbage-dump world and turns sewage into wine. The intention is to submerge history itself within allegory. Rather than reconstituting the symbolic

221 Ibid.

mistake, Duras intends to "make this horror rise again from its ashes by incorporating it in a love that will necessarily be special and 'wonderful,' one that will be more credible than if it had occurred anywhere else in the world, a place that death had not preserved."[222] Benjamin on the way history takes its its place on the baroque stage: "When, as is the case in the *Trauerspiel*, history becomes part of the setting, it does so as script. The word 'history' stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience. The allegorical physiognomy of nature-history, which is put on stage in the *Trauerspiel*, is present in reality in the form of the ruin. In the ruin, history has physically merged into the setting."[223] What uniquely avails itself to the allegorical setting is a physiognomic interpretation of character through a hieroglyphic reading of appearances.

222 Ibid, 9.

223 Benjamin, *Tragic Drama*, 177-8.

The Architect

The leading characters in the film are physiognomic composites, faces into which theories of subjectivity can be read. They speak to one another on screen, and at another remove, they intervene in many of the discussions that have dominated the subject of Hiroshima since 1945. As for the architect, He is fighting on the Chinese front at the time of the bombing. He is not survivor so much as his military deployment kept him out of range. Nonetheless, he is haunted by what Theodore Adorno attributes to the afflictions of those who survive trauma:

> Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living—especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living. His mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz; this is the drastic guilt of him that was spared. By way of atonement he will be plagued by dreams such as that he is no longer living at all, that he was sent to the ovens in 1944 and his whole existence since has been imaginary, an emanation of the insane wish of a man killed twenty years earlier.[224]

The architect is he who was spared and rebuilds, who gets involved in politics, sure of

224 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 365.

himself, and crucially, Duras indicates that "*He is not a libertine* . . . It's for this reason that his affair with the young French woman is a real love affair, even though it's a chance adventure. It's because he doesn't believe in the virtue of chance affairs that he can live this one with such sincerity, with such violence."[225] His brutality stems from a failure of belief. The architect is he who believes it only when he sees it. Where She sees him allegorically, he views her as a symbol. For him she is 1,000 women in one. In love and in his memory of the event, he becomes the melancholic figure who doesn't know what he is missing.

If one is sympathetic to the architect, He appears to be making the shadow of Hiroshima visible to the actress so she may understand that by acknowledging an essential inability to witness the event she indeed witnesses it. His testimony, as an escapee of mass death, parallels the stand made by Primo Levi, in his own reflection on witnessing as a survivor of Auschwitz. Giorgio Agamben, reading Levi, understands this to be radical shift in the role of the witness: "The witness usually testifies in the name of justice and truth and as such his or her speech draws consistency and fullness."[226]

225 Duras, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, 110.

226 Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz,* 34.

Hersey, as a witness to the historical truth of Hiroshima and unwavering accuser of injustice, figures in this traditional mode. But for Levi and the architect, "the value of testimony lies precisely in what it lacks . . . The 'true' witnesses, the 'complete witnesses,' are those who did not bear witness and could not bear witness. They are those that 'touched bottom.'"[227] The complete witnesses of Hiroshima were eviscerated in the yawn of fire, boiled in the Ōta River, made into thousands of pale, shadowy streaks dashing across the concrete ruins. He understands and is trying to make her see that "Whoever assumes the charge of bearing witness in their name knows that he or she must bear witness in the name of the impossibility of bearing witness."[228] In telling her she has seen nothing, the architect attempts to speak the silence of the drowned. A related claim is called upon by McCarthy in her moral indictment of the symbolic Hiroshima: "To have done the atom bomb justice, Mr. Hersey would have to interview the dead." Duras herself also alludes to this logic of the unrepresentable in her synopsis of the film: "Impossible to talk about Hiroshima. All one can do is talk about

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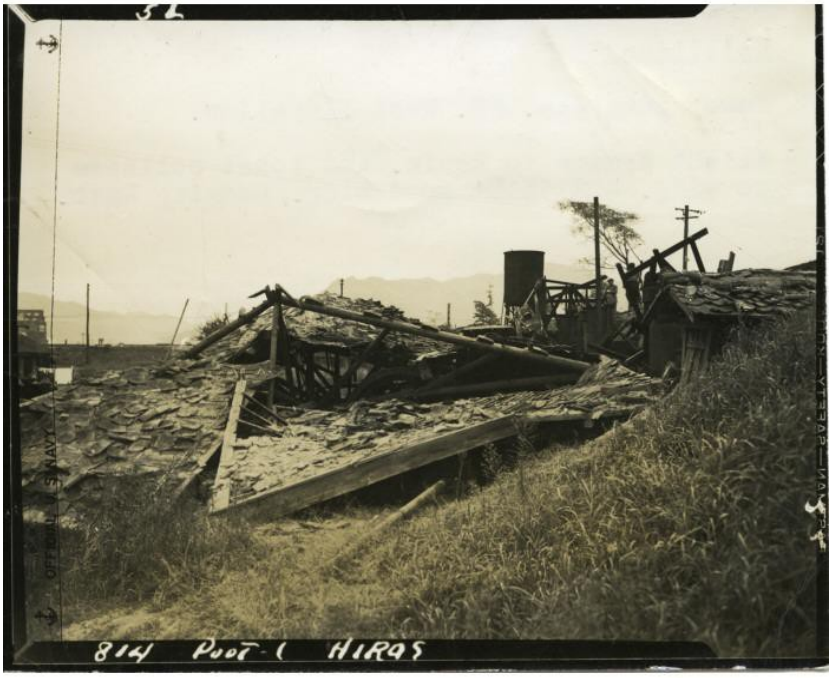
227 Ibid.

228 Ibid.

the impossibility of talking about Hiroshima."[229]



However, if one becomes unsympathetic to the architect, to his witnessing of impossibility scripted by Duras, then his silence appears not as a careful safeguarding of the incalculable witness so much as a character irremediably blanked by the bomb's shadow. In the mind of the melancholic, an "attachment to the object of one's sorrowful loss supersedes any desire to recover from this loss, to live free of it in the

229 Duras, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, 9.

present, to be unburdened by it. This is what renders melancholia a persistent condition, a state, indeed, a structure of desire, rather than a transient response to death or loss."[230] The Freudian reading of melancholy is given a theological twist in Benjamin's analysis of Adam and the Garden:

> Adam, as the first born, a pure creation, possesses the creaturely mournfulness; Eve, created to cheer him, possesses joyfulness. The conventional association of melancholy and madness is not observed; Eve had to be designated as the instigator of the Fall. This gloomy conception of melancholy is not of course the original way of seeing it. In antiquity is was, rather, seen in a dialectical way.[231]

The actress also appears to conform to the story of the Fall. After his loss she consoles him, the eternal nurse of an eternal war; she is at once the cause of his anguish and the object of his desire. It is also worth noting that in his canonical work on this theme, Erwin Panofsky identifies melancholia as the compelling force behind Faust's willingness to succumb to Satan's temptation.[232]

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230 Wendy Brown, "Resisting Left Wing Melancholy" in *boundary 2*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Autumn: 1999), 20. Brown is paraphrasing Freud's seminal work "On Mourning and Melancholia" prior to articulating her own critique of the contemporary American Left.

231 Benjamin, *Tragic Drama*, 147.

232 Erwin Panofsky, *Saturn and Melancholy* (New York: Basic Books, 1964).

The architect's case conforms to that crippling melancholia Benjamin detects in the poetry of Erich Kästner, which he considers to be symptomatic of much of the Left radicalism of his violent times. In his own words, "this left-wing radicalism is precisely the attitude to which there is no longer in general any corresponding political action. It is to the left not of this or that tendency; but simply to the left of what is in general possible."[233] Weighed against the demands of the political, Benjamin argues that the melancholic ineffability embodied by the architect may amount to nothing more than "tortured stupidity."[234] Extending the core of Benjamin's politico-theological critique to cinematic representations of Auschwitz, Gillian Rose argues that the melancholy privileged by Agamben and others is a form of what she terms "Holocaust piety."[235] For Rose, "To argue for silence, prayer, the banishment of equally of poetry and knowledge, in short, the witness of 'ineffability,' that is, non-representability, is *to mystify something we dare not understand*, because we fear that it may be all too

233 Benjamin, "Left-Wing Melancholy" in *Screen* 15(2) (1974), 30.

234 Ibid, 31.

235 Gillian Rose, "Beginnings of the Day: Fascism and Representation" in *Modernity, Culture and 'the Jew,'* eds. Daniel Boyarin and Chana Kronfeld (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 243.

understandable, all too continuous with what we are—human, all too human."[236]

What invocations of the "ineffability" of Auschwitz enable is the retreat from accepting that our contemporary world still collaborates with and is implicated by the predatory violence that made the crematoriums possible. This allows fascism to promise the "beginnings of the day," the dawning of a new light that heals the wounds of the past and points the way forward.[237] The arrival of the beginnings of the day is also made possible when a film allows its audience to sympathize with the original suffering of the victim who is fully protected against predation in the present. That was then; this is now. Conversely, at the end of day, "Only the persistence of always fallible and contestable representation opens the possibility for our acknowledgment in the mutual implication in the fascism of our cultural rites and rituals."[238] If the logic of fascism triumphs in this dispute over the time of the day and the limits of representation, another threat is surely added to the dangers that presently face the dead of Auschwitz, and perhaps, in turn, the dead of Hiroshima.

236 Ibid, 243-244.

237 Ibid, 242.

238 Ibid.

As the architect challenges the picture of Hiroshima given by the actress, he is not simply testifying. He is also actively attempting to blot out Hiroshima the testimony of his new-found lover, and by extension, the film's audience. His performance is an attempt to impose a shadow on her version of remembrance. *Hiroshima Mon Amour* clearly doesn't invite a return to daybreak through a comfortable resolution of the horror of the event. That would be the path Rose associates with the second half of Steven Speilberg's film, *Schindler's List*. In "its anxiety that our sentimentality be left intact," Rose contends that the film "leaves us at *the beginning of the day*, in a Fascist security of our own unreflected predation, piously joining the survivors putting stones on Schindler's grave in Israel."[239] The embedded cost of the attempt in *Schindler's List* to guarantee a comforting, moralistic lesson about the fascist camps, "the overcoming of representation, in its aesthetic, philosophical, and political versions," is that the film ultimately "converges with the *inner tendency* of fascism itself."[240] The more ethical film, for Rose, would "leave us unsafe, but with *the remains of the day,*" but "to have

239 Ibid, 247.

240 Ibid, 242. Her emphasis.

that experience, we would have to discover and confront our own fascism."[241] Crucially, Rose goes on to explain how "the limits of representation are configurative: they concern the relation between configuration and meaning."[242] In his defense of the unrepresentability of Hiroshima, the architect must nonetheless possess a basic understanding of the event that certifies it as unintelligible, as non-knowledge. Echoing a similar point on the subject of Auschwitz, Jacques Rancière argues that "in order to assert unrepresentability as art that is commensurate with the unthinkability of the event, the latter must have itself been rendered entirely thinkable, entirely necessary according to thought."[243] In the end, "The logic of the unrepresentable can only be sustained by a hyperbole that ends up destroying it."[244] Perhaps in his own silence and attempt at silencing her, he risks the quiet of a new morning.

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241 Ibid.

242 Ibid, 246.

243 Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2007), 138. Also: "The ethical requirement that there should be an art appropriate to exceptional experience dictates exaggeration of the forms of dialectical intelligibility against which the rights of the unrepresentable are supposedly being upheld."

244 Ibid.

In addition to this risk of complicity, there is also a danger in conflating these two events, these two cities in ruin, in a superficial invocation of the categories of survivor and witness. What they do share, in keeping with Benjamin's thesis, is that both Hiroshima and Auschwitz correspond to a theological crisis. Just as the theological

crisis played out in the Protestant Reformation gives rise to aura's rebirth in allegory, the crisis in representation that haunts the remnants of both of these cities is bound up with the belief that these are the places on Earth where God left us. The crucial point of divergence, however, is alluded to in line of McCarthy's, where she argues that doing justice to the bombing requires interviewing the dead. Without remembering the singularity of the events, we may all too easily confuse this position with something similar in the critical writings on Auschwitz—Levi, for example, or perhaps Jean-Francoise Lyotard's oft-cited notion of *Le Différend*. We must remember that the dead of Hiroshima, at least the dead in 1946, *did not* witness the event, as the drowned of Auschwitz were able to witness the relatively slow and vast operations of the Final Solution before their fate was sealed.

Duras alludes to this distinction in the surreal imagery of the opera—ash transforming into water—a cinematic moment which leads us back to the event's confusion in a scene originally documented by Hersey's text: "Houses nearby were burning, and when huge drops of water the size of marbles began to fall, he half thought that they must be coming from the hoses of firemen fighting the blazes (They

were actually drops of condensed moisture falling from the turbulent tower of dust, heat, and fission fragments that had already rise miles into the sky above Hiroshima)."[245] And also, days later, after Truman's famous speech declares the use of the atom bomb and the Japanese emperor addresses the nation in a radio broadcast, the surviving victims of Hiroshima still did not comprehend what had happened to them: "Those victims who were able to worry at all about what had happened thought of it and discussed it in more primitive, childish terms—gasoline sprinkled from an airplane, maybe, or some combustible gas, or a big cluster of incendiaries, or the work of parachutists."[246] This is what was unique about the victims of Hiroshima for Bataille. More than ever before, they were totally disconnected from any possible understanding of what was happening to them.

Interviewing the dead, doing justice to the event, cannot be interpreted as yet another example of ceding the role of the witness to the drowned: one lesson of Hiroshima's immediate dead (not those killed in slow-motion by the radioactive excess

245 Hersey, *Hiroshima*, 24.

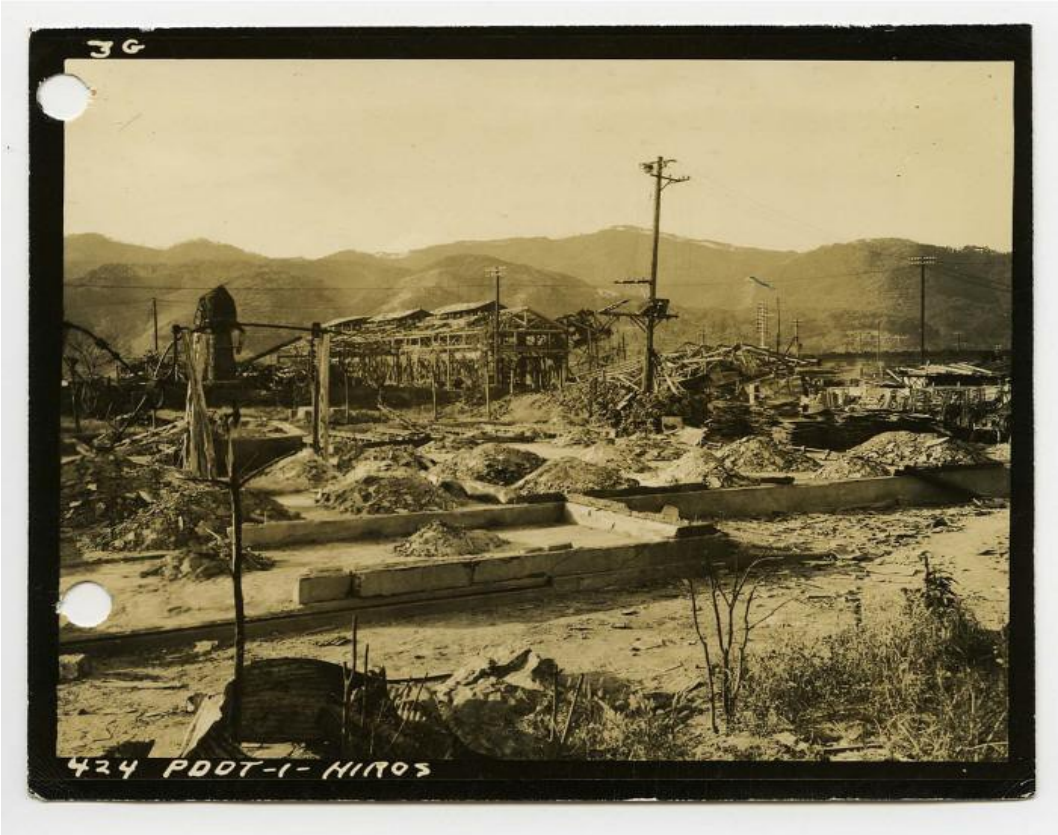
246 Ibid, 64.

of the bombing) is that witnessing belongs only to the survivor, who endures long enough to witness the event's becoming the reality-principle for the vast architecture of global power politics. Another warning entrusted to us by the dead of Hiroshima is that we may well die without understanding the nature of our demise. Our ability to simply learn the lesson of history in order to ward off catastrophe disguises a fatal conceit. In order to understand the event, we, like the dead of Hiroshima, must avoid the mistake of taking appearances for reality and hubris endemic to the supposed mastering of history through its contemplation. Interpreted allegorically, even Hersey's *Hiroshima* conveys this revelation in remarkable terms:

> Everything fell and Miss Sasaki lost consciousness. The ceiling dropped suddenly and the wooden floor above collapsed in splinters and the people up there came down and the roof above them gave way; but principally and first of all, the bookcases right behind her swooped forward and the contents through her down, with her left leg horribly twisted and breaking beneath her. There, in the tin factory, in the first moment of the atomic age, a human being was crushed by books.[247]

247 Ibid, 21.

The architect, the escapee with a melancholic attachment to Hiroshima, is consumed



by the very shadow of the event he depends on as a figural proxy, where the event may be reverently contemplated in its inaccessibility and profound absence. He is not a reactive subject like Winston Churchill but a subject dedicated to occluding what happened, insisting not that nothing new happened, only that we cannot ever know what happened. This is the dominant way of approaching the eventfulness of

Hiroshima today, now that no one would dare say that nothing happened, just as few, if any, would risk definitely stating what they think did happen. Benjamin and others demonstrate how the architect's pious disposition draws us only too easily into the abyss.

The Actress

The actress is also principally characterized by her melancholia, but the loss which now defines her is not attributable to the bombing of Hiroshima but the death of her German lover which takes place in the final days of France's occupation by the Nazis. Duras tells us that "She too might be called in a certain way 'The Look.' Everything about her—her words, her movements—is manifest in her expression. This look is not self-conscious. She looks for the sake of looking. Her look doesn't define her conduct, it *always* exceeds it."[248] Asked by the architect why she came to Hiroshima, she replies: "looking closely at things is something that has to be learned."[249] The actress, in a film inside the film, plays "the eternal nurse of an eternal war," though one may argue that she never really breaks character.[250] She says to the architect, "Like you, I too, tried to struggle with all my might against forgetting. Like you, I forgot. Like you, I desired to have an inconsolable memory, a memory of shadows and stones," but, "Just as in love this illusion exists, this illusion of being able

248 Duras, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, 111.

249 Ibid, 28.

250 Ibid, 10.

to never forget, so I was under the illusion that I would never forget Hiroshima. Just as in love."[251] Her refrain: ". . . I meet you. I remember you. Who are you? You destroy me. You're so good for me."[252] For this character, amorous ecstasy requires self-destruction. Nothing is gained without giving something away. Prophetic insight comes at a cost, as revelation is accompanied by forgetting, an erasure of the past that the apocalypse has re-visioned. As a new love arrives, she fights to keep the memory of her old love from fading out of view.

Her claim is never simply that she toured the sights of the city and an authentic experience of the bombing was made immediately available. There is always in her account a subtle acknowledgment and acceptance of artifice. In her description of the museum, for example, she reports that "four times at the museum in Hiroshima, I saw the people walking around. The people walk around, lost in thought, among the photographs, the reconstructions, for want of something else, among the photographs, the photographs, the reconstructions, for want of something else, the explanations, for

251 Ibid, 19.

252 Ibid, 25.

want of something else."[253] Of course these are only "reconstructions," fakes standing in for the real, but they "have been made as authentically as possible. The films have been made as authentically as possible. The illusion, it's quite simple, the illusion is so perfect that the tourists cry . . ."[254] And finally, though it is almost concealed by the blanket dismissals and "tortured stupidity" of the architect, there is a moment of revelation in the actress's testimony which marks the passage from the visible to visionary reflection, from planes of transience to the fullness of the infinite, from the generality of representation to the singular universality of the event.[255] "Listen to me" she says, "I know something else. It will begin all over again . . ."[256] As She speaks the audience sees a sequence of serene images: trees, a church, and a merry-go-round. In the screenplay, Duras notes her intention to convey "Hiroshima rebuilt. Banality."[257]

253 Ibid, 17.

254 Ibid, 18.

255 See Bull, *Seeing Things Hidden,* 21-26, where he introduces the idea of "necessary hiddenness." In this allegorical reading of the *Hiroshima mon Amour*, featuring two antagonistic world-pictures, an emphasis on the legitimacy of one representation necessarily disguises the other (without concealing it).

256 Duras, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, 24.

257 Ibid.

Meanwhile, the actress repeats, "It will begin all over again. There will be ten thousand degrees on the earth. Ten thousand suns . . . the asphalt will burn."[258] Her revelatory vision is a testament to the unseen which prefigures and invisibly fills an allegorical space in-between and beyond representation.

As Benjamin shows us, "The view that prophetic ability is furthered by melancholy is an ancient one, and is derived from Aristotle's essay *De divinatione somnium*. And this survival from the presuppositions of antiquity emerges in the medieval tradition of the prophetic dreams granted precisely to melancholics."[259] Even in Kant, "'vengefulness . . . inspirations, visions, temptations, . . . significant dreams, presentiments, and miraculous portents' are ascribed to the melancholic."[260] In "One

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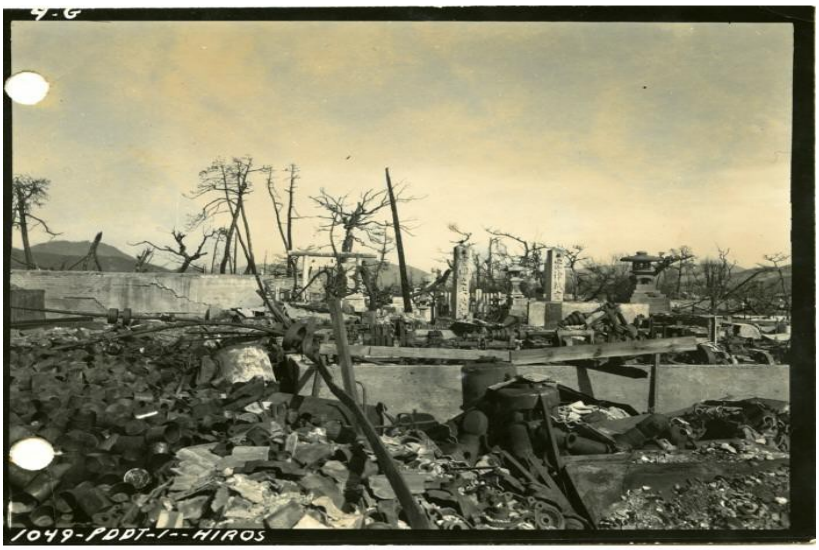
258 Ibid.

259 Benjamin, *Tragic Drama*, 147.

260 Ibid, 148. Relating this phenomena (as N.O. Brown does) to a variant of neo-Platonism at work within Islamic theosophy, Benjamin writes:"Melancholy betrays the world for the sake of knowledge. But in its tenacious self-absorption it embraces dead objects in its contemplation, in order to redeem them . . . The persistence which is expressed in the intention of mourning, is born of its loyalty to the world of things. This is how we should understand that unfaithfulness which almanacs attribute to saturnine man, and this is how we should interpret that completely isolated dialectic contrast, the 'faithfulness in love' which Abu Ma sar ascribes to saturnine man. Faithfulness is the rhythm of the emanatively descending levels of intention which reflect the appropriately transformed ascending ones of neo-Platonic theosophy." Ibid, 157.

Way Street," Benjamin's early collection of aphorisms, published the same year as his book on the *Trauerspiel* , he mentions an "aura of mockery" which sometimes appends itself to worldly hieroglyphs:

> Hence, when you are taken unawares by an outbreak of fire or news of a death, there is in the first mute shock a feeling of guilt, the indistinct reproach: did you really not know of this? Did not the dead person's name, the last time you uttered it, sound differently in your mouth? Do you not see in the flames a sign from yesterday evening, in a language you only now understand? And if an object dear to you has been lost, was there not, hours, days before, an aura of mockery or mourning about it that gave the secret away? Like ultraviolent rays memory shows to each man in the book of life a script that invisibly and prophetically glosses the text.[261]



261 Ibid, "One Way Street" in *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken Books: 1978), 89.

Benjamin's fundamental concern is what results from this auratic encounter. Either the moment forces us to change, leading to an altogether different fate, or its leads us to a state of contemplation, where the moment is interpreted and revealed fate presses on unimpeded. We either act in time and avert the foretold end or we fall victim to its catastrophic inertia while busily interpreting its meaning.

As in all prophetic moments, character and fate enter into a paradoxical relation with time: for the allegorist who experiences revelation, who rises from the dream, it's always too early until it's too late. The allegorist never finally wakes up. She is either consumed by the flame of her prophecy or finds herself falling into the sleep of another age, after the conversion of her previous one. Either character is fate and the prophecy is confirmed (the dream becomes a nightmare), or character splits off from fate, rendering the prophecy false. Benjamin's work hinges on the possibility of this theological disjunction of fate and character. He tells us to take warning, that a potentially catastrophic error occurs when "character and fate, far from being theoretically distinct, coincide. Such is the case when Nietzsche says, 'If a man has character, he has an experience that constantly recurs.' That means: if a man has a

character his fate is essentially constant. Admittedly, it also means: he has no fate—a conclusion drawn by the Stoics."[262] Benjamin insists to the end that there are some melancholic characters for whom something new can happen, and Benjamin himself was surely one of these on the day he finally found suicide worth the trouble.

Toward the close of his treatise, after so many ornamental detours, Benjamin finally defends the relevance of the baroque's allegorical obsession, arguing that his "account may, indeed must, linger so insistently over the allegorical structure of this form for the simple reason that it is only thanks to this structure that the *Trauerspiel* can assimilate as its content the subjects which contemporary conditions provide it."[263] The allegory is not to be mistaken for an aesthetic novelty which typifies the stage productions of a particular historical period; the far more radical claim advanced esoterically by Benjamin is that without allegory, the contemporary as such is imperceptible. And what allegory assimilates, for Benjamin, "cannot be elucidated without the aid of theological concepts, which were indispensable even to [the

262 Ibid, "Character and Fate," in *Reflections*, 306.

263 Ibid, *Tragic Drama*, 216.

Trauerspiel's] exposition."[264] *Hiroshima mon amour*, seen as allegorical mourning film, is thus profoundly implicated in the theological, both in terms of its conception, through the joint efforts of Duras and Resnais, and its reception, a task which addresses itself to us.[265]

264 Ibid.

265 For a discussion of the theological within Duras's work, see also Liliane Papin, "The Theater and the Sacred: A Religious Pagan," in *Critical Essays on Marguerite Duras*, trans. John W. Kneller and ed. Bettina L. Knapp (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1998): 195–203. With regard to Duras's theatrical work, Papin argues that: "To be 'faithful' to her writing, we must not forget that she does not try to set her plays in a fictional present, but rather to free them from it. That is the only way one can portray Duras at her maximum strength and respect the religious aspect of her narrative." Ibid, 203.

The actress came to Hiroshima not only see it but to learn how to see, and so too does the film portray the city in the distant aftermath while also portraying a prophetic way of seeing. It is a film about how one gazes upon Hiroshima's remains, both moving and still. *Hiroshima mon amour* relates to vision in substance and form, providing an argument about a witness overcome with melancholia and sadness, for whom memory is grave and surrender another opportunity for freedom. It offers the human sensorium a dangerous education, one that incurs risks and leaves its viewers exposed to a barrage of threats and the possibility of deep impressions. It is not a film that instructs its audience on how to relate to the event directly; its specific *subject matter* is how one experiences the eventfulness of Hiroshima through the mediation of simulacrum that appears to keep it locked in the past. The question underwriting the film: does representation imply a diluted form of experience, offering us diminishing returns over time? And are these representations of representations of the event growing ever distant from an authentic understanding of what happened and what it meant—what it may continue to mean? Benjamin's thought allows us to address the

question on the level of form; in terms of substance, the film is indebted to the work of Georges Bataille, not in the sense of validating an ideal subject type, but furthering and contributing to his thought while also illustrating it. The horror of love is intimately related to the horror of war: all the wounds, ecstasies, so much violence. Bataille's core message in the aftermath, also the key to what Duras is trying write into the film: "certainly it is better to live up to Hiroshima than to lament it, unable to bear the idea of it."[266]

Joël Farges, another French filmmaker, warned after seeing the film that though it was absolutely possible, not everyone will have a singular, subjectivating encounter when view *Hiroshima mon amour*. That is to say, it remains to be seen whether or not we will come away "impressed by this film. Impressed in a photographic sense, as in Hiroshima, where we see (in a terrifying image in photographic negative) the shadowy trace of a sentry burned alive, imprinted forever in the calcinated blackness of a brick wall."[267] As he reflects on the historical shift in twentieth century warfare when

266 Bataille, "Concerning the Accounts," 232.

267 Joel Farges, "Singular" in *Marguerite Duras* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1987), 6.

"observation and destruction . . . develop at the same pace," Paul Virilio maintains that the two converge "above all in the blinding Hiroshima flash which literally *photographed the shadow* cast by beings and things, so that every surface immediately becomes war's *recording* surface, its *film*."[268] Pictures of Hiroshima in ruins belie the fact that the atomic bombing itself was, in its execution and end-product, a picture of Hiroshima imprinted on the world. What the film, about two melancholic lovers who meet by chance in the city of Hiroshima, allows us to think is the extent to which the lacerating truth of the event subjectivates us.

In 1959, the year of the film's release, many these characters called into being by what they saw on screen and in the ruins of Hiroshima begin to speak out about their revelation, and again and again, they invoke the language of allegory, calling our attention to the event that it was and the shadow it casts over the present. During his seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan acknowledges that "All ages have thought they had reached the most extreme point of vision in a confrontation with

268 Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema*: *The Logistics of Perception*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1989), 68.

something terminal, some extra-worldly force that threatened the world."[269] "But," he says, "our world and society now bring news of *the shadow* of a certain incredible, absolute weapon that is waved in our faces in a way that is indeed worthy of the muses."[270] Across the German border, in a lecture series also running in 1959, at the Free University of Berlin, Günther Anders argues that in the aftermath of Hiroshima "mankind will always and for eternity live under *the dark shadow* of the monster."[271]

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269 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*: *Book VII The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960*, trans. Dennis Porter and ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), 104. Lacan closes this installment of the seminar with a brief discussion of Oppenheimer and the well-funded desire which animates science. In an earlier lecture, he tells his audience that if you try to conceptualize this "absolute weapon," and if you try to imagine a rocket to be rushing towards us from outer space, "you will then see inside yourself that *das Ding* is next to the subject." Ibid, 105. The link between Duras and the ethics seminar is also addressed by Lacan in "Homage to Marguerite Duras, on Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein."

270 Ibid.

271 Günther Anders, "Commandments," 20. This shadow is immensely significant for Anders, as "The apocalyptic danger is all the more menacing because we are unable to picture the immensity of such catastrophe. It is difficult enough to visualize something as not-being, a beloved friend as dead; but compared with the task our fantasy has to fulfill now, it is child's play. For what we have to visualize today is not the non-being of something particular within a framework, the existence of which can be taken for granted, but the nonexistence of this framework itself, of the world as a whole, at least of the world as mankind. Such 'total abstraction' (which, as mental performance, would correspond to our performance of total destruction) surpasses the capacity of our natural power of imagination: 'Transcendence of the Negative.' But since, as 'homines fabri,' we are capable of actually producing nothingness, we cannot surrender to the fact of our limited capacity of imagination: the attempt, at least, must be made to visualize this nothingness." Anders, "Theses," 496.

The expression is fundamental to their insight. Lacan is careful in his address not to name the source of this shadow, and in so doing, at least in the sense of Adamic language, he declares it evil. Somehow in 1959 the subjective transformation sought by the Manhattan Project began to manifest all over the globe.

The following year the producers of *Hiroshima mon amour* gave Resnais a share of the film's windfall profits in the form of a cash bonus, which he later split with his screenwriter. Duras offered her cut to Georges Bataille.[272] Perhaps she felt that the film, with its surreal braiding of eros and death, owed a debt to Bataille's thought. While the purpose behind her cash offering remains obscure, the immense impact of the film on Bataille is partly chronicled in a letter titled "Les Sables d'Olonne, 24 July 1959," where Bataille writes: "I'm sure that we will have an important conversation, among other things about the illustrations for my book. I have been able to bring into focus my plans and my notes for the possible illustrations. I have in any case secured

272 "Through [Dionys] Mascolo, Duras was on relatively close terms with Bataille, whom she had interviewed the previous December [1957]; the following month she also contributed a short piece on Bataille to the magazine *La Cigue*. In April 1960, again via Mascolo, she offered Bataille her share of the windfall profits that, as a bonus, the producers of *Hiroshima mon amour* offered Alain Resnais and part of which he, in turn, wished to pass on Duras. She voices later, more critical thoughts on Bataille in: Leopoldina Pallotta della Torre, Margarite Duras: *la passione sospesa*, pp.62-3." Hill, *Duras*, 165, fn. 2.

photographs of the remarkable scenes from Renais's film on Hiroshima, which will go well with the conclusions of the book."[273] He also declares his intention to write a piece entitled "The Nietzschean World of Hiroshima," to be published in a re-edition of his principally autobiographical work, *On Nietzsche*.[274] We can only sift through fragments, the ruins of his thought, and try to piece together sketches of what that work might have looked like. Bataille before and after reflects the movement from revelation to subjectivation. Movie is about how people are subjectivated by a place, by an evental site, which requires annihilation by representation—image (and vision) as the dissolution of negative space. For the subject, one arrives in the sovereign, atomized instant, shattering just as it arrives, the other infinitely endures: "being attains the blinding flash in tragic annihilation."[275] For Bataille, the sight of ruins is capable of producing a secondary wave of ruination: "The young and seductive Chinese man . . . left to the work of the executioner, I loved him with a love in which the sadistic instinct played no part: he communicated his pain to me or perhaps the excessive nature

273 Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*, trans. Peter Connor (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1989), 9.

274 Bataille, "Unlivable Earth?," 191, fn. 50.

275 Bataille, "The Labyrinth," in *Visions of Excess*

of his pain, and it was precisely that which I was seeking, not so as to take pleasure in it, but in order to ruin in me that which is opposed to ruin."[276]

Everything in this chapter up to this point, from the debates over representation that followed from Hersey's work to its intimate relation to the life of Georges Bataille, has been presented in service of establishing layers of context for the film in order to accentuate the way it is already speaking. This is because *Hiroshim mon amour* is not a film into which theories should be read. Rather than formulating an exogenous commentary on film, one should instead see the film as a commentary on how one should look upon Hiroshima in ruin. In this way the film attempts to provide the spectral education which the actress seeks. With this we may read the film back into contemporary debates to which it was intentionally addressed. The film, in its aesthetic commentary on aesthetics, aligns itself with Gillian Rose and her critique of the critique of representation. We must contend with the ruins of the event as a potential means for revelation, rather than making the most of degraded forms that offer only partial access to an original authentic moment. We must open ourselves up to the miraculous

276 Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 120.

encounter that pictures of Hiroshima in ruin still render possible, pictures like the ones re-presented here, originally taken by the military personnel and civilians (many of them professional photographers) as data collection for the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey charged with assessing the damage caused by the atomic bombs.

The photographs were quite literally spared from the dustbin of history when a man walking his dog pulled a suitcase from a pile of trash waiting for collection in front of his neighbor's home.[277] After contacting his neighbor years later, the man learned that neighbor too had pulled them from the trash many years prior after the wife of one of the original photographers threw them out. She told the man who found them on his neighbor's lawn that they were among on the only things that survived a catastrophic fire at her home decades prior. With these images in view, we may revisit one last time Benjamin's theory of ruination. His reflections on the ruin are a constant throughout his oeuvre, but only in the later work, through the figure of Baudelaire's rag-picker, does he address the ruin as a methodological challenge. What remains of art and thought after their decomposition in time? What avails itself to the re/searcher who

277 Adam Harrison Levy, "Hiroshima: Lost and Found" in *Hiroshima: Ground Zero 1945,* 30-49.

happens upon the remnant which has lost its original sparkle to obsolescence? For Benjamin and Baudelaire, the gleaners, those nearest to the hidden vitality of trash, know best:

> Here we have a man whose job it is to gather the day's refuse in the capital. Everything that the big city has thrown away, everything that it has lost, everything it has scorned, everything it has crushed under foot he catalogs and collects. He collates the annals of intemperance, the capharnaum of waste. He sorts things out and selects judiciously: he collects like a miser guarding a treasure, refuse which will assume the shape of useful or gratifying objects between the jaws of the goddess of Industry." This description is one extended metaphor for the poetic method, as Baudelaire practised it. Ragpicker and poet: both are concerned with refuse.[278]

The work that preoccupies Benjamin after this discovery extends the metaphor once again. In his work on Baudelaire, above all, rag-picking becomes a metaphor for his philosophical method as he collects together and refashions the detritus of forgotten days and bygone civilizations, inventing a second life with contemporary resonances that sound off like an alarm clock when the fateful hour, in all its dramatic fullness, arrives—that moment when lightning strikes the clock tower in the town square, surging through a makeshift assemblage which goes racing through the streets, burning

278 Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life*, 108.

a whole in the fabric of time. Here Benjamin definitively sides with the actress: should an answer to the question of Hiroshima be possible, the past (or "the foggy ruins of time") must "become citable in all its moments," even and especially a dog with three legs, a blackened eye extracted with surgical forceps, and piles of hair.[279] Granted, such tactics do not guarantee the arrival of an answer; the assembled collection cannot predict the weather. However, the assemblage of remnants does provide an opportunity structure for those who look through it with certain eyes when conditions are ripe for revelation.

Another powerful example comes by way of the diary kept by Machihido Hachiya, the director of a local hospital.[280] Mr. Imachi, a friend of Hachiya's and part of the hospital's administrative staff, who proved particularly adept at digging through the ruins, "the mines of the town," and discovering objects that ascended in value relative to the rapid inflation brought on by the bomb crashing what was already a strained local war economy. He uses these treasures to barter for much needed medical supplies,

279 Ibid. "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations*, 254.

280 Michihiko Hachiya, *Hiroshima Diary*, ed. and trans. Werner Wells (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1955).

mostly cigarettes and fresh blankets:

> Mr. Imachi gave me the notebook he used to record purchases and the amounts paid and pointed to the entries. This was my first encounter with inflation and what it could mean to the citizens of a war-torn city. As Mr. Imachi said, money was worthless. Under such conditions, how he managed to get what he did was remarkable. Along this same line, I learned a new term. People had come to refer to 'the mines of the town,' by which was meant articles of value buried in the ruins. Some made a regular business of digging in 'the mines of the town.' At first, I felt this sort of thing was beneath one's dignity, but the more I thought, the more interested I became. In the afternoon, giving way to impulse, I decided to have a treasure hunt myself. Going to the ruins of the barracks south of us I found a couple of people digging away. Stopping to see what they had uncovered, I found they had picked up some iron cooking utensils and a few rusty tools. I dug around a bit and found a few offs and ends, but nothing intact or worth saving.[281]

Unlike Baudelaire's rag-picker, who must render value from what others consider worthless and dispose of, Mr. Imachi must discover what is worthwhile under conditions of total trans-valuation, when paper money proves useful only as kindling. The "mines of the town" where he digs through trash, ash, and bone are nothing like the city dump or the curbside trash can where junk and debris are quarantined, kept out of sight and out of mind. In Imachi's Hiroshima, ruination was the rule, with small, rigidly defined outposts of the barely living the exception that proved it. Though the

281 Ibid, 188-9.

settings are radically dissimilar, the essential task remains the same—to persevere, against all odds: "People go into the town, thread their way through the destruction or dig for treasures, they return to the new community of the dying and they hope."[282] Or, as Benjamin once put it, "The rag-picker fascinated his epoch. The eyes of the first investigators of pauperism were fixed on him with the mute question: Where does the limit of human misery lie?"[283] Of paramount importance is a refraction, not the consolidation, of meaning. The salvaged materials provide for their viewers an allegorical invitation to an encounter in which lightning might strike: "Thus, in a certain sense, the smallest act of political reflection makes for an epoch in the antiques business. We construct here an alarm clock that rouses the kitsch of the previous century to 'assembly.'"[284]

As they did for Benjamin and Duras, the two impulses collide in the mind and

282 Elias Canetti, "Dr. Hachiya's Diary of Hiroshima" *The Conscience of Words*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Harpercollins, 1979), 185.

283 Benjamin, "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," in *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2006), 54.

284 Ibid, 204.

activities of Dr. Hachiya. Making his way through the ruins, "the mines of the town," he occasionally hunts for treasure, bent on the collection of what may be salvaged, but on certain days, his intentions lie elsewhere, as goes looking for and encounters precisely what cannot be found in the wreckage but what the wreckage nonetheless makes available by way of an allegory:

> I went out to worship, beginning in the neighborhood. I stopped first at the gate of the Sasaki home and prayed for the repose of Mrs. Sasaki's soul. Closing my eyes, I could almost see her standing here with a smile on her face. 'Hachiya-san, where are Shuchan and Yaeko-san?' She seemed to ask for my son and wife. I opened my eyes and she was no longer there. I closed them again and she reappeared. It seemed I could see her although we were living in different worlds. I had been fond of Mrs. Sasaki, and I closed my eyes and talked with her for some time. I then prayed for two neighbors who were killed in their offices near the center of town and returned to the hospital.[285]

A moving secondary gloss on this passage, which links acts of allegorical interpretation to the collection of remnants at ground-zero, is supplied by the modernist novelist Elias Canetti:

> He closes his eyes to see a neighbor who has perished, and she appears to him. The instant he opens his eyes, the image vanishes, he closes them again and she reappears. He seeks his way through the remnants of the city, and one cannot say that he is wandering, for he know exactly what he is looking for and he

285 Hachiya, *Hiroshima Diary*, 216.

finds it: the places of the dead. He spares himself nothing. He pictures everything. He says he is praying for everybody.[286]

Hachiya provides a powerful response to the question of what can be seen and what is obscured in Hiroshima's ruins. His diary also demonstrates the extent to which this overarching visual and visionary thematic is derivative of the event itself. In the days after the bombing, he writes:

> The night had been close with many mosquitoes. Consequently, I slept poorly and had a frightful dream. It seems I was in Tokyo after the great earthquake and around me were decomposing bodies heaped in piles, all of whom were looking right at me. I saw an eye sitting on the palm of a girl's hand. Suddenly it turned and leaped into the sky and then came flying back towards me, so that, looking up, I could see a great bare eyeball, bigger than life, hovering over my head, staring point blank at me. I was powerless to move. I awakened short of breath and with my heart pounding. I must have held my breath during this horrible dream. The story about the man at the Hijiyama first-aid station who held the eye in his hand had been a little too much.[287]

Clayton Eshelman, an American poet and translator writing many years later, sublates this (now iconic) image when he associates it with the final compressive moment of a chain-reaction induced by the first plutonium bomb, which blasts a hole in the

286 Canetti, "Dr. Hachiya's Diary," 191.

287 Hachiya, *Hiroshima Diary*, 114-5.

continuum of history, dividing time in two and penetrating the unconscious of all those creatures living in its wake:

> The ikonic [sic] image of the twentieth century—the Hiroshima man standing in the aftermath of the explosion, naked, holding out one of his eyeballs before him in his palm—is underscored by Richard Rhodes' remark (in *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*) that at the moment the bomb exploded the plutonium core had been squeezed into an "eyeball." Might not the Hiroshima man's "offering" be the appropriate communion wafer for that Incarnational giant who, after dividing time into before and after, ascended 1989 years later in a blast of resurrection that has now penetrated every creature's shadow?[288]

In not attempting to avoid but in pressing through our melancholia and our inauthentic representations, we may see in the photographic stills of Hiroshima's ruination the same vision—revelation through annihilation—that seized upon the actress. *Hiroshima mon amour* shows us that it is still possible to live up to the event, rather than simply lamenting what happened, but it also leaves us with the haunting question: are we too late?

288 Clayton Eshleman, *Hotel Cro-Magnon* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1989), 11.

Conclusion: The Jonah Paradox

One should not say that I am better than Jonah.

—attributed to the Prophet Muhammad by Sahih al-Bukhari, 4:55:608

In a 1980 interview, Michel Foucault, embracing a rare moment of candidness, spoke plainly about the purpose of his genealogical work: "What I am trying to do is provoke an interference between our reality and the knowledge of our past history. If I succeed, this will have real effects in our present history. My hope is that my books become true after they have been written—not before."[289] That is to say, before these effects materialized, his histories occupied an impossible position relative to "the games of truth" already underway, a place of non-knowledge well outside the conceptual bounds of the discourses under scrutiny.[290] His work, so he thought, could be acknowledged as true (recognizable as knowledge) *only after* it had displaced the epistemic regime which preceded it. This was the critical function of his Nietzschean genealogies, which could be read as merely descriptive without it. Günther Anders, another philosopher of history writing in a register of impossibility, hoped for the opposite effect—not books that come true after they are written but books which

289 Michel Foucault, *Foucault Live*: *Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*, ed. Sylvere Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), 301.

290 Ibid, 445: "The word 'game' can lead you astray: when I say 'game,' I mean a set of rules by which truth is produced. It is not a game in the sense of an amusement; it is a set of procedures that lead to a certain result, which on the basis of its principles and rules of procedure, may be considered valid or invalid, winning or losing."

succeed as truth only by *proving themselves false*:

> I have published these words in order to prevent them from becoming true. If we do not stubbornly keep in mind the strong probability of the disaster, and if we do not act accordingly, we will be unable to find a way out. There is nothing more frightful than to be right.—And 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."[291]

Both formulations are obviously paradoxical. In order for Foucault to be right, it must appear as though he is wrong at the time of publication, and in order for Anders to realize his intention, what is apparently true now—the inevitably of nuclear omnicide —will later be denounced as illusory.

Anders's philosophical writings, in the years after 1945, wavered impossibly between the telling of a cautionary tale and the pronouncement of a death sentence. Addressing the apparent contradiction in his own work, Foucault said of himself that "I am not merely a historian. I am not a novelist. What I do is a kind of historical fiction."[292] He conceded: "In a sense I know very well that what I say is not true. A

291 Anders, "Theses," 505.

292 Foucault, *Foucault Live,* 301.

[more conventional] historian could say of what I've said, "That's not true."[293] Anders was similarly dedicated to the widening of his readers' imaginations. He was no mere philosopher, content with just speculating on the world of atomic bombs. Ridding the world of the menace of nuclear war was the work of his lifetime, and his academic works represent only a portion of that effort. An existentially committed disarmament activist, he sought to alter the course of world history that those bombs plotted. He reminds us time and again in his writings that he sought this every day, in every action he undertook, with every breath he drew. So should we, he said. No, Anders was no mere philosopher, nor did he claim to be a prophet, but he was the author of a prophetic philosophy that tried, in its way, to render the invisible visible and thereby spare humanity the fate that ends in cataclysmic nuclear war.

If only he could convince humanity that it was terminally ill, that its world was soon coming to an end, then it may somehow, hope against hope, recover—or the same logic reversed: if humanity believes itself to be totally rid of the nuclear affliction, it has unwittingly exposed itself to annihilation without remainder. For John-Pierre

293 Ibid.

Dupuy, this aspect of Anders's thought is

> typical of a whole series of paradoxes to which I have given the fine name of Jonah—in reference not only to the twentieth-century German Philosopher Hans Jonas, but also to his predecessor in the eighth century BCE, the biblical prophet Jonah. Both were faced with the same dilemma, the very one that confronts every prophet of doom: he must foretell an impending catastrophe as though it belonged to an ineluctable future, but with the purpose of ensuring that, as a result of his doing just this, the catastrophe will not occur.[294]

Jonas and Anders knew each other well. Jonas, who also studied with Husserl and Heidegger, introduced Anders to his first wife, Hannah Arendt. One of his books, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, in its call to rise up against the forms of technology that jeopardize the future of our species, affirmed many of the positions previously staked by Anders; it also afforded Jonas the opportunity to speak in a manner worthy of his namesake.[295] And prior to that, Jonas published a seminal work on the subject of gnostic spirituality.[296] The combined weight of his double entendre allows Dupuy to emphasize

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294 Dupuy, *Mark of the Sacred*, 191. DeBevoise, the translator, provides the following note on the quoted passage: "'Jonas' is the French spelling of the biblical name Jonah."

295 Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

296 Ibid, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God & The Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958).

the importance of reading Anders in a more theological than philosophical context.

That said, Anders was well aware of the deep theological resonances in his project. Dupuy goes on to quote him (self-reflexively) retelling the Old Testament story of Noah and the deluge: "Noah had grown tired of being a prophet of doom, forever announcing a catastrophe that never came and that no one took seriously. One day

> he 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 a small crowd of curious people had gathered around him. They asked him questions. They 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 full height and said these words: "The day after tomorrow, the flood will be something that will have 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 his workshop. That evening a carpenter

> knocked on his door and said to him: "Let me help you build the 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."[297]

Here, Dupuy sees Anders bringing the peculiar logic of the Jonah paradox to the fore. Indeed, his powerful line—"I have published these words in order to prevent them from becoming true"—is clearly derivative of "Let me help you build the ark, *so that it may become false*." What could be mistaken for a performative contradiction in secular terms is revealed in this story to be bound to the non-linear and infinitely dense temporality of prophecy, which requires paradox (fates *and* accidents) and multiplicity (time *within* time). As the *Bhagavad Gita* spoke for Oppenheimer, so too did the book of *Genesis,* through the voice of Noah, speak here for Anders. Everything he hoped for lay in the ideal reactions of the carpenter and roofer: sharing in Noah's prophetic vision served as the call to work, to help "reverse time." Delivering his message required the re-ordering of temporality; if Noah had adhered to a linear variant of secular time, he would always be *speaking too soon until it was too late*.

As another builder in this tradition, Dupuy provides a rare re-introduction to

297 Dupuy, *Mark of the Sacred,* 203-4.

the little known work of Günther Anders, recycling many of his principal arguments and layering in a mass of necessary clarifications, but he is also trying to augment that corpus, constructing his own theoretical addition. His opening move, establishing a theological context for the nuclear epoch, allows Dupuy to address the temporal orders at work in the Jonah paradox which disorient the secular mind. Prophetic figures like Anders, Noah, and Jonah are not simply fatalistic, in the conventional sense, though they are insistent upon a certain reading of fate. He writes:

> the Jonah paradox . . . is subject to the following constraint: the prospect of catastrophe, if it is to be credible, must be made to fully exist in the future, so that the suffering and the deaths foretold will be believed to be inevitable, the inexorable result of something like fate. The present conserves the memory of it, so to speak, allowing the mind to project itself into the aftermath of the catastrophe and treat the event in the future perfect sense.[298]

They speak of what will have happened tomorrow (unless we undergo a metamorphosis today). It must be true that nuclear will occur, that the city of Ninevah will fall, that the great deluge will drown all life, otherwise there would be no sufficiently pressing need to sever ties with the bygone world and submit to the difficult process of conversion that entering another world would require. If the doomed

298 Ibid, 204.

outcome is inevitable (as the secular cynic may point out), then why sound the alarm? This is where the Jonah story differs from Noah's in its essential warning to the prophet who would consider abandoning his post. The lesson is not that the whale returned him to the city so he could complete the task of saving it from destruction, as Noah saved the occupants of the arc, but rather that the prophet cannot retreat, *no matter what*. The whale (orcus, another reference point for Blake's Orc) symbolizes the prophet's obligation to intervene, to speak his vision in spite of (not fleeing from) impossible odds.

After Jonah emerges from the belly of the whale and returns to Ninevah's shores, the question which greets him is, "How, then, can one prophesy a future one does not wish for, *so that* it will not occur?"[299] Dupuy responds on Jonah's behalf by elaborating on the paradoxical co-existence of fates and accidents, which is for him the dialectical key to the enigma of the Jonah paradox. He goes on to suggest that this an ancient solution to an equally ancient problem, one that literature has grappled with throughout the ages:

299 Ibid, 192.

> The key to the enigma is found in the dialectic of fate and accident that forms the core of existential deterrence, in regarding nuclear [war] as something that is *at once necessary and improbable*. But is there anything new about this idea? Its kinship with tragedy, classical or modern, is readily seen. Consider Oedipus, who kills his father at the fatal crossroads, or Camus's "stranger," Mersault, who kills the Arab under the blazing sun in Algiers—these events appear to the Mediterranean mind both as accidents and as acts of fate, in which *chance and destiny are merged and become one*.[300]

Further reflection on the accident–fate dialectic yields this reference to Jacques Derrida's concept of the *supplement*:

> Accident, which points to chance, is the opposite of fate, which points to necessity; but without this opposite, fate cannot be realized. A follower of Derrida would say that accident is the *supplement* of fate, in the sense that it is both its contrary and the condition of its occurring. What complicates the present case is that the fate is one we absolutely do not wish for ourselves, one that we must try as far as possible to distance ourselves from. Accident, as both an instrument of fate and its negation, gives us the means to do this.[301]

Dupuy goes on to show how the same dialectic of inevitability and contingency is re-appropriated in deterrence theory, which proceeds "as though the bomb protected us

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300 Ibid.

301 Ibid. And earlier in the prologue, on p. 17: "in many mythic accounts, fate implacably unwinds until the moment of final catastrophe is reached, but in order for it to be fulfilled an accident must occur. The accident is not the same as fate; indeed, in a sense, it is its opposite. But it is the indispensable instrument of fate—a *supplement* of fate, in the sense that Derrida gives this term. The effectiveness of nuclear deterrence, for example, is a consequence of rational reliance on a paradoxical account of this type."

from the bomb—an astonishing paradox."[302] Consider, to use another example, the idea of nuclear custodianship and the looming threat of accidents. In the event of the accident happening, two scenarios would be equally valid, that our custodial efforts keep the accident from happening and if it does for whatever reason occur, this is the pure play of chance and not intentionality, as accidents do sometimes happen, no matter how hard we try to prevent them. The reverse is also true, that the lack of the accident happening had nothing to do with the measures taken to keep it from happening and that this is what the nuclear accident exposes. Accidents (especially the idea of an accidental nuclear war), are integral, not exceptional, to the systems designed to prevent them. The insight circles back to the beginning of the dissertation and its asking whether the nuclear non-event is owed to either dumb luck or hard work.

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302 Ibid, 16. He later explains on p. 190: "First: the threat of retaliation is not credible: if deterrence were to fail, such a threat would never be carried out out. Second, perfectly effective deterrence would be self-negating: the deterred party could never be sure that the deterring party really means to carry out his threat of retaliation if deterrence were to fail. This paradox can be escaped only if the reality of the nuclear apocalypse is made a part of our future, as it were, so that it is apprehended as fate or destiny. It may seem surprising to find these words in the writings of existential deterrence theorists, who think of themselves as "rational" thinkers and hard-headed strategists. But a moment's reflection will make it clear that their own argument is no sooner stated than it is swallowed up by the abyss of self-refutation: the condition under which deterrence is effective—that we regard nuclear apocalypse [sic] as our fate—contradicts the very purpose of deterrence, namely, to ensure that nuclear apocalypse [sic] does *not* take place."

Perhaps the answer, following Derrida, is that the distinction between the two is undecidable.

The real power of Dupuy's analysis is in his discussion of the main theme of the dissertation's introduction, namely the idea of the sacred, via the work of Sigmund Freud and René Girard, as it relates to the nuclear epoch:

> It used to be said of the atomic bomb, especially during the years of the Cold War, that it was our new sacrament. Very few among those who were given to saying this sort of thing saw it as anything more than a vague metaphor. But in fact there is a very precise sense in which nuclear apocalypse [sic] can be said to bear the same relation to strategic thought that the sacrificial crisis, in René Girard's mimetic theory, bears to the human sciences: it is the absent—yet radiant—center from which all things emerge; or perhaps, to change the image, a black—and therefore invisible—hole whose existence may nonetheless be detected by the immense attraction that it exerts on all the objects around it.[303]

What Dupuy fails to understand, however, is that this is not a *similar relation* (resembling an originary act of sacrificial violence which structures a regulatory taboo), it is the *same story*: Girard's theory is literally not just figuratively connected to the nuclear epoch. After a brisk survey of the historical literature on the decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan, he arrives at the following conclusion: "Why was the bomb

303 Ibid, 175.

used? Because it *existed*. The simple fact of its existence is a threat, or rather a promise that it will be used."[304] Wrong. The Americans *wanted* to drop the bomb, and they had prophetic beliefs which acted in concert with that desire; their decision was not passive but active. Faced with a closing window of wartime opportunity, the only issue under consideration was whether the atomic explosion would occur in battle or in the controlled, non-lethal environment of a virtual demonstration.

The Manhattan Project sought revelatory annihilation, and the incineration of two Japanese cities was understood to be the price that it had to pay for the desired miracle to occur. The Project's holocaust was supposed to end the reign of war by triggering an apocalypse of world-historical proportions, an explosion of human potential so miraculous that it would even transcend the constraints of the sacred. Orc unbound: humanity would no longer be required to spill blood in order to purchase its taboo against murder. Revelation was what Oppenheimer, Stimson, and Truman really wanted, and deterrence (a form of the taboo) is what they actually got. Desire with prophetic intent—this is what Dupuy and Anders fail to grasp about the nuclear epoch

304 Ibid, 184.

and themselves. The doomed world-historical situation which they invoke the language of the Old Testament to condemn was engineered by the Project; our fall into this fate was not a tragic accident. The very revelation sparked by the bomb that induced their subjectivation was similarly engineered—not spontaneous at all but methodically crafted, planned, and to some extent, scripted.[305] From someone like Oppenheimer's perspective, the real mystery is not how could such a person (subjectivated the atomic bombings of 1945) could exist but why there should be so few? As an individual, Anders experienced the transfiguration of subjectivity that the Manhattan Project expected to be universal. None of this is to say that Anders or Dupuy were wrong in the conclusions they ultimately extrapolated, only that they were more right than they knew.

The story of the Manhattan Project told in "Burn, and Make Me New" marks

305 Reading Dupuy's subject position as a product of Oppenheimer's vision puts a much more intimate gloss on the passage Dupuy quotes from a story written by Jorge Luis Borges: "Why does it make us uneasy to know that the map is within the map and the thousand and one nights are within the book of *A Thousand and One Nights*? Why does it disquiet us to know that Don Quixote is a reader of the *Quixote* and Hamlet is a spectator of *Hamlet*? I believe I have found the answer: those inversions suggest that if the characters in the story can be readers or spectators, then we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious. In 1833 Carlyle observed that universal history is an infinite sacred book that all men write and read and try to understand, in which they too are written."

one of the points at which the dissertation breaks away from the Jonah paradox exemplified by Anders and moves toward Foucault's example, no longer articulating a vision of history that hopes it will be someday be proved false but one that can only be accepted as true after it displaces popular myth, as it presents ideas that must be excluded if the nuclear epoch is to cohere. Relative to the contemporary "[war] games of truth," that chapter presents an impossible version of events, not because the story is inaccurate but because if it were to be accepted as true, deterrence, which requires an unflinching confidence in the universality of rational self-interest, would begin to crumble. The impulse to develop the atomic bomb and the decision to drop it cannot be reduced to strategic necessity or the passions of revenge. Such an insight into who we were at that time must by implication destabilize our faith in the account of human desire coded into deterrence theory. It is of course not a coincidence that the Manhattan Project continues to be thought of exclusively in these terms. It may be that averting a fate is just as much about revealing a hidden past as it is a matter of articulating a vision of future doom. At least in this case, the work of the philosopher, like Foucault, who authors historical fiction is indissociable from the prophetic

ambitions of someone like Anders. Neither of them claim to be inventing anything. Their creativity is in finding ways to make the invisible visible, displaying what was already there, hidden, not concocting something from scratch.

Anders never strayed from his belief that the old logic of the infernal return in the new situation of the nuclear epoch meant that we must remain constantly vigilant, never trying to squirm out of the paradox through the belief that we have done enough to put the omnicidal nuclear threat in the past. We endure on the condition that we accept the inevitability of our mass death should we let down our guard. In the final analysis, the best that can be hoped for in these hopeless times is *postponement*. As discussed in the previous chapter on infernal recurrence, Anders was someone who believed that

> although at any moment The Time of the End could turn into The End of Time, we must do everything in our power to make The End Time endless. Since we believe in the possibility of The End of Time, we are Apocalyptics [sic], but since we fight against this man-made Apocalypse, we are—and this had never existed before—Anti-Apocalyptics.[306]

In this instance, his misreading of the term *apocalypse* is noteworthy. Among those

306 Anders, "Theses," 494.

faithful to the idea that nuclear war changed everything and that fire to end all fires is inevitable, there is a clear dividing line that separates believers in postponement—the endless deferral of the nuclear epoch—from those who seek its immediate transformation. Anders called us to struggle for more time, which is altogether different from the call for another world issued by H.G. Wells and his disciples on the Manhattan Project. One camp calls for diversionary tactics in the time that remains, while the other races against the clock, declaring time is up—conversion was needed yesterday.

A generous reading would allow for the possibility that this could be the performative expression of the Jonah paradox. In order for conversion to occur, the idea of its impossibility must be imposed as a necessary threshold. Perhaps he propagated disbelief in an effort to make conditions more ripe for leaps of faith. Perhaps this is his way of donning the sack-cloth and covering his face in ash, a theatrical ploy meant to jolt his readers and audiences into a more serious contemplation of the nuclear peril. Armed with an unprecedented vision, Noah nonetheless cloaked himself in the old customs. Once the crowd had been lured by his familiar costume, he told them of his vision, speaking of things that challenged their understanding of the known world in

a way they could understand. Extending the same generosity to Dupuy, one could similarly explain his flagrant misuse of the term *apocalypse*, which he quite obviously understands.[307] He invokes an "apocalyptic tone" because he wants to encourage his readers to think in terms of Biblical prophecy. The allusion to Jonah is a substantive addition to his very deliberate stylistic emphasis on the language of the Bible. But one should beware the indulgence of bad faith: this argument would also allow for deterrence theorists to confess the critique while defending the bomb: yes, they say, we understand its smoke and mirrors but they work so long as we do not out them as nothing more than smoke and mirrors. Counter-narratives (true or not) would only risk eroding confidence in the deterrence apparatus, which is deeply problematic for a system of security that runs on a belief in its own intrinsic necessity and efficacy. The simple rejoinder: if one accepts that our present fate is suicidal, nothing can be ruled out as a potential means of averting it, even something that seems equally suicidal but at least presents a marginal chance for humanity to live on. Any action that hinted at even

307 Dupuy, *Mark of the Sacred*, 23: "I believe that the present crisis is apocalyptic, in the etymological sense of the word: it *reveals* to us something fundamental about the human world. And this revelation, like the apocalypses of the Bible, from the seventh chapter of the book of Daniel to the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and the book of revelation by John of Patmos, bears upon the violence of human beings. The violence of human beings, not God."

a miniscule chance of success would be preferable to the sure death that will result from inaction.

If, on the contrary, Anders and Dupuy are taken at their word, one begins to see very clearly the ways in which they are not like Jonah, who called for conversion, the traversal of worlds, not a postponement of their destruction. Their cynicism places an artificial cap on the force of revelation, which Jonah must believe he can unleash in its full splendor if he is to prophesy to people of Ninevah in good faith. This split between Jonah and Anders returns us to fundamentals of the Einstein–Freud correspondence. Their question restated: "Is there any way of delivering mankind from the menace of [nuclear] war?" Anders put no faith in the miracle of conversion, which even Freud held out hope for. He also counseled diversion as a pragmatic hedge, but Freud, like Nobel, Einstein, and Oppenheimer believed that the dread produced by the anticipation of future [nuclear] war could produce a global conversion to pacifism. He believed in the possibility of revelatory annihilation, though he was not personally under its sway. Dupuy and Anders, on the opposite end, are the obvious products of this form of revelation, though they do not truly believe in its potential to transform

others in the same way.

And yet, even if we do believe that their conversion could be universalized, we cannot simply wait in the nuclear epoch for the miracle to come. The expectation of conversion without effort will have to be replaced with vigorous work, says Anders; even if that work incurs endless frustration, we must remain vigilant: "Time and again our efforts . . . will be frustrated. It is even possible that our efforts will make no progress whatsoever."[308] He continues, "But even this failure should not intimidate us; repeated frustration does not refute the need for repeating the effort. On the on the contrary, every new failure bears fruit, for it makes us vigilant . . ."[309] Dupuy would have us walk the dialectical tight-rope strung over the pitfalls of fate and accident, existential deterrence and the Jonah paradox:

> If we reject the Kingdom—that is, if violence is not universally and categorically renounced—all that is left to us is a game of immense hazard and jeopardy that amounts to constantly playing with fire: we cannot risk coming too close, lest we perish in a nuclear holocaust (this is the principal of existential deterrence) nor can we risk standing too far away, lest we forget the danger of nuclear weapons (this is the Jonah paradox). We must neither believe too much

308 Anders, "Theses," 498.

309 Ibid.

> in fate nor refuse too much to believe in it. We must, that is, believe in fate exactly as one believes in a work of fiction. In principle, the dialectic of fate and chance permits us to keep just the right distance from the black hole of catastrophe: since apocalypse [sic] is our fate, we are bound to remain tied to it; but since an accident has to take place in order for our destiny to be fulfilled, we are kept apart from it. Notice that the logical structure of this dialectic is exactly the same as that of the sacred in its primitive form, as elucidated by Girard.[310]

Humanity must only strike the balance between standing too close or too far away from the fire because it has rejected the Kingdom. What Dupuy and Anders fail to understand, but what is immediately available to the nameless woman from Nevers in *Hiroshima mon amour*, is that one need not reject the Kingdom. Even in the distant aftermath of the event, the experience of revelation remains possible.

And thus we arrive at last and most significant of the dissertation's many questions—the question of questions: in the nuclear epoch, is the time of prophecy over or ongoing? The theological context built up by Dupuy neglects to mention Islam, which is, in some of its manifestations, an Abrahamic faith centered on visions, hierophanies, not sacraments, especially not blood sacrifices (like those at Hiroshima and Nagasaki). The link between philosophy and prophecy (as in direct revelation, full

310 Dupuy, *Mark of the Sacred*, 193.

of apocalypse) is at home in the intellectual traditions of Islam, according to Henry Corbin: "One of the striking characteristics of Shi'ite philosophy in Iran has been the insistence on the common vocation of the philosopher and prophet."[311] He goes on to explain that the "prophet is not someone who predicts the future. He is the one who utters the language of the invisible. In order that the Sages should appear like the successors of the prophets their philosophy must in its essence be a prophetic philosophy."[312] The Prophet Muhammad insists on his equal footing with Jonah when he gently rebuked a host showering him with praise, "One should not say that I am better than Jonah." Or, as Moses put it in the book of Numbers, upon hearing that Medad and Eldad had begun to prophesy in the exodus encampment at Taberah: "Would to God that all the Lord's people were prophets."[313] Throughout history the proclamation has been punishable by death: "Suhrawardi (not to be confused with the Sufi of the same name) is generally referred to by Orientalists as *almaqtil*, the "one

311 Henry Corbin, *The Concept of Comparative Philosophy: A Lecture to the Faculty of Letters, University of Tehran, December 1974*, trans. Peter Russell (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1981), 16-7.

312 Ibid, 17.

313 Numbers 11:29.

killed," because he was indeed executed in 1191 for having claimed allegedly that God can create prophets at any time."[314] There are those who believe themselves to be already saved and seek the postponement of the end-times, and those who believe that age of prophecy is still upon us and are this willing to risk everything for redemption. The two positions are fundamentally irreconcilable, as each side regards the other as a threat to its world.

Even today, to announce that prophetic time remains in world that others believe to be already saved—that there remains a moment in each day that Satan cannot find—still carries with it threats of danger and death. Blake alluded to these risks when he wrote in the margin of one of his books, that "To Defend the Bible in This Year 1798 Would Cost a Man His Life." He wrote this when England was orchestrating the first war on terror, stomping out the embers of Jacobinism that drifted north after the bloody and infernal Reign of Terror in France.[315] But now all of the violence risked by

314 Hermann Landolt, "Henry Corbin, 1903-1978: Between Philosophy and Orientalism" in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 119, No. 3 (July-September 1999), 485.

315 Blake often wore a red Phrygian cap, demonstrating his support for the Jacobin cause, as he walked the streets of London at that time. He would later be charged with sedition, under penalty of death, for totally unrelated reasons.

prophecy in its call to overturn a doomed world must be reconsidered relative to the atomic bomb having already risked everything. What then is the answer to the question of questions hazarded here? No, the age of prophecy is not over, and neither is the story of revelatory annihilation.

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