

Doomsday Speculation as a Strategy of Persuasion:

A Study of Apocalypticism as Rhetoric

The Rhetoric of Doomsday

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To the Memory of

Harold Jantz

Scholar and Teacher

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CHAPTER I

Conclusions in Lieu of Introduction

A Statement of Purpose

An accused has been asked, “When did you stop beating your wife?” His attorney will know enough to object in court and demand the “division of the question.” “Are you married?” “Are there occasions when you and your wife don't get along?” “On such occasions has either of you ever resorted to violence?” “Has it ever been you?” And so on. Few propositions are clean enough to be spared a “division of the question.” Most come bundled with presuppositions and special interests. In the far less rigorous forums of everyday public discourse one rarely gets the opportunity to demand the “division of the question.”

The following pages seek to “divide the question” in predictions of the imminent End of the (or a) World. This work argues that propositions concerning impending doom are, on three counts, not what they pretend to be. If they pretend to be assertions pure and simple, they deceive because they actually represent a means of coercion, a persuasive strategy to get others (or the world) to do something or stop doing something. They are, in this sense, a rhetoric. Secondly, propositions concerning impending doom misrepresent themselves by concealing their presuppositions. By making assertions about the imminent future, they are actually making assertions about all of the rest of time as well. The assertions, explicit and implicit, are bonded together in a logical context. Whenever any constituent part of the context is invoked, the entirety of the context is invoked as well. Thirdly, by presenting themselves as

applicable to the outside world, as objective, propositions concerning impending doom conceal the human subject, both the motivation of the human subject and the origins in subjective human experience of the patterns projected onto time and the world. This work argues, therefore, that predictions of the imminent End contain a rhetoric, a logic, and a psychology.

Doomsday as a Rhetorical Narrative

Speculation about the end of things seems to be about what it says it is about: the end of things-in-general. In fact, such speculation is about a great deal more than that. It speaks to the present and the past as much as it does the future. In so doing, such speculation sooner or later begins to resemble a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. This story differs from other stories in that it is about time itself: about not just any beginning, middle, and end, but rather about *the* beginning, *the* middle, and *the* end. The story is also about the storyteller, in a special and profound sense. And between these two, the story is about the storyteller's community, specifically about a community in crisis. The story affirms the worth of the storyteller's community, to spite the crisis, by repudiating the world insofar as the world is defined by present time and can be blamed for the crisis. The central importance of *time* in the story distinguishes it from other reproaches to the world at large, such as mystics, ascetics, or utopians might voice. The “now” in the “here and now” is the target.

Speculation about the end of things has a purpose, a goal. Chiefly it is to deal with crisis either by moving an audience to undertake some action to resolve the crisis in its favor or to persuade an audience of the insignificance of the crisis in the grand scheme of things, especially in view of what is yet to come. Speculation about the end of things is therefore a discourse of persuasion and, like all such forms of discourse, it employs a strategy of persuasion— “a rhetoric.”

The present study treats the great variety of speculations about the end of things as a rhetoric of a certain kind employed by a story of a

certain kind. In this attempt, it seeks to illustrate the insight of Kenelm Burridge that all evidence of such speculations and of the actions based upon them “comes to us as a story, as a narration of historical or quasi-historical events.”¹

The Rhetoric of Imminent Disaster

One of the purposes of a rhetoric is to catch and hold attention. Consider the uses of disaster. Disasters do occur, natural and man-made, seismic, meteorological, ecological, mechanical, personal, psychological, medical, social, political, economic. To predict that disasters will occur does not really qualify as prediction. Technologically advanced societies acknowledge this fact of life by organizing insurance companies, that is, by anticipating disasters and spreading their probable consequences across time and the populations likely to be touched by it. Disaster is tamed and made generic.

Yet to predict disaster is one of the most certain ways of catching and holding people's attention. It is commonplace to deplore the present state of affairs (“Ain't it awful?”) and to hint at consequential large-scale disaster (“This does not bode well,” or “I don't know where all of this is going to end”). To deplore the present state of affairs seems to entail an assumption of sincerity in favor of the proponent (“Why would anyone make up anything so terrible?”) and an intrinsic plausibility (“All we ever get on the news is disaster”).

Conversely, one of the surest ways of *losing* people's attention is to predict that the future will hold pretty much what the present or the recent past holds: more of the same. Saying so out loud lays no special claims on the audience, does not presume unusual sincerity on the part of the proponent, may suggest the opposite (“What does he know, that he isn't telling us?”), and may even offend plausibility by leaving out accident and the random (“How can you be so sure?”).

¹ Kenelm Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), pp. 12-13.

A certain self-interest is surely at work when such arguments are received. An audience does not need to be especially equipped to deal with business as usual. A catastrophe does require extraordinary measures and to be warned of it may well elicit gratitude on the part of those hearers who wish to be prepared. Others may consider the prospect of catastrophe a welcome diversion from humdrum routine. Some may imagine themselves as survivors, perhaps even as beneficiaries, of the catastrophe, and their enemies as its victims.

To threaten or predict disaster works rhetorically—in defiance of reason, experience, and good sense; to predict routine does not. “A catastrophe is coming, for sure!” Speculation about the end of things employs the threat of disaster as one stratagem of persuasion. There are others.

The Abominable Present World

Predictions for their own sake make almost no sense at all. They should, at the very least, enhance the stature of the person doing the predicting. They should also furnish a model for what the future might hold and thus provide some guide to planning. In that respect, they call upon the audience to engage in certain actions appropriate to the coming state of affairs and to engage in those actions posthaste. The more predictions depart from mere extensions of present conditions and the closer they approach a catastrophic rupture, the greater the demands on the audience and the present world.

The threat of catastrophe would seem to deal with the future. As is the case with all predictions, such a threat is a way of dealing with the present. In the face of impending catastrophe, certain qualities of the present are sacrificed, chiefly the autonomy of the present, the here and now, the world-as-it-is, the status quo. The claim of the present to be the sole frame of reality and, hence, the sole arbiter of what is important in human affairs, is surrendered.

Reflection upon the present may lead to a resigned acceptance of the present, while the worldly-wise may counsel that one comprehend the

present fully because, “the future unveils herself to the one who knows the present.”² But if the reflection becomes critical and qualitative, if the present is felt to differ from other time in that it is, in all respects, getting steadily worse, then Doomsday begins to take shape as the goal of history.

An audience may view the present as unsatisfactory and evaluate it somewhere between dreary and life-threatening. Such a public is likely to welcome the degradation of the present and the cancellation of its autonomy. An imminent catastrophe renders the unsatisfactory present unimportant and replaces it with a different present, one that is dependent on a future event to which the audience is privy. Paradoxically, the “here and now” is much enhanced by this dependence, but it is radically different from the experience by the “uninformed” who view the present as autonomous and authoritative. That radically different present becomes charged with purpose, a moment of anticipation, an instant before the final catastrophe, the focus of a spectacle. And its limits, origins, and outcomes are known for certain.

Perfect satisfaction with the here and now (“God's in His heaven, and all's right with the world”) probably is an exceptional state. Those dissatisfied with the world have in the threat of catastrophe an alternative that addresses the root of their dissatisfaction: a dependent, a non-autonomous present. The dimension of the coming catastrophe conforms to the magnitude of dissatisfaction, if, say, the very existence of the audience is under threat. Or the dimensions may exceed the dissatisfaction, if the grievances are minor. Consequences disproportionate to a minor dissatisfaction may be rationally implausible but can be emotionally gratifying. It is not difficult to shift sentiment from a particular grievance to a general dissatisfaction with the world. Such a shift justifies what might be a personal complaint and lends it general validity (“You see? It's not just me!”). The threat of catastrophe capital-

² “Der den Augenblick kennt, dem unverschleiert die Zukunft [sich],” Goethe in “Skizzen zur dritten Epistel,” 1.23, in *Werke*, herausgegeben im Auftrage der Großherzogin Sophie von Sachsen, 1. Abt., 5 (Weimar, 1910), p. 371.

izes on discontent with the world-as-it-is. The widespread appeal of speculation about the end of things-in-general rests in part on the same discontent. By appealing to disgruntlement, this devaluation of the present world, promising a revaluation of the present, becomes a stratagem of persuasion. After all, it promises a world to the audience's better liking.

Golden Ages Surround History

Paradigms for a perfect world have always to be “other” in time or place or both, if only because present time and place are imperfect. If present realities are defective, if there are imaginable alternatives which are not so, and if they are located in time, they must, of necessity, be found in the past or the future. In both cases these alternative times refer to the world-as-it-is. Nothing in them exists for its own sake or for any purpose other than to describe the world-as-it-is. The perfection they portray is the absence of the present world's imperfections, which had either not yet come to be or will have been corrected. The alternative times portray a perfection against which the world-as-it-is can be measured and must be found wanting.

The Golden Age of the Past

If the alternative time is located in the past, it carries with it the powerful authority of tradition, whether the tradition is “real” or invented. Why any “real” or invented past should wield authority is far from clear, but it certainly seems to do so. The authority of the past is orienting and reassuring. Should the proponent of a certain cause invoke the authority of the past in order to orient and reassure, it would be well for an opponent to find a competing past authority equally orienting and reassuring. To dismantle the proponent's past authority may be per-

ceived as right but is just as likely to be disorienting and to offend piety. Simply being right is rarely enough to persuade. It may, in fact, merely irritate, especially if “being right” offends tradition, or even just the principle of tradition, and seems to undermine the authority of the past. Invoking and affirming the authority of the past may carry a great deal more weight with a jury (or a public) than merely being right.

It might appear that the tactics just described apply chiefly to “conservative” argumentation. That is far from the case, if “conservative” means “maintaining the status quo.” To be sure, any status quo can be endowed with a past that will justify it. However, if the past in general and “origins” in particular are presented as authoritative and normative then the status quo is automatically exposed as having departed from the norm. Insofar as present realities can never measure up to past ideals, simply because realities by definition fall short of ideals, an appeal to an ideal past criticizes the present and repudiates the status quo.

This argument is not reserved to situations of crisis. Appeals to an ideal and authoritative past are routine, and they consistently reproach the present world. Nostalgia may seem, on the face of it, a tender, wistful sentiment. However, since the present will in no way measure up to the way things once were, nostalgia repudiates the world-as-it-is. A golden glow may hover about all memories of the past, so that the present is implicitly inferior. One particular event may be so sanctified in memory that any later imitation pales by comparison. In nostalgia, the past provides an escape from the demands of the present, cancels the importance of the present, and, indeed, ignores its autonomy and special claim on reality. Nostalgia, furthermore, carries a subjective authority so privileged as to be unassailable. If the object of the persuasion is to repudiate the world-as-it-is, nostalgia is a powerful weapon. The

persuader need only enlarge the scale of nostalgia from the personal to the universal—and maintain a link between the two.

The Golden Age of the Future

Nostalgia has a counterpart in the common experience of anticipation. Like nostalgia, anticipation has the capacity to propel its subject far from the present but in the opposite direction. The extent to which anticipation influences the present depends on the imminence, quality, and magnitude of the anticipated future. Any future in which all three are not particularly intense is unlikely to change one's habits. A remote prospect about which one has no strong feelings or which will alter one's life only in minor ways will not elicit any perceptible anticipation.

If any one of the factors is intensified, however, the situation is different. An imminent event about which one has no strong feelings and which will alter one's life only in minor ways will make a difference in the perception of the present.

The intensity of anticipation is increased, of course, if the other factors are intensified as well. An imminent and highly desirable event is likely to make a difference when contrasted with the absence of such a prospect. When such an event also promises wholly to change one's life for the better, it is proportionately more likely to transform everything about the way the present is perceived and transacted.

To the extent that any such prospect becomes real, an audience's hold on day-to-day reality is seriously threatened. Anyone who can make such a prospect real to an audience can extract from it almost any sacrifice.

The Golden Ages are One

The ideal times alternative to the present, whether the object of nostalgia or of anticipation, are indistinguishable one from the other. Common usage calls them by the same name, a “Golden Age,” thereby recognizing the fundamental identity of the two, even though they are “chronologically” at the opposite ends of time. The unity of alternative times, whether past or future, lies in a common reference point, the present, and a common purpose, the critique and devaluation of the present. Dissatisfaction with the world may lead to the fantasy of an idealized past and the concept of decay that accounts for the present. Intense dissatisfaction may lead to the vision of a coming catastrophe and the projection of an ideal future. The similarity between the two ideals is reducible to the attitude toward the present. If the attitude is critical, the alternatives, both past and future, will share an absence of the ills of the present and a fullness of the good missing in the present. The ideal future is, like the idealized past, an alter ego of the present. It is from the “hidden side” of the present that the idealized past and the idealized future emanate, and it is there that they meet and become indistinguishable from one another. Like predictions of disaster, the Golden Ages may pretend merely to describe but they mean actually to condemn and therein to persuade and are thus stratagems of persuasion.

The Fall

The logic of Doomsday speculation expects reasons for the forthcoming disaster. Reasons are what give the disaster meaning. The reasons may appear to be in the present: the way things are going, the only outcome is disaster. But the logic's evaluation of the present is so negative as to preclude endowing the present with so much importance.

The denial of autonomy for the present requires that the reasons for the wretchedness of the world be sought and found elsewhere. Given the “chronological” nature of the system, its hypersensitivity to time, the ultimate cause of the forthcoming disaster has to be situated in the past. The past certainly cannot be the one which is the object of nostalgia. It must be a past that intervenes between that object and the present. It must be an event of some magnitude, powerful enough to lead to the destruction of the ideal universe and thereby to the miserable present. The cause must be out of the reach of correction, lest someone get the notion that the miserable present can be improved by mere tinkering. And, finally, the definition of the event must indicate just what in the present generates dismay with the world-as-it-is.

In practice, appeals to this “intervening moment” are more generic (“I’m not sure what went wrong” or “where we went wrong”) and subtle (“It might have been that . . .”) than specific. Despite their indeterminacy, appeals to an “intervening moment” observe distinctive rules of expression. The character of such appeals is thereby revealed with as much certainty as by blatant assaults on the autonomy of the present. Appeals to the “intervening moment” explicitly or implicitly take the form: “if only . . . had not . . .” If only an event had not occurred; if only someone had not acted in a certain way. When directed toward any “other,” such appeals to the intervening moment act as a recrimination. The audience knows where the blame must be placed.

The very same construction can, however, just as easily become subjective: “If only I had not . . .” This is the syntactic form for remorse, which is surely as powerful a force as anticipation or nostalgia in repudiating the present and its claims. Remorse differs from nostalgia. While nostalgia reaches into the past to modify the present, remorse reaches *from* the past to transform the present and make it a dependency

of the past. In this respect remorse resembles anticipation, which reaches from the future to transform the present entirely and make it into a dependency.

Although recrimination can be satisfying, the effectiveness of an appeal to the “intervening moment” probably resides in the subjective counterpart to recrimination: self-recrimination, remorse. Insofar as speculation about the end of things argues by analogy to remorse it becomes, like other appeals to non-present time, a stratagem of persuasion.

The shifts from the personal scale to the social and cosmic scales provide the energy at the core of speculation about the end of things. It is a recurrent feature of the critique of the present to play fast and loose with scale, with proportion. It represents one of the most powerful weapons in the hands of the persuader. Since there is more than a little trickery involved, the arguments have been designated “stratagems.”

The Social Scale

The main business of social criticism is to deplore the present, not just in an access of bile, frustration, or despair—these, however, incline to be characteristic—but with a view toward reform. The view toward reform implies favorable alternatives to the present elsewhere in time. The transformation of the disagreeable present into an agreeable non-present demands a process of reform. Since processes are tied to passages of time, one of the alternatives lies in that non-present called the future or the hereafter.

The passage of time from the present is not merely a setting for the process of reform; the two, the passage of time and the process of reform, are identical. A force already in the present must reverse the process. That force must propel a sufficient and adequate process of

reform, commensurate with the present evil and its reckless momentum. The present evil is intolerable and growing. Why else inveigh against it? There is no point in protesting the present if it is improving and needs only time to grow to be perfect. To undo the worsening present evil, reform will have to be radical. The longer delayed, the more radical it will have to be. If delayed until the end of time, it will have to be total, resulting in a passage of time out of time, a return to the timelessness before creation.

The consciousness implicit in thinking twice about the present, finding it wanting, and growing angry about it, requires a construct against which to measure the present. If the present is considered bad and getting worse, its degeneration must have proceeded from a set of conditions less bad, not wanting, not an occasion for anger. That set of conditions becomes an entity distinct from the present. It lies well beyond the other end of the process of degeneration, hence in the distant past.

An abyss yawns. How is it that the distant past became the disagreeable present? If the primordial past had been that good, should it not have contained the power to preserve itself? Did it not instead contain the weaknesses that led to its own decay? If it was so flawed or intrinsically corruptible, it would have been like the present; and it was everything good that the present is not. Something must have happened, something mighty, something quite literally epoch-making, something sufficient and adequate to cause a degeneration in the human condition.

What was it? The traditions are inconsistent with one another. An easy answer would be “the Fall of Man.” The trouble with that answer is the disagreement as to what that Fall of Man meant or whether it took

place at all.³ Still, a Fall of some kind must be assumed. Yet neither Eve's gullibility nor Pandora's curiosity is sufficient to the host of miseries that constitutes the present. The failure of a divine test, as in the case of Adam and Eve, or divine malice, as in the case of Pandora, seems closer to an adequate explanation. But both of these explanations entail divine complicity. This leads to other problems apart from the rhetoric of Doomsday and related to theodicy, the question of evil in the world and of the deity's role in evil apart from time.

If the Fall is regarded as an attempt at usurpation of divine prerogative—to be as gods knowing good and evil as in Genesis, the theft of fire as in Hesiod, the assumption of royal powers as in the Sibyls—then a sufficient and adequate cause seems to be at hand: an overstepping of the proper order of things with its consequence the disruption of that order.

Some disorder seems to be the occasion for the end of the ideal past. But the demise of the golden past was long in coming, subtle, unnoticed, with any one sufficient and adequate cause difficult to detect. The deterioration of the ages seems to proceed without apparent reason, except in obedience to some ineluctable law of degeneration. In one of Hesiod's myths, humanity itself takes a turn for the worse and brings the age down with it. Discontent disrupted the order, and the troubles are self-inflicted. In other cases an innovation of some kind terminated the happy order and instigated the decline that resulted in the wretched present.

The innovation may have been technological (such as agriculture, mining, or city-building), political (such as the introduction of monarchy), social (such as gradation according to occupation), or economic (such as

³ Norman P. Williams, *The Ideas of the Fall and of Original Sin* (London and New York: Longman, Green, 1938), p. 11.

the introduction of private property, the shift to a money economy). Usurpation, decay, and innovation describe a diverse set of occurrences. They have, however, a clear common feature: Change.

If things were the way they ought to be, which is the way they used to be, then the present would be comprehensible and controllable. But it seems today that at every attempt to comprehend and control, something intervenes that was not there before, something alien to the old order, contradicting or ignoring it. The complaint in truth bemoans the inability to comprehend and control events, but it sings other tunes. One such is that lament over the disparity between the idealized past and the disagreeable present that imposes blame on a mythical scapegoat: if only Adam had not fallen; if only Prometheus had not stolen fire or Pandora not opened the jar; if only Ninus had not usurped monarchy. This activity consoles. First it finds an adequate cause for the present state of affairs and fixes responsibility far from the complaining subject. Then it makes no demands since the deeds cannot be undone nor the doers reached for punishment. This same helplessness may parade as unflinching certainty, as a dogmatic assertion of steady and relentless deterioration. Such a conviction is clearly less a reasoned attempt to grasp the workings of the present—is there ever a moment when all things from every point of view are getting only worse?—than a desperate attempt to impose some order, any order on the disorder of the present, to impose some predictability on the unpredictability of historic change.

Responses to the unpredictability of historic change include frustration and anger. They are ways of treating intolerable uncertainty. The reasonable—whatever that may be in a given culture—fails to explain events or to provide means for minimal predictability. This leads to a distrust of the reasonable and to the expedient of an unreasonable

alternative. The apparent irrationality of the historic drama is joined by the certain irrationality of the players. This irrationality manifests itself variously. Often there is an alien in the present on whom responsibility can be placed. Sometimes the alien is real and truly oppresses, but as often he is nothing more than an obvious victim of change, not an initiator of change.

Blame must be placed somewhere, either in the past (the Fall) or in the present (the oppressor). But these assignments of blame are poor substitutes. The real villain, though rarely named, is known. To be sure, those will be punished who profit from the disorderly present, and the instrument of correction—be it personal or impersonal, some Messiah or a revolution—will be the very apotheosis of change. Change opened up the abyss between then and now; change must close it. Change is summoned to the forthcoming correction as violent avenger to undo the damage—and thereafter to be banished forever from human affairs.

The Subjective Model

The “personal” scale to which the rhetoric of Doomsday appeals works on several levels. Disgruntlement, remorse, and anticipation reside on the levels of altogether ordinary, day-to-day experience. The rhetoric of Doomsday derives its remarkable persistence, in part, from the very ordinariness of these points of reference. There is, however, at least one other level remote from the day-to-day experience of most human beings. Extraordinary individuals in many times and many cultures report intense personal experiences which conform precisely to every stage of “history” as the rhetoric of Doomsday presumes “history” to be. The spiritual biographies of prophets and heroes tell again and again of primordial innocence, primordial innocence lost, ordeals undergone, disaster, even death, faced and withstood, followed upon by

regeneration happily ever after. It is the stuff of fairy tales and myths.

These two levels may join when real crisis occurs. The catastrophes of individual birth and death may be summoned to suggest the inner shell of Doomsday rhetoric, the Fall and the coming catastrophe. The experience of the *here and now* that comes with sudden pain or certain danger may be summoned to suggest the core of Doomsday rhetoric, the abominable present. The experience of youth in nature and the recollection of youth in human beings may be employed to suggest the first Golden Age. The last Golden Age applies to relief of crisis passed, a new beginning and all the happier associations of starting all over, free of the burdens of the past, “reborn” or “rejuvenated.”

Connections may inhere between these experiences and events. That is, relationships between them may be necessary because of some unifying “I”; on the other hand, such events may also be perceived as popping up in isolation one from the other. In either case, these experiences and events serve the rhetoric of Doomsday as points of reference: on their account no assertion made is wholly unfamiliar. In turn, the rhetoric of Doomsday serves these experiences by connecting them to the cosmic order.

The Symmetry of Time

Paradoxically, the rhetoric of Doomsday frequently employs the motif of disorder, of “the world turned upside down,”⁴ turned upside down to have gotten the way it is, turned upside down to be restored to the way it is supposed to be. But the rhetoric of Doomsday knows the way the world is supposed to be and neatly balances the turnings upside down. The result is a perfect, symmetrical construct precariously balanced on

⁴ Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideal During the English Revolution* (Viking Press: New York, 1972), pp. 22, 307.

the present moment in time, with catastrophes surrounding the present moment and Golden Ages surrounding the catastrophes.

Russell Frazer, who writes, “The end and the beginning are the same. The proclaiming of a millennial future differs only lexically from the invoking of a vanished Saturnian Age,”⁵ detects the fundamental symmetry in the rhetoric of Doomsday. The notion that primordial times and end times refer more than accidentally to one another has been known for ages and was given a compact formula, “Urzeit und Endzeit” (primordial time, end time), by Hermann Gunkel late in the last century.⁶ Eric Hoffer, addressing a different audience on the subject of mass movements, writes, “there is no more potent dwarfing of the present than by viewing it as a mere link between a glorious past and a glorious future.”⁷ Thereby he identifies the center of the symmetry, the present. Gershom Scholem describing the doctrine of redemption in Jewish mystical thought, observes “It is nothing but *tikkun*, the restoration of that great harmony which was shattered by the Breaking of the Vessels. . . .”⁸ The imminent messianic catastrophe that is to end history corresponds to a past cosmic catastrophe, “the Breaking of the Vessels,” which once, long ago, started the process that would permit history to begin. The catastrophic parentheses that enclose the present and isolate it from the surrounding golden ages complete the symmetry. That symmetry is at the essence of the rhetoric of Doomsday.

The symmetry of the system transforms unknown time into something known, and does so in a simple, orderly, universally under-

⁵ *The Dark Ages and the Age of Gold* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 7.

⁶ *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit: eine religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1895).

⁷ *The True Believer* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 69.

⁸ *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1965), p. 301.

standable manner. It provides a comprehensive and inclusive explanation of events. The terrors of uncertainty shrink into graspable certainties, and these in turn dictate definite and appropriate courses of action.

As important as the symmetry is—and there is nothing more important to an understanding of the rhetoric of Doomsday—it is imperfect. The rhetoric of Doomsday does not insert a mirror in the middle of history and insist that every future moment correspond precisely and in reverse order to every past moment. It does not stop the unraveling of history and ravel it back up again. On the contrary, history proceeds. But the process is neither an accidental nor a cumulative continuation of what has preceded. Rather, it is a response. The forthcoming catastrophe responds to the past catastrophe: it undoes its ancient counterpart and purifies the universe once and for all of even the possibility of a recurrence. The forthcoming Golden Age responds to the past Golden Age: it restores its ancient counterpart and in such a way as to preclude forever even the possibility of another degenerative process.

The Pragmatics of the Rhetoric of Doomsday

The system of belief underlying the rhetoric of Doomsday refers at some point to the world-as-it-is. This part of the system can be verified by experience, even if the rest is unverifiable. The system as a whole necessarily fails to meet normal tests of plausibility. It is repeatedly exposed as false, or “disconfirmed.” In view of the inevitable failure of the predictions, one would think that the whole question of Doomsday would sooner or later lose interest.

Nothing of the kind. Religious cults to this day revive the message in its totality, employing every element of its symmetry. They do so openly. Revolutionary political movements do the same with somewhat

less candor. Far more subtle, but far more pervasive, is the use to which the rhetoric of Doomsday is put in everyday discourse. It is one of the mightiest weapons in the whole arsenal of persuasion. The rhetoric of crisis, for example, depends for its pathos almost exclusively on the threat of Doomsday.

The threat of Doomsday raises the present out of the ordinary, demands or predicts as inevitable some imminent massive action to countervail the past wickedness that led to the present mess, and promises a much better time to come, such as once prevailed before the past wickedness took hold. Even in the far more muted tones of ordinary conversation, threatening an imminent catastrophe is enough to command the attention of listeners and raise the speaker to the status of prophet. All the better if the speaker can claim some inside knowledge, but it is not necessary. Confirmation in experience will enhance the prophet, but it also is far from necessary. The rhetoric of Doomsday is so familiar and, as it seems, so cherished that any employment of it will elicit, at the very least, recognition, and then, depending on circumstance, some sign of assent or, failing that, among a small minority, compensatory rejection. It is not likely to invite indifference: “no one possessing or claiming the gift of divination will ever lack for a following of some sort.”⁹

The underlying pattern appears to be so fixed and normative that it enjoys something approaching predictive value: if an utterance adheres to one element of the pattern, it is likely to adhere, implicitly or explicitly, to the other four; if it adheres to more than one element it is exponentially more likely to adhere to the remaining elements. Missing

⁹ E. M. Butler, *The Myth of the Magus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), p. 7.

parts can, with near certainty, be assumed as implicit in the argument. With opportunity these parts can be made explicit.

Consider the following imaginary dialogue: What do you think brought us to the present mess? Some wickedness. Were things better before? Yes, of course, because the present wickedness had not yet taken hold. Will things get better again? Yes, of course, but only when the wickedness is eliminated. When is that to happen? Soon, in a forthcoming catastrophe. This dialogue is imaginary because conversations do not routinely follow the logic of their object with such economy. The logic could nonetheless be drawn out of countless real conversations which deplore a present state of affairs and which confidently predict large-scale disaster.

The argument, with its confident prediction of disaster, is widespread and persistent. It makes assumptions of credibility that favor both the person of the proponent and the content of the prediction. How is that possible in the face of the common experience of disconfirmation? Since the tenacity and authority of the rhetoric of Doomsday cannot be explained by its accurate portrayal of events, an explanation must be sought elsewhere. A welter of deep and contradictory needs seems to underlie most expressions of the argument: a need for both order and predictability in the historical circumstance and an equal and opposite need for escape or just plain change. In a moment of great crisis—persecution, destruction, intolerable want—the rhetoric of Doomsday endows the moment with meaning, first by locating it in a grand scheme, and then by promising imminent surcease with stupendous rewards for endurance. Even in far less critical circumstances, the rhetoric of Doomsday gratifies similar needs, comprehensively for the oppressed, troubled, and disoriented, and intermittently for others.

Preventive Pessimism

A crisis, a drastic deterioration of present circumstance, may lend an expression of Doomsday pessimism especial authority and pertinence, but such a background is not in any way necessary or prerequisite for an expression of Doomsday pessimism to exist in the first place. These expressions occur in altogether ordinary circumstances, where the radical potential often conceals itself behind the apparently reasonable facade of preventive pessimism.

Doomsday pessimism looks at the world as it is and sees that good fortune is intermittent, that the day-to-day is monotonous and insecure, and that only suffering and death are certain. Another attitude might discover that bad fortune is also intermittent; that the monotony of the everyday holds security, and that its insecurity holds countless possibilities, some of them pleasing; and that suffering and death, however disagreeable, play an ultimately constructive part in the natural order. This attitude not only suggests Dr. Pangloss, it also tempts fate.

The same forces that compel the orator to begin his speech with humility, the hunter to belittle his skill and credit his success to luck, the merchant to complain about business, and the superstitious to knock on wood when an optimistic utterance has slipped out, those same forces also encourage professions of Doomsday pessimism. Two assumptions underlie such behavior: one, that the controlling powers—God, history, fate, public opinion—are interested and malicious; the other, that language and gesture affect the controlling powers. Let us call the powers fate. Fate is contrary and envious. Speaking aloud in a profane, unprotected environment, where fate can hear and intervene contrarily, is to invite trouble if the utterance is optimistic; but if pessimistic, it might trick fate into smiling, out of sheer contrariness. If that is too much to hope for, then a pessimistic evaluation of the present should at least placate fate

by assuring it that there is nothing to be envious about. Having thrown fate a sop one can go about one's secure and comfortable existence with somewhat greater confidence and in less fear of an irrational reversal.

The magical formula, "to hope for the best, but prepare for the worst," expresses this common form of day-to-day Doomsday expectation. It attempts to deceive malicious fate and deflect its attentions by placing tight restrictions on optimistic evaluations of the world, "cautious optimism," in modern parlance, and removing restrictions on pessimistic evaluations. Common Sense may respond, "things are never as bad as they seem," but that does nothing to alter or weaken the thrust of pessimistic evaluations and only invites the ritual counter-response, "no, they're worse," meant to ward off fate's evil eye. Preventive pessimism preserves a magical worldview. As such, it may be despised and called superstitious, but it is as likely to be respected, "Well, there's no sense in tempting fate."

The pessimistic utterance, "things are going to get a lot worse before they get any better," follows the lines of the rhetoric of Doomsday out of the immediate present into a better future. The utterance may not insist on a catastrophic solution to the present worsening, but such a solution is allowed for. The pessimism is directed toward the world as it is and as it is likely to be for the near future. The pessimism reverses itself and becomes optimistic for a period well past the present and that part of the future that can be clearly seen from the vantage point of the present. The optimism is reserved, then, for a non-present, a not-here-and-now, an alien circumstance.

Rival Systems

The rhetoric of Doomsday differs from other worldviews by making time orderly (not arbitrary), immanent (not transcendent), historical (not

exclusively present), social (not individual), linear (not cyclical), and closed (not open-ended). It imposes both order and meaning on history. Its dialectical opposite resides not among rival systems that also impose order and meaning but in radical skepticism of any kind, materialist or mystical. The course of events, as far as the rhetoric of Doomsday is concerned, is anything but arbitrary, nor is the design irretrievably hidden in the mind of God. History is knowable in its entirety, and every moment is significantly related to every other. The rhetoric of Doomsday is nothing less than a cosmology that unites the story of the universe with the history of human affairs.

The grandiose proportions may suggest that Doomsday speculation rests chiefly on the level of the cosmic and, by virtue of that remoteness, may transcend the everyday. In actual practice, the rhetoric of Doomsday has again and again transformed itself from an immanent to a transcendent worldview, one that places the totality of genuine and important events on another, non-terrestrial plane. The stubborn refusal of the world to end or of the Golden Age to descend upon it has caused countless proponents to postpone the events indefinitely, to some indeterminate and infinitely remote end of time, and apparently to cut the ties to day-to-day reality altogether. The outcome of that process should not be confused with its inception: just because Doomsday speculation eventually turns into some kind of transcendent belief system does not mean that it started out that way, that transcendence inheres in the system, or even that the transformation to a transcendent belief system is stable and irreversible. At the very least, this process points to the tenacity of the system: even disappointment and failure do not suffice to dishonor or dismantle it altogether. And the course of events may, at any moment, return the system from transcendence to immanence.

Immanence is characteristic of Doomsday speculation: it can always point to the miserable disorders of the present.

The consequences of a Doomsday outbreak—inevitable disappointment but also, possibly, great worldly success—regularly lead to a neutralization of Doomsday rhetoric, either by turning the argument inward and making it personal and purely spiritual or by indefinite postponement. Neither the internalization nor the postponement does anything to prejudice some other detonation or to alter the basic anatomy of Doomsday rhetoric. There seems to be widespread agreement that the rhetoric of Doomsday in its practical, usually radical manifestations erupts on a popular rather than an elite social level, and has its numerical strength among the underdogs and not among the established.¹⁰ That may or may not be entirely true. When it is true and when revolt fails or becomes too costly, or, on the contrary, when the ideology of the underdogs becomes established, then the problem arises, what to do with the dangerous or embarrassing vestiges of the ideological past. In such an environment the rhetoric of Doomsday is routinely neutralized. Judaism, Christianity, American Indian religions, and modern sectarian and revolutionary movements have witnessed the process again and again. Activist Doomsday rhetoric goes underground, and far less threatening versions consort with the most respectable prevailing ideas. This process accounts for many of the different levels and intensities of the rhetoric of Doomsday, behind which, however, the organizing principles persist. The present remains repulsive; only the past and the future hold indications of redemption; and they are catastrophically separated from the irredeemable here and now.

¹⁰ Vittorio Lanternari, *The Religions of the Oppressed*, trans. Lisa Sergio (New York: Knopf, 1963), p. 309.

The character of the present and its imminent consequences in the future are sensitive issues on which feelings run high. No one who is convinced of the deteriorating character of the present and the inevitable revolution or catastrophe to come will accept with complete equanimity the fact that these convictions are at least as old as civilization, probably older, and represent a flight into some primordial, common human reservoir of fear and hope. Even less is such a person likely to accept the assertion that these convictions are an unreasonable attempt to lend order to a confusion of data that would otherwise be wholly out of control. No one likes to be told one's thoughts are not one's own. But even the most stubbornly self-sufficient will admit with Mephisto (*Faust* II, 6806-10), only the rarest thoughts have not been thought before in some analogue, in some time or tongue. "Is there anything whereof it may be said, See this new? it hath been already of old time which was before us" (Eccles. 1.10), mused the Preacher; and when he did, the idea was no doubt already hoary and near cliché.

The Preacher set his musing in the famous lament on the vanity of human striving in the face of the unrelenting recurrences of nature, on the pitiable present-ness of man in the face of the enormity of time. "There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after" (1.11). There is only the pitiable present. All other time—the past, any future present, and beyond—is doomed to oblivion; and the present is doomed to become other time. On this account the Preacher recommends, "There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink and that he should enjoy good in his labor" (2.24). This sense of time lies with others at the foundations of Western culture. It expresses itself in the opulent tradition of *carpe diem*, seize the day, extending from the Preacher to literary existentialism. It is anti-

historical and profoundly individualistic. It shares this axis with its polar complement, mysticism, which seeks to escape time altogether by transcendence.¹¹

These anti-historical and individualistic attitudes toward time compete with others that are by contrast historical and social; some are optimistic toward the prospects of history, such as evolution or progressivism, others are ambivalent such as cyclical theories of history, and one is outstandingly pessimistic at least toward the prospects of present time. The rhetoric of Doomsday, like the “seize the day” traditions, springs from despair at the prospects of time, but the rhetoric of Doomsday does not conclude with an affirmation of the present as the *carpe diem* tradition does. It flees the day.

The rhetoric of Doomsday touches mysticism at this point, the compulsion to annihilate the present. But time is pressed to its linear conclusion in the rhetoric of Doomsday, and mysticism, by contrast, seeks to leap out of time altogether. The purview of the rhetoric of Doomsday is temporally horizontal; that of mysticism is temporally vertical.¹²

The rhetoric of Doomsday seeks consolation in those moments of time envisioned as opposed to the present: the remote past and the not-so-remote future. The rhetoric of Doomsday is historical in that it presupposes—contrary to the Preacher—that time is remembered, and that remembrance bears upon the present, normally as an abiding reproach. The rhetoric of Doomsday is social insofar as time becomes a setting for the conditions in which human beings live and act among one another. “The times are bad” or “out of joint.” These and like statements refer primarily to social conditions and secondarily to conditions in

¹¹ Walter Schmidhals, *Apokalyptik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973), p. 81.

¹² Schmidhals, *Apokalyptik*, p. 89.

nature. Furthermore, they imply that there were times not bad and not out of joint, and, more subtly, that good times will one day return. But they will not return merely as day follows night, just as the past did not deteriorate into the present by simple passage of time. Something happened to make the past into the present; and so something must happen to make the present into the future. The present becomes elongated to include the span of time between the good times or, more specifically, between the degeneration that made the disorderly present and the regeneration that will make the orderly future.

The importance of order in the rhetoric of Doomsday rests on the system's consistent and specific response to disorder. By itself the quality of orderliness, however, does little to distinguish the rhetoric of Doomsday from any other systematic treatment of time in speech: a cyclical system, for example, based on an analogy with the seasons also lends order to time. Doomsday speculation differs from cyclical systems in that it denies recurrence. The sequence of "history" is linear and unrecoverable. Doomsday speculation differs from other and rival temporal systems also by virtue of its simplicity: progressivism, for example, with its open-endedness, precludes any certainty as to the particular directions of "progress." This uncertainty maintains a potential for complexity that makes the system useless for firm knowledge of the future. By contrast, the rhetoric of Doomsday presumes a closed temporal universe, with history shaped into a work of art, a cosmic drama, a sublime comedy, proceeding certainly and inevitably toward a grand and happy conclusion.

History as Comedy

Drama inheres in the rhetoric of Doomsday. Heroes and villains populate its universe, struggle with one another, win and lose not just for

themselves but for their audience as well, and do so in the face of a greater, over-arching force, some manifestation of necessity as to the outcome, be that necessity “society,” “the culture,” “the gods,” “fate,” or “history.” However earnest the tone of Doomsday rhetoric and grandiose its compass, its view of history is not “tragic” in the Aristotelian or commonly applied sense of the term. The downfall of the hero is not required or occurs as an initiating complication, not as a resolution. The downfall of the villain (as individual, representation, or abstraction) *is* required, but that is the stuff of comedy.

Let comedy be defined as that form of drama which begins with an orderly universe, proceeds with complications that make it appear as though things will go badly (anastasis), turns the unhappy course of events around (climax) so that a happy resolution is in sight, worries the characters and the audience with a reversal (catastasis) or reversals that threaten the happy outcome, but concludes with general harmony. Given that definition, the rhetoric of Doomsday presents a comedic view of history. The rhetoric of Doomsday places the present just before the “catastasis” of the cosmic comedy, that last ordeal or reversal of good fortune before the happy resolution.

To associate Doomsday with comedy may seem at worst cynical and at best paradoxical, although Dante, for one, would not have thought so. A certain hilarity may accompany privileged knowledge about the outcome of important present events (“I know something you don't know”), but that is not where the association between Doomsday and comedy lies. The association is structural.

The story told by the rhetoric of Doomsday observes a chronological sequence in common with comedy, for that matter, in common with the spiritual biographies of prophets and heroes as well, and, perhaps not coincidentally, generally comparable to the tense system

of most Indo-European languages. The sequence appears to represent one of a small number of possible patterns applicable to the experience of time.

The Unity of the Rhetoric of Doomsday

The sequence, with its beginning, middle, and end, also represents a whole, a temporal and narrative unity. Actual expressions of the rhetoric of Doomsday, however, usually stress some features at the expense of others, while taking yet others for granted altogether. It is rare, though not unheard of, to find the entire temporal structure explicit in one single actual expression. Nonetheless, the absence of a feature in some expression of the rhetoric of Doomsday in no way threatens the integrity of the temporal and narrative unity or diminishes the importance of that which was left implicit. A declaration such as, “Things were once wonderful, and they're going to be wonderful again,” might, with the stated information alone, make sense in a vacuum as an assessment of a situation. In reality, such vacuums do not exist. The two assertions are implicitly linked by an ellipsis which contains at least one evaluation, “what a sorry mess things are in now,” and one exhortation, “and we're going to do something about it.” The ellipsis is what endows the original declaration with power. The message is, in fact, contained in the ellipsis. Its impact would be diluted by explicit articulation.

To analyze the rhetoric of Doomsday is, of course, very different from employing it. Analysis requires that the components and the relationships between them be made explicit and individually be given their due. Analysis may appear to do violence to the organic character of the system—surely it is greater than the sum of its parts—but actually, the fragmentary representation of an analysis conforms to the way the

system usually expresses itself in the world. Underlying the representation, the organic character of the rhetoric of Doomsday is, nonetheless, such that no dissection, however thorough, can genuinely separate the parts.

In defiance of this paradox, the following demonstration will present the elements of the rhetoric of Doomsday in their own temporal logic, beginning with the beginning.

CHAPTER II

The Primordial Golden Age

Primitivism

The primordial Golden Age expresses concretely that attitude toward time which Lovejoy and Boas called chronological primitivism. To the question, “Where is the good?” primitivism of this sort answers, “In the beginning.”¹ Lovejoy and Boas distinguish it from another kind, cultural primitivism, “the discontent of the civilized with civilization,” which, to the same question, “Where is the good?”, responds “Elsewhere” (*Primitivism*, p. 7). Both kinds of primitivism reject the present circumstance—be it temporal, geographical, social, or technological—and locate a preferable circumstance in another, simpler environment.

¹ A. O. Lovejoy and George Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity, A Documentary History of Primitivism and Related Ideas*, I [all published] (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1935), p. 1 [hereinafter *Primitivism*]. This volume and its successor by Boas, *Essays on Primitivism and related Ideas in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1948), remain the fundamental document collections. Harry Levin surveys the pertinent scholarship in *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), pp. xx-xxiii. Also consulted: Walter Veit, “Studien zur Geschichte des Topos der Goldenen Zeit von der Antike bis zum 18. Jahrhundert,” Diss. University of Cologne, 1961; M. G. Flaherty, “Money, Gold, and the Golden Age,” in David Daiches and Anthony Thorlby, eds., *Literature and Western Civilization* (London: Aldus Books, 1974); and Henry Kamen, “Golden Age, Iron Age: A Conflict of Concepts in the Renaissance,” *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 4 (1974): 135-55.

Lovejoy and Boas distinguish further between “hard” and “soft” primitivism, the “hard” preferring the simpler world because it demands more, the “soft” because it demands less than civilization, and both holding the actual present circumstance up to criticism by contrast.

According to Lovejoy and Boas, the long career of the Golden Age began at precisely that moment when some caveman, “if the cavemen were at all like their descendents . . . discoursed with contempt upon the cowardly effeminacy of living under shelter or upon the exasperating inconvenience of returning for food and sleep to the same place instead of being free to roam at large in the wide open spaces” (*Primitivism*, p. 7). The origins of the Golden Age are, in other words, shrouded in prehistoric antiquity or, if Freudians are to be believed, in the darkness of the amniotic waters where desire and fulfillment were, once, one and the same.² Wherever its origins lie, some notion of a Golden Age seems by common consent to be practically universal among the cultures of the world.³ This does not mean that all cultures are primitivistic all the time; it means merely that they all seem to provide for nostalgia when the occasion demands, and give that nostalgia an object to focus upon.⁴

The Golden Age as “Photo-positive”

The similarities across cultures between various descriptions of Golden Ages are altogether remarkable, although the differences probably reveal more. As to the similarities, the most divergent traditions depict a condition free of struggle or free of want or both, as

² Weston LaBarre, *The Ghost Dance: Origins of Religion* (New York: Dell, 1972), p. 95.

³ Paul Radin, *The World of Primitive Man* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1953), pp. 4-6.

⁴ Mircea Eliade, “Nostalgia for Paradise” (1957), in his *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), pp. 59-72.

things were supposed to have been at the beginning. At the one extreme, the beginning is absolute, before time, before the cosmos, when there was only God or nothing. At the other extreme are “the good old days,” which may be located in the not very long ago, but are considered, relative to the here and now, to be at or nearer the beginnings. In between these extremes lie the origins of the human race, the tribe, the nation, or the institution, say kingship or the church. This intermediate group has in common a notion of casual familiarity with the divinity or a surrogate. If these origins are imagined as lying at or near the beginnings of history, then other common features are added. Harmony with the divinity above extends to the animals below, a sign of human mastery of nature. An abundant and generous earth gratifies simple human needs, requiring no labor. The human race is free of pain and disease. Beauty suffuses human beings and their surroundings. The seasons, if there are any, shift gently. More often, there are no seasons at all, not even night, but only spring and day. Time has no dominion, so there is no aging and no death.

This summary attempts, as the traditions do, to depict the Golden Age in positive terms, to describe a desirable alternative to an unsatisfactory here and now. But the underlying thrust of the Golden Age remains negative. It is a negation of a negative. In consequence of this, descriptions of the Golden Age generally suffer from a ghostlike quality. They rarely achieve an artistic integrity of their own but depend rather on another structure. Their features refer far less to one another than to the present they are meant to rebuke.

The Golden Age as “Photo-negative”

The descriptions of the Golden Age take on the quality of a photo negative: although they have outline, detail, and apparent composition,

the system remains just a code for another system altogether. The retention of familiar composition with the displacement of significant features inclines variously toward the grotesque, fantastic, and ludicrous. It is close to the essence of caricature. In the traditions of the West, the Golden Age has had to compete with farcical extensions of itself from the earliest moments of its recorded history (*Primitivism*, pp. 38-41).

The flaws in the system, born of its dependence on its antithesis, no doubt invited some of the derision, but surely the major source lay in the myth's defiance of some of the deepest ideological presuppositions of western culture. A certain degree of asceticism and striving are, Weber notwithstanding, not exclusively Renaissance ideals but form the axis of social and personal life from the Greek *eris* (strife) or *agon* (contest) through the moral heroism of medieval religious life into modern industrial times. The struggle-free, want-free Golden Age was condemned from the very start to an ambivalent role. It could never provide a more than intermittent ideal, a wish-fulfilling fantasy, an emergency measure meant to help weather a crisis in the prevailing value system.⁵ This applies, with exceptions, to the whole pattern of the rhetoric of Doomsday. As widespread and influential as it may be, the rhetoric comes into its own chiefly in crisis, during a failure of present- and world-affirming assumptions to account for events.

The Extremist Position

A Prehistoric Golden Age

The rhetoric of Doomsday as a whole is best viewed this way, as an

⁵ Alfred Doren, "Wunschräume und Wunschzeiten," *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg, 1925/5* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1927), pp. 158-205, here 196-98; see also: Ludwig Edelstein, *The Idea of Progress in Classical Antiquity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), p. 9, note 17.

available argument in a reservoir of arguments, summonable at appropriate times, especially in response to crisis. It implies crisis whenever it is employed and draws much of its strength and plausibility from the extraordinary circumstance in which it is properly at home and seems best to work. Although there is something inherently extremist about the rhetoric of Doomsday, one should not identify it entirely with its most spectacular manifestations such as messianism and millenarianism. The rhetoric of Doomsday, although uniform and fixed in composition, appears in the observable world in many forms and varying intensities. As a means of organizing experience, charging it with importance, and moving others to action, the system is equally available to the cool social advocate and the ardent religious cultist, to the revolutionary and the momentarily dejected citizen wondering where it is all going to end. Not all expressions or permutations of Doomsday speculation need to push matters into the extreme. On the other hand, the extremes reveal the outline of Doomsday speculation with especial clarity, and it can be studied there with greater confidence.

There are some who seem to repudiate the world unconditionally, to transcend history thereby, and who so seem to escape any possible entanglement in anything as this-worldly as Doomsday. Their Golden Age is so remote as to retreat behind creation altogether. Yet, it turns out that they too have a present ridden with struggle and want, lurking in the shadows of their bright and changeless deity. They too envision a coming catastrophe and an end to history.

Gnostics

Recent and quite sensational finds at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt place at least some of these near nihilists, if they may so be named, in the midst of those who long for Doomsday. These discoveries

are demanding considerable reevaluation of the Gnostics, the sects that produced the documents in the first centuries A.D. and brought down on themselves the wrath of Christian, Jew, and pagan alike.⁶ Understanding of Gnostic doctrine was, before the find at Nag Hammadi, derived almost exclusively from the polemical literature of their enemies and from only a smattering of documents surviving from the sects themselves. That understanding was remarkably accurate, given the kind and quality of available information. In dispute and still obscure are the origins of the sect, though the find strongly suggests that one of the roots extends back to Jewish heretics and apostates wholly alienated by the diaspora.⁷ Largely unanticipated was the extent to which the sects were eschatological in outlook, that is, they seem impatiently to have been awaiting a historical savior, the End of Days, divine intervention in history, and the radical transformation of the world. What seemed until recently to have been a somewhat eccentric but recognizable form of mysticism, a religion of transcendence, turns out to have had a thoroughly radical component, like other radical religious manifestations of those times, Essenes and Christians.

“The Gospel of the Truth” begins with a story of the search by “the all” for its source, “from whom it had come forth.” But the all was “inside

⁶ For a popular and thoroughly readable account of the discoveries see John Dart, *The Laughing Savior: The Discovery and Significance of the Nag Hammadi Gnostic Library* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), and also for a general audience, Elaine Hiesey Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979). The rapidly expanding scholarship can be followed in the proceedings of the Working Seminar on Gnosticism and Early Christianity, *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1986) and is admirably compiled (through 1985) by Michel Tardieu and Jean-Daniel Dubois, *Introduction à la Littérature Gnostique* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1986).

⁷ Simone Pétrement, *Le Dieu Séparé: les Origines du Gnosticisme* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1984), pp. 25, 65-71, and Henry A. Green, *The Economic and Social Origins of Gnosticism*, Society of Biblical Literature, Dissertation Series, 77 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), pp. 174-210, esp. pp. 205-10.

of him . . . the incomprehensible, the inconceivable one, who is superior to every thought.”⁸ “The Tripartite Tractate” describes him as the father, the root of everything, the unity, inimitable, immutable, the sole lord, unbegotten: “he is unattainable in his greatness, inscrutable in his wisdom, incomprehensible in his power, unfathomable in his sweetness” (*NH*, p. 56). In “The Apocryphon of John,” the apostle, troubled by a Pharisee, goes into the desert and meditates when, lo, the heavens opened and the whole of creation shone and was shaken, and a young-old man appeared to John and spoke to him to reveal that which was and would be: prior to anything is the one, the father of everything, perfect, immeasurable, imperishable, ineffable, wholly at rest, and existing as pure light that no eye can behold (pp. 99-100). “The Gospel of the Egyptians” calls the same being “the unrevealable, unmarked, ageless, unproclaimable father . . . the self-begotten . . . alien” (p. 196). Christ himself in “The Second Treatise of the Great Seth,” speaks of “the perfect majesty . . . at rest in the ineffable light” (p. 330).

Eugnostos the Blessed tells us that the God of truth is the unchanging good, the faultless, the blessed, the unknown and unknowable, who nevertheless ever knows himself. For other gnostics, the primordial self-knowledge is the ultimate source of all mischief, though not for Eugnostos. For him, the beginningless First Father beholds himself within himself as in a mirror, and by the divine self-knowledge he begets the first beings, the Sons of the Unbegotten Father, at rest in the First Father “ever rejoicing in ineffable joy because of the unchanging glory and measureless jubilation.” First Father's act of will, to have his form come to be, resulted in androgynous Immortal Man. His many names include God of gods, King of kings, First Man, Adam of the

⁸ James M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 38 (hereinafter *NH*).

Light, Pistis (faith), and most importantly, Sophia (wisdom). This last name assumes a separate identity as consort of Immortal Man. From this pair stem several generations of spiritual beings, such as the year, months, days, moments, called “types” of Immortal Man, but there is nothing yet of the measurement of matter about them (pp. 210-13).

The Christian parallel to Euginostos, “The Sophia of Jesus Christ,” brings the story to the conclusion of the primordial condition, Sophia's act of will, to create without her consort. Out of that act of will, First Father allowed a curtain to come into being, dividing the higher and lower regions (p. 225). But this takes us to the Fall and the matter of the next chapter.

Analogues Worldwide

The notion of pre-cosmic perfection is not unique to the highly sophisticated religious speculation of the Levant. It appears also in the similar traditions of Hindu India and in aboriginal New Guinea and America—broadly enough distributed to be called a worldwide phenomenon. In at least one Hindu tradition, prior to the cosmos only divinities are to be found wrapt in profound contemplation, which activity begets yet other spiritual beings until awareness of one or other differentiation begets desire and, with it, creation.⁹ Among the Dayak people of Borneo the absolute beginning is the totality. Out of a series of disruptions come creation and humanity. When these people wed, they celebrate the creation but also make it retroactive, returning symbolically to the primordial totality.¹⁰

⁹ Heinrich Zimmer, *The King and the Corpse: Tales of the Soul's Conquest of Evil*, ed. Joseph Campbell, Bollingen Series, XI (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 239-41.

¹⁰ Mircea Eliade, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 77-79.

The creation story of the Seneca relates that before the earth, there was an unseen floating island above the great blue arch of heaven above a boundless sea. On it there lived a great chief and lawgiver to the beings on the island: "In the center of the island there grew a tree so tall that no one of the beings who lived there could see its top. On its branches, flowers and fruit hung all the year round, for there was no summer or winter there, or day or night. The beings who lived on the island used to come often to the tree and eat the fruit and smell the sweet perfume of its flowers."¹¹ The world does not come into being until after some deplorable events take place on the island, so that the "time" in question, despite the suggestion of Eden, is before creation.

The "Other Place"

Whether the island continues in existence after the creation of the world, the myth does not say. But there are many myths in various distinct traditions where the primordial condition remains intact in an elsewhere terribly hard to reach. Primordial time is, in these cases, excepted from the laws of history and permitted to continue its own existence but on the other side of some virtually insuperable obstacle. The accounts in Genesis indicate that the Garden of Eden continues in existence in a real place on earth but is unreachable because of the cherubim and the flaming sword. Only Enlil, the god who separated earth and heaven, could ferry the heroes to Dilmun, the earthly paradise of the Sumerians. Dilmun represents the primordial condition and there, "the croak of the raven was not heard, the bird of death did not utter the cry of death, the lion did not devour, the wolf did not rend the lamb, the

¹¹ Arthur C. Parker, *Seneca Myths and Folk Tales* (Buffalo: Buffalo Historical Society, 1932) p. 411.

dove did not mourn, there was no widow.”¹² Dilmun was free of the ravages of disease and aging:¹³

A sick eye did not say, “I am a sick eye,”
 A sick head did not say, “I am a sick head,”
 An old man did not say, “An old man am I,”
 An old woman did not say, “An old woman am I,”

and free of the technology of irrigation, necessary to the agriculture of the Sumerians:

“A man has dug a canal,” one did not say.

Certain Polynesians seem to have believed in an abode of bliss, Pulotu (Buloto, Mbulotu), in the midst of which grew a great tree. All wants were supplied by its leaves. Cooked, they transformed themselves into delicious foods of all kinds. As if that were not enough, this paradise was overgrown with the richest fruits and most fragrant flowers. The birds and hogs automatically replenished themselves; if one was killed for food, another immediately took its place. For anyone there who felt the infirmities of age, a bath in a wondrous lake would restore full life and beauty.¹⁴

Culture heroes and their ecstatic successors regularly visit such places, submitting to great ordeals to get there, and to return to the ordinary world to tell of how things ought to be. Among the islands off New Guinea, the culture hero later named Manseren descended into an underworld paradise, Koreri, where there is eternal youth, no difficulty, no misery, no disease, no death, and the slave is the master. The people

¹² N. K. Sanders, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1964), p. 36.

¹³ W. F. Albright, “Primitivism in Ancient Western Asia,” in *Primitivism*, pp. 421-32; here p. 424.

¹⁴ Johannes C. Andersen, *Myths and Legends of the Polynesians* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1928), pp. 419-21.

are happy, they sing and dance and suffer no privation.¹⁵ The prophets of the Feather Cult along the Columbia River in the American northwest routinely reported trips to the beautiful world of the dead, where there was no aging and people wore buckskin and used nothing introduced by the white man.¹⁶ Wovoka, father of the Ghost Dance that swept the Plains Indians in 1890, had visited the spirit world in a trance and there had seen God with all the ancestors engaged in old-time sports and occupations, all happy and forever young in a beautiful land full of game.¹⁷

The most striking instance of such a continuously existing paradise is the “Land Without Evil,” which, in pre-Columbian times, as recently as the 1940s and often in between, moved the Tupí-Guaraní Indians of Brazil to abandon their homes and wander about the continent searching. The “Land Without Evil” was thought to lie in the east, over the seas, in the middle of the earth, on the other side of a long and difficult journey. It was the abode of God, the home of the culture heroes, where the ancestors persisted in the old ways.¹⁸ The “Land Without Evil” lies in the background of the home of El Dorado sought by Pizarro and Raleigh, and found by Candide.

Had the Tupí-Guaraní succeeded in crossing the great sea

¹⁵ Ernst Wilhelm Müller, “Die Koreri-Bewegung auf den Schouten-Inseln (West-Neuguinea),” in Wilhelm E. Mühlmann, ed., *Chiliasmus und Nativismus, Studien zur Soziologie der Revolution*, I (Berlin: Reimer, 1961), pp. 144-46 (hereinafter Mühlmann).

¹⁶ Brian R. Wilson, *Magic and the Millennium* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), pp. 350-51.

¹⁷ James Mooney, *The Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890*, Fourteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1892-1893, Part 2, pp. 641-1136 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1896), p. 771.

¹⁸ Curt Nimuendajú Unkel, “Die Sagen von der Erschaffung und Vernichtung der Welt als Grundlagen der Religion der Apapocúva-Guaraní,” *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 46 (1914): 284-403; here, p. 287.

eastward they might have meet the Greek and Roman ancients coming at them westward on the same pursuit. Their Elysium, Elysian Fields, Isles of the Blest, Fortunate Islands lay to the west, beyond the pillars of Hercules—at least that is where later geographers placed them. In Homer (*Od.* 6. 561-68) they are at the boundaries of earth where “there is neither snow nor long winter nor even rain, but Ocean ever sends forth the gently blowing breezes of Zephyr to refresh men.” Hesiod locates them in the same place (*Erga*, 167-69), and there, untouched by sorrow, live the heroes “for whom the grain-giving earth bears honeyed fruit.” In Horace (*Ep.* 16, 40-66) the Fortunate Islands, unplowed, give grain. The vines, unpruned, flourish. The goats, unbidden, come to be milked. Bears threaten no one, and there are no serpents. The islands are never reached by ship (*Primitivism*, pp. 30, 291-97).

Primordial Time

Classical Antiquity

This worldwide myth assumes in terms of place very much the same posture that Doomsday speculation does in terms of time. The ideal alternative is separated from the wretched prevailing circumstance by great obstacles and terrible ordeals; furthermore, it shows up the prevailing circumstance for the miserable thing that it is. But the myth is rarely, perhaps never, purely geographical. The present but virtually inaccessible paradise, the ideal elsewhere consistently refers to an ideal erstwhile, at least until science fiction. In primitive cultures, the abode of the ancestors is where things are now as they used to be then. In Sumer, Dilmun was the locus of earthly creation and refers to things as they were at the beginning. Hesiod explicitly connects the elsewhere and the erstwhile: when Zeus overthrew the Titans, he banished Cronos to the Isles of the Blest, there to govern the heroes as he had once governed

the cosmos in the Golden Age.

To be precise, Hesiod speaks not of a Golden Age but rather of a golden race who, without sorrow or labor, feasted and made merry, who were rich in flocks, and to whom the earth ungrudgingly, abundantly, and spontaneously gave of her fruits. Hesiod places his description of a struggle-free, want-free existence right after his discussion of struggle, its kinds, and its place in human affairs. The members of this golden race did not fear death, for “when they died, it was as though they were given over to sleep.” As this generation passed away, it provided the benevolent guardian spirits of humanity (*Primitivism*, p. 27).

Plato describes the Age of Cronos in similar terms. In those days God troubled himself personally with the rotation of the spheres. Some divinity took personal care of each group of living things and supplied them with all their needs. There was no savagery, no strife whatsoever. The trees and bushes gave of their fruit without stint. There was no need for clothing or bedding, for the seasons were gentle and the grass soft, and it sprang out of the earth of its own accord without human toil. Human beings had leisure and could engage in discourse with the animals. There was no sexual generation; and good things simply came to be without the labor.¹⁹

As Hesiod has Cronos, and Plato the gods, so Aratus (3rd c. B.C.) had Justice in person living among the first race of human beings. Life was simple then, peaceful, and free of sea trade and its unfortunate results: “Oxen and plough and Justice Herself, mistress of people, giver of all just things, furnished all things a thousand fold. This continued as

¹⁹ 271c-272c: *The Statesman*, Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds., *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, Bollingen Series, 71 (New York: Pantheon, 1963), pp. 1037-38. See also W. K. C. Guthrie, *In the Beginning: Some Greek Views on the Origins of Life and the Early State of Man* (London: Methuen, 1957), pp. 69-71.

long as the earth nourished the golden race” (*Primitivism*, p. 35). Aratus seems to allow for agriculture in the Golden Age. His imitator Ovid does not. In his Golden Age (he calls it so, “aurea . . . aetas,” and not a golden race), “Earth herself, unburdened and untouched by the hoe and unwounded by the ploughshare, gave all things freely.” Fidelity and righteousness were the order of the day: human beings chose them of their own accord without the need for law. There was no marine trade and no need for fortifications or soldiers. “Spring was eternal and the placid Zephyrs with warm breezes lightly touched the flowers born without seeds.” There was no money, and all the metals, noble and base, lay hidden deep in the earth. And on the surface of the earth, there was no need to mark the boundaries of the soil (*Primitivism*, p. 63).

For Tibullus (ca. 65-19 B.C.) Greek Cronos becomes Latin Saturn, and his reign meant an age free of roads and ships, hence free of commerce, and free of all the signs of private property: houses had no doors, fields had no boundary stones. There was no war, no wine. The acorn was enough to eat, and pure water enough to drink. And love was free (*Primitivism*, p. 42). Virgil's *Georgics*—like Hesiod's *Erga*, a treatise on farming—paradoxically place the Golden Age in an era without the need for agriculture: “Before Jove's day no tillers subdued the land. Even to mark the fields or divide it with bounds was unlawful. Men made gain for the common store, and Earth yielded all, of herself, more freely, when none begged for her gifts.”²⁰ The community of goods and the spontaneous fertility of the earth presumably made farming unnecessary.

The first-century (A.D.) historian, Pompeius Trogus, places the Golden Age in his own Italy when Saturn ruled there in person: “all

²⁰ 1.125-28: H. Rushton Fairclough, trans., *Virgil*, 2 vols., Loeb Classical Library, 63 (London: Heinemann, 1960), 1, pp. 88-89.

things belonged to all in common and undivided, as if all men had one patrimony.” There were no slaves, no private property (p. 67). The use of all things in common and social equality characterize the Golden Age in most of the other first-century Roman authors who have anything to say about it: Seneca, Pseudo-Seneca, Statius, Tacitus.²¹

Judaeo-Christian Traditions

The accounts in Genesis, at the other wellspring of western culture, locate the Golden Age in the Garden of Eden and share with other traditions the notion of direct communication between God and humanity, human mastery over nature, and a pre-agricultural, vegetarian diet of fruits and berries for the founders of the race—with unhappy consequences indeed. Ezekiel (28.12-13), speaking metaphorically of the city of Tyre, describes Eden, the garden of God, as the home of an extraordinary creature, immeasurably beautiful, filled with wisdom, the image of perfection, covered with jewels—the very ones that adorn the heavenly city in Revelation (21.18-21).²²

The difficult and troublesome thinker Philo Judaeus (ca. 30 B.C. to ca. 50 A.D.) tried to turn Jewish thought into a philosophy acceptable to his gentile colleagues in Alexandria. The demands of the Old Testament narrative placed some limits on Philo's philosophizing tendencies. He preserves a picture of the primordial condition not attached to a race or a generation but rather to the person of Adam. His Adam was physically perfect, the most beautiful of men, a giant. He was free of disease and disorder, enlightened of intellect and sense, so that he

²¹ *Primitivism*, pp. 52, 273, 362, and cf. Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 88-91.

²² Frederick Robert Tennant, *The Sources of the Doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin* (1903; reprint New York: Schocken, 1968), p. 63.

could grasp “the natures, essences, and operations which exist in heaven.” He could communicate with the spirits and lived in unalloyed bliss. Similar views appeared among the Rabbis and entered Christianity with the Church Fathers.²³

As the Fathers were hammering out an orthodox system of belief in the first centuries of Christianity, their opinion of the primordial condition gradually took the shape anticipated by Philo. Adam before the Fall embodied the Golden Age. He was wholly innocent, simple, and “in possession of a full understanding of the divine will concerning man's conduct.”²⁴ His condition in Paradise was devoid of pain.²⁵ He enjoyed immortality, autonomy, and freedom of the will. He knew nothing of the force of necessity. The Creator saw Adam amid His creation and saw that both were good. Adam was adorned with a beauty beyond all things beautiful: thus Gregory of Nyssa.²⁶

Irenaeus of Lyon tells us that God created Adam as lord of the world and everything upon it. He meant Adam to enjoy the world, and so he provided a place more beautiful than any on earth, airy and filled with light, nourishment, water, and everything needed for a pleasant life. There God walked and talked with Adam, instructing him in justice. In this state man was still a child (*Texte*, 1, pp. 299-300). The Church Fathers anticipated this secular doctrine of a later time, the Romantic notion of childhood as the Golden Age, as they anticipated so much else in western intellectual life. They did not, however, stress this notion. Childhood was only one of many metaphors they employed to give shape

²³ Tennant, *Sources*, pp. 134 and 149.

²⁴ Boas, *Essays*, p. 20 (see above, note 1).

²⁵ Williams, *Ideas of the Fall*, p. 558.

²⁶ Alfons Heilmann, ed., *Texte der Kirchenväter*, 5 vols. (Munich: Kösel, 1963-66), 1, pp. 271-73 [hereinafter *Texte*]. This edition and translation is organized according to subject matter and is, for that reason, extraordinarily convenient.

and texture to their teachings about the primordial condition.

John of Damascus describes paradise as a palace built for the ruler of the world, Adam. In Eden, in the east, God planted paradise and made it the home of every joy and pleasure, higher than the rest of the earth, wafted about by the purest air, eternally green, fragrant and filled with light, beautiful and pleasing to the senses, a divine place, a worthy dwelling for him created in the likeness of God (*Texte*, 1, p. 305). And this was only the paradise of the senses. There was also a paradise of the spirit, where Adam mingled with the angels, thought divine thoughts, and nourished himself on these thoughts. On account of his simplicity, of his life free of artifice, he went about naked and could raise himself in contemplation through creation to the sole Creator, and he took joy in this activity (1, p. 312).

Augustine (354-430 A.D.), the most influential of the Fathers, taught that man originally had the gift of immortality. In the Garden he was free of all ailments and of the process of aging. He had special knowledge which empowered him to give the animals the correct names. All of his sensual impulses were subject to reason, and his reason was obedient to the divine will. He was free to choose and inclined toward the good (*Texte*, 1, p. 335). Adam was created without flaws. He was perfect. That perfection is the natural condition of man.²⁷

Those early Christian writers who took the primitivist stance—not all did—had myths of the Golden Age ready-made for them by their predecessors both pagan and Jewish. All these traditions and more run together helter-skelter in an early fifth-century compilation known as the Sibylline Oracles. Some of the Oracles did originate in the first centuries B.C. and A.D., although they all pretend to be the ecstatic prophetic

²⁷ Joseph Barbel, ed., *Augustinus: Enchiridion* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1960), p. 239, and Boas, *Essays*, pp. 40-41.

utterances of the inspired madwomen of deeper antiquity, such as the Cumaean Sibyl who admitted Aeneas into the underworld. As confused and confusing as they are, their early date and the special freedom allowed by the authorial fiction make them extraordinarily interesting texts.

At the culmination of the work of creation, the Sibyls tell us, God made man and assigned him the paradise of ambrosia, there to perform good works. Seeing him alone, God made woman like unto him. The two engaged, of their own accord, in wise discourse, for their minds had not yet darkened. They felt no shame and walked about naked like the beasts of the field. Even after the Garden, mankind lived in a blessed state. His numbers increased greatly. Houses and cities were built. Life stretched out to a great length of days. There was no fear of death, for when men died they were as though overtaken by sleep. They were a favored and magnanimous race. They loved the Lord.²⁸

A Sibyl who lived before the Flood prophesied yet another Golden Age for the period after the Flood, when Cronos will rule and, after him, three high-minded kings. They distribute to each his due. The earth again radiates the brilliant colors of ripe fruits of all kinds. These grow of their own accord and supply mankind with nourishment. There is no aging, no illness, no fear of death: overcome by sleep, men journey to Acheron and the House of Hades, there to dwell in honor. God gives them noble minds and takes counsel with them.²⁹ The original Jewish Sibyl also places a kind of Golden Age right after the primordial catastrophes, the Flood and the Tower of Babel. This Golden Age is

²⁸ 1.22-25, 33-37, 65-73: *Sibyllinische Weissagungen*, ed. and trans. Alfons Kurfess (Munich: Heimeram, 1951), pp. 32-37; comp. James H. Charlesworth, ed. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983-85), 1, pp. 335-365 (hereinafter *OTP*).

²⁹ 1.283-307: *OTP*, 1, pp. 342; Kurfess, pp. 46-49.

identified with father Abraham, although she does not mention him by name. The best of men arise from the city of Ur among the Chaldaeans. They have no interest in astronomy or mining or marine trade or prognostication or magic. They are concerned with justice and virtue. They are without greed and its consequences, war and hunger. They know no theft and respect their neighbor's property. The rich man does not oppress the poor and the widow. Rather he supports them with wheat, wine, and oil, obeying the commandment of the heavenly father, who gave the earth to all in common.³⁰

The Tiburtine Sibyl, daughter of Priam of Troy, saw the Golden Age beginning in her own time or shortly thereafter, when the first generation would be simple, eminent, truthful, gentle, benign, wise, lovers of liberty, and lovers of the consolation of the poor. Even the second generation lives splendidly, growing tall, worshipping God, and cooperating with one another free of malice.³¹

The Sibyls are not alone in extending the Golden Age past the time of the Garden of Eden into the first generations of men. The Ethiopian Enoch declared that law and justice prevailed still in the first of the ten world-weeks of mankind, that is, into the time of Enoch himself.³² And one knows from Genesis of the long life achieved by the patriarchs. The Slavonic Enoch is somewhat more conventional in restricting the Golden Age to the time Adam spent in the Garden (all of five and a half hours), where the heavens were so open that there was unending day and Adam could hear the triumphal chorus of angels. Adam was created lord of the

³⁰ 3.218-47: *OTP*, 1, pp. 367; Kurfess, pp. 81-83.

³¹ Kurfess, pp. 226-27.

³² 1 Enoch 93.3: *OTP*, 1, p. 74; comp. E. Kautzsch, *Die Apokryphen und Pseudepigraphen des Alten Testaments*, 2 vols. (1900; reprint Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1962), 2, p. 299.

beasts of the earth and appointed ruler of all.³³ In the Book of Adam and Eve, postlapsarian Adam reminisces, “O Eve! remember the glory that rested in us in the garden. O Eve! remember that while we were in the garden we knew neither night nor day.”³⁴

Anthropological Evidence

The diffusion of these traditions abroad into other cultures is, in some cases, quite clear-cut, for example, where missionaries brought the Bible and western learning to China or the South Seas. In other cases a certain transformation by Islam brought similar traditions to the farthest corners of the world. The possibility of very early, prehistoric diffusion has also to be considered, as does the possibility that nostalgia for the imagined bliss of the beginnings simply forms a part of the human condition.³⁵

To read a summary of African creation myths and their assessment of the primordial condition of man is rather like reading Plato's description of the age of Cronos. Were the myths diffused in prehistoric times? By Christian or Islamic missionaries? Are they archetypal or shaped by the humanistic training of the German scholar reporting them? Hermann Baumann relates that Africa, too, has a mythology of the first human beings.

In their time everything seemed possible. The divinity was near. Death had not yet entered the world. People had more magic than they do today. The first human beings had been given mastery over nature.

³³ 2 Enoch 32.2; 58.2-4: *OTP*, 1, pp. 154, 184-85; comp. A. Vaillant, *Le Livre des Secrets d'Hénoch*, Textes publiés par l'Institut d'Études Slaves, 4 (Paris: Institut Slaves, 1952), pp. 65-66, 102-103.

³⁴ Ch. 9: S. C. Malan, ed., *The Book of Adam and Eve* (London: Williams and Northgate, 1882), p.13.

³⁵ Mühlmann, p. 297.

They understood the language of the animals and lived with them in peace. Abundant and opulent food made itself available to men without toil. There was no sexual generation, and humanity renewed itself like the serpent its skin. In short, everything that drove and determined mankind was different then.³⁶ Baumann makes the point that the myths varied according to the social organization of the tribes. Those communally organized incline to attach the myths to the human race in general; those organized as aristocracies or monarchies incline to attach the myths to the leading families or the ruling house. On that principle one could, as it were, predict that royal Egypt would say of the good king: in his reign truth prevailed, the lie was shunned, the land was as it was in the beginning when Ra governed.³⁷ In theocratic Mexico the priest-king and culture hero, Quetzalcoatl, reigned over the Golden Age when “the cotton grew naturally in all colors,” and would reign again, *rex quondam et futurus*, the once and future king.³⁸ In imperial China the myth covers both people and monarch. In the prehistoric period of Huang-Ti, people controlled their passions perfectly. One did not have to eat; sipping dew was enough. And the emperor gave the people the calendar, musical instruments, and all the artifacts of civilization.³⁹

The anti-imperial revolutionary movement that wracked China in the middle of the nineteenth century (1850-1864) was named the Great Peace (T'ai-p'ing) after the perfect age, the one before the age of

³⁶ Hermann Baumann, *Schöpfung und Urzeit des Menschen im Mythos der Afrikanischen Völker* (Berlin: Reimer, 1936), pp. 242f., 267, 319, 328. Cf. Eliade, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries*, p. 59.

³⁷ G. van der Leeuw, “Urzeit und Endzeit,” *Eranos-Jahrbuch* 1949, 17 (1950): 11-51, here p. 30; and Tennant, *Sources*, p. 34.

³⁸ Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology* (New York: Viking, 1970), pp. 214 and 457.

³⁹ Campbell, *Primitive Mythology*, p. 454.

philosophers, the original situation of mankind, when there was a great surplus of food and kindly virtue permeated the people.⁴⁰

Certain Golden Ages are idealized versions of the prevailing order and lend the prevailing order authority. The myths of Ra and Quetzalcoatl act in this way. When the Golden Age loses the prestige of the primordial condition, that is, association with creation itself, and becomes merely the good old days, then the social organization sponsoring the myth seems to make very little difference. What counts, regardless of the larger organization of their societies, is that the bearers of the myth are in opposition. Their good old days lie between the primordial condition and the wretched present. Those days become the focus for specific grievances and represent simple antitheses to those grievances. For example, one revolutionary in republican Brazil simply turned around the idea of the republic and held up the past monarchy as the model for the good old days.⁴¹ For the great Iroquois prophet, Handsome Lake, the good old days were those before the arrival of the white man, when the people were virtuous, honest, and single-minded, without evil habits or appetites.⁴² Handsome Lake's powerful Shawnee rival, Tenskwatawa, brother of Tecumseh, preached a similar doctrine but included in his specifications for the good old days the notion of the collective ownership of the land.⁴³

⁴⁰ Eugene P. Boardman, "Millenary Aspects of the Taiping Rebellion," *Millennial Dreams in Action*, Sylvia Thrupp, ed. (New York: Schocken, 1970), pp. 70-79, here pp. 70-71 and Rudolf G. Wagner, *Reenacting the Heavenly Vision: the Role of Religion in the Taiping Rebellion* (University of California, Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1982).

⁴¹ Lanternari, *Religions of the Oppressed*, p. 191.

⁴² Parker, *Seneca Myths*, p. 384.

⁴³ Lanternari, *Religions of the Oppressed*, p. 124.

Among those people for whom European contact brought colossal change, the good old days usually meant the days prior to the contact. Some peoples were resigned to the permanence of the alien presence or simply had short memories, and they placed the good old days into an earlier phase of that presence. The Maji-maji rebellion of Tanganyika (1905-1906) and the MauMau rebellion of Kenya held up as the norm the pre-European order, the old way of living, the ways of the past as did certain Melanesian revival cults.⁴⁴ However, one of these cults, located on the northeast coast of New Guinea, where the Germans has briefly owned a colony, identified the period of German administration as the good old days, a sure way to annoy the Australian authorities.⁴⁵

At least one revolutionary movement, the Vailala Madness (1919-1931), became itself the good old days, just a few years after dying out. The natives, as it seems, recall how “in that wonder time, the ground shook and the trees swayed . . . flowers sprang up in a single day and the air was filled with their fragrance. The spirits of the dead came and went by night.”⁴⁶ The Vailala Madness is not the only revolutionary movement that to some, in retrospect, seems like the good old days.

Authorizing Myths

The good old days may be missing some of the grandeur of the Golden Age proper, but they exert no less powerful an influence on events. What they lack in universality they make up in concreteness and familiarity. It is, in general, hard to be indifferent to reminders of the

⁴⁴ Wilson, *Magic*, pp. 267-69, 312, 323, 480.

⁴⁵ Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of Cargo Cults in Melanesia*, 2nd ed. (New York: Schocken, 1970), p. 100.

⁴⁶ F. E. Williams, “The Vailala Madness in Retrospect,” quoted in Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, p. 90f.

past, to ruins for example, but something special occurs when the ruins are one's own. When the good old days are interpreted as the object of personal memory or, more importantly, of group memory, then they function as a major source of identity over against other individuals or groups. The good old days then become authorizing myths, explaining why we are different from all others. In the texts cited in this chapter, some glimmer of exclusiveness appears as early as the Gnostic who claimed esoteric revelation. The reduction of the general Golden Age under Cronos to a peculiarly Italian event under Saturn probably started out as innocent Greco-Roman syncretism, adapting the myths of the two peoples to one another in a cosmopolitan spirit, but by the time of Pompeius Trogus that adaptation points directly toward nationalism.

Christianity was barely a century old when Montanism became an identifiable alternative to the great church. It was the earliest group of Christian apocalyptic radicals after the first Christians themselves. For the Montanists the good old days were the time of the primitive, apostolic church. In this, as in their entire attitude toward prophecy, ecstasy, the world, and the church, they anticipate all later Christian apocalyptic radicals down to modern times. Their authoritative past is, of course, not just any good old days, but the time when the divinity himself walked among men, instructed them, and appointed a succession. He was also the savior who promised soon to return, to intervene in history, and conclude it. Any kind of exclusive claim to this authorizing tradition would certainly provoke the anger of the developing institution that claimed the tradition for itself. And indeed Montanism was soon condemned by the great church and driven into (temporary) extinction.⁴⁷

Montanism used the primitive church as a model antithetical to

⁴⁷ *Texte*, 5, p. 381.

the great church. Such a reproof puts the prevailing institution on the defensive and demands of it an explanation of its failure to measure up to the standards of the good old days. It is an intrinsically un rebuttable argument. The common consent of the disputants makes the good old days immeasurably better than the present: whoever affirms the present state of affairs has to be, to some degree, betraying the ideal. The prevailing institutions survive such attacks by transmuting the terms of the argument. The primitive ideal may, for example, be deprived of historical pertinence by elevation to the spiritual plane or postponement into a remote, indefinite future, as in St. Augustine.⁴⁸ As often as the one side has resorted to the sublimation of the argument, the other side has returned to the literal, historical interpretation. And to this day we have apocalyptic sects breaking off from the established order, sometimes to become established themselves in due course. This sequence of events unfolds in secular apocalyptic movements as well as religious ones. Those in opposition always have the rhetorical advantage.

Summation

It may seem a long way from the pre-cosmic totality to the rhetoric of opposition, but the distance traversed lies on one plane, the Elysian. Everything there is in perfect order and leaves us with nothing to worry about. It is the home of ideals, and apparently we all remember it very well. But we seem to remember different things. For some, the Golden Age precedes creation; for others it follows. For the latter it may precede

⁴⁸ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 25; Wilhelm Kamlah, *Apokalypse und Geschichtsverständnis: die mittelalterliche Auslegung der Apokalypse vor Joachim von Fiore*, *Historische Studien*, 285 (Berlin: Verlag Dr. Emil Ebering, 1935), p. 128, note 27; Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages*, *Records of Civilization*, 96 (Columbia University Press, 1979), pp. 26-27.

only history, and for them the very ideas of history and the Golden Age are mutually exclusive; or it may lie in time, either at the beginning of all history or at the beginning of a particular history. These Golden Ages generally house the parents of the human race, on the one hand, or of the nation, tribe, or people on the other—with the understanding that the nation, tribe, or people have a prior, special, or sole claim on humanity. In other words, for some the Golden Age is universal, for others it is exclusive to themselves.

The bliss of the Golden Age consists, for all, in the balance of needs and gratification. But for some the needs are simple and simply gratified—there is no sexual generation, and hunger is allayed by acorns or the dew—and for others there is free love and an eternal banquet. The levels of civilization differ considerably. Most conceive of a Golden Age wholly free of the need for civilizing technology, especially agriculture, mining, and trade, and free of the institutions of civilization, private property, money, and social gradation. But others allow for agriculture, others for cities, yet others for the whole apparatus of culture. All the differences, however, do nothing to alter the essential character of the Golden Age: it was wonderful and is absent. We are on one plane; it is on another. An abyss intervenes between us. It is into that abyss that we next leap.

CHAPTER III

The Fall

The Fall as Causal Explanation

Given that the past Golden Age was perfect or, at any rate, preferable to the present, then any activity that upset the original condition would obviously have to be considered a deterioration. Western tradition provides the convenient term, “the Fall,” for the event that separates humanity from its idyllic origins. One can afford to delete “of Man” from the rubric because various traditions treat the event of separation in ways that sometimes give man a very small part in the whole affair. Fall stories all seek to explain how evil came into the world at large or some limited version of the world in particular. They are often housed in cosmogonies, stories of how things came to be, and fill them out by explaining how things came to be as they are now. In this respect they occupy one small corner of the large category, “etiological myths,” those that give causal explanations for the world as it is, why bats fly at night, why peacocks croak and nightingales sing.

Kinds of the Fall

Fall stories span the globe and resemble one another so closely that they seem, on occasion, to echo the voice of a single primordial

storyteller. In spite of that, or on account of it, the stories resist, indeed defy easy classification. Most of the stories share a primitivistic bias, that is, they deplore anything that alters the simplest “natural” condition; technology is the chief culprit here. But on the other hand, certain stories applaud the bringer of culture, and others ignore civilization altogether. Some see the Fall in a single event, others allow it to recur in different forms, yet others identify it as a long process of degeneration. There are those stories that incline to place the blame externally, that is, on God, the devil, or an intruder; and there are those that incline to place the blame on humanity itself, its own negligence, curiosity, disobedience, presumption, lust, violence, or greed. Logic may expect mutual exclusion among these features, but Fall stories have no such scruples.

The Fall and the Representation of Evil

In general, the traditions have more to say about the Fall than they do about the conditions from which the Fall fell, perhaps because the Fall is simply more interesting. When the good is conceived negatively, as an absence of the wicked, then the wicked has the advantage. In this regard, the rhetoric of Doomsday is in direct contradiction to the orthodox theological position on the nature of evil. But this position, that evil is nothing, or nothing more than a privation of good, conforms erratically with experience. There are certain goods that express themselves actively in experience, such as the gratification of the senses. But many other goods, such as health and security, describe a passive condition that negates an active evil, such as disease and danger. The rhetoric of Doomsday focuses so intensely on the evil in the world that evil becomes the chief active reality.

The good is, in any case, difficult to portray. The great villains and sinners usually appear to be more interesting than the great saints. They

may not be so subtle or complex as the saints, but they are certainly more eye-catching. The doctrines of the Fall similarly provide the drama missing in the Golden Age. Much of the scenery of the Fall is populated with malicious gods, devils, and demiurges. Incest, fratricide, and rebellion run rampant across it. A disaster takes place of a magnitude not to be reached again until the forthcoming catastrophic correction of the Great Calamity.¹

The Indeterminacy of the Fall

For all the advantage that the Fall has over the Golden Age in terms of positive, dynamic representation, it suffers from an indeterminacy spared the Golden Age. Some traditions seem reluctant to fix blame entirely on one event or find no event monstrous enough to account for the misery of the present condition and the appalling disparity between it and the Golden Age. This reluctance expresses itself variously. Sometimes multiple Fall stories conceal the basic failure to agree on one appropriate event. Often an inappropriate event is selected and propped up with great contextual, cultural, or exegetical scaffolding. The event is made appropriate after the fact. The horrendous consequences are bent back to magnify the event. Or general cultural presuppositions endow it with great meaning, in the same action endowing all other arbitrary events with meaning. Or learned interpretation comes to the rescue. These possibilities, no one exclusive of the other, all end up assuming what they seek to prove.

Fall stories, regardless of their independent stature, that is, whether they present obviously terrible events or sheer accidents, depend

¹ Samuel N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China: A Historical Survey* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), pp. 8 and 45.

heavily on the context provided by the rhetoric of Doomsday. Some forthcoming events are going to turn the world on its head or, from the point of view of the doom-sayer, upright again. This catastrophic correction has to respond to a catastrophic error, otherwise there would be no need for the forthcoming disaster. The world would still be upright now, in the present, indeed, we would all be living in the Golden Age. But it is plain that we are not. The place of the Fall story in the pattern is largely self-evident when the tradition has chosen an instantly recognizable horror or a transcendent evil to disrupt the primordial condition. It is, however, quite another matter when negligence, misunderstanding, or accident is made responsible for the loss of paradise.

The Ritual Fall

Mircea Eliade describes this kind of Fall: "As a result of a ritual fault, communications between heaven and earth were interrupted, and the gods withdrew to the highest heavens. Since then, men must work for their food, and they are no longer immortal."² Let a Fall story from Africa, one of the Tower of Babel type, illustrate. Those who tell the story, the southern Luba people of the Congo, have a fixed order for processions, with the flute player up front and the drummer in the rear. In the beginning God often descended to earth to visit human beings, who thought it would be nice if they could reciprocate the visits. To that end they built a tower of tree trunks. The first to bid for entrance was the flute player. God admitted him and all those who followed, closing the heavens only after the drummer entered. He thought, quite rightly, that

² *The Myth of the Eternal Return or Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask, Bollingen Series, 46 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 91.

he had reached the end of the line. But in fact the drummer was only half way down the line. The rest of the climbers fell from the tower and were killed when God closed the heavens. So death entered the world, and the heavens were closed to men. The catastrophe could have been averted if the drummer had come at the end where he belonged.³ What a price to pay for a ritual fault.

But not if ritual can also return things to the way they were, which it regularly does in these traditions, or promises to do. In ordinary circumstances, the primordial condition can be recovered subjectively in customary religious activity, as for example, in ecstasy. This process has much in common with the rhetoric of Doomsday but is sublimated. The Fall catastrophe is overcome by means of a powerful ritual, and the participants return to the time of origins.⁴

In extraordinary circumstances the sublimation does not suffice, and when that happens an analogous ritual activity may be applied to the surrounding historical world in order to compel an objective restoration of the primordial condition. Then the ritual becomes a means of making the rhetoric of Doomsday into a historical reality. Take the Ghost Dance of 1890 by way of illustration. The Indians hoped by ecstatic song and dance to recover what they could not win by force of arms: freedom of the land, the return of the buffalo, a restoration of the old ways, and the elimination of the European. If ritual properly executed can destroy history, then an error in ritual can certainly cause it to come into being. In this context, accident, oversight, and ritual fault cease to be trifles.

The principles working in these examples of the relationship between ritual and event work also in European traditions. The Bible

³ Baumann, *Schöpfung und Urzeit*, p. 257.

⁴ Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 50.

offers at least four Fall stories or Fall-like events—Eden, Cain, the sons of God, and Babel—and popular Jewish, Christian, and unorthodox sources offer many more. Orthodoxy chose what would appear, out of context, the most trivial alternative, the eating of the forbidden fruit. After all, little on the surface of the story warrants the terrible consequences. Powerful intellects and the creation of the discipline of theology turned Eve's error of judgment into a moral catastrophe enormous enough to require the whole history of salvation. For Christians, it was the last wholly free human act until the drama of the Incarnation, on which it raised the curtain. The spiritual effects of the Fall could be assuaged by a ritual act, baptism. A saintly life could further restore the “natural” primordial condition, but the correction of the historical effects have to await the Second Coming and the great purging of evil from the universe. In orthodoxy, that remains a remote prospect or an allegory of the spiritual life. In radical sectarianism it becomes as imminent and immanent as history itself. In context, the eating of the forbidden fruit, like the ritual fault, is anything but trivial.

Ritual Tautology

One has to admit a certain circularity of argument here: what makes an apparently trivial act so hugely important in its context? Why, the context itself makes it important. The circularity inheres in all kinds of activities, religious and secular, and is not reserved to primitive peoples. As a closed, self-contained argument it is basically irrefutable and acts as a hedge against uncertainty and meaninglessness. In the concrete it is an assurance that the culture is doing things right, and it becomes most evident in ritual behavior. There, one arbitrary disposition of things is made the only proper disposition. The African Fall story just cited is an example. The story assumes a proper disposition of people in

a procession, flutist first, drummer last; the propriety of the disposition in return assumes the story—just consider the consequences of improper disposition! Finally, both the story and the custom assume and affirm the importance of orderly disposition as such. In modern industrial and post-industrial cultures there is the curious phenomenon of the celebrity celebrated for being a celebrity. After the circularities have exhausted themselves, only an assumption and affirmation of celebrity as such are left.

It is possible that all myths rest on such tautology. But it is far less evident in some than in others. There are Fall stories that seek to make the primordial catastrophe enormous enough in itself to warrant the subsequent disaster. These take their power first from broad philosophical, theological, and moral principles and only secondarily from the more particular catastrophic consequences. Such principles might be that absolute being is the absolute good, that the divine will has the force of law for all creation, that human life (however defined) and social order (however defined) are sacrosanct. When the Fall offends against such a principle, then the horrendous consequences almost go without saying.

Gnostics

The Gnostics in their extremism again provide the clearest case. Their doctrines are esoteric and strange but rest on an altogether systematic ideology rooted in the first of the above principles, that absolute being is the absolute good. At least two consequences follow from that principle: that unity is the primordial condition (absolute being allowing for no rival), and that knowledge (*gnosis*) of that truth is the highest value. Add a dualistic disposition and the pattern of Doomsday speculation, and the rest of the system follows reasonably and proportionately. One could thus safely “predict” that ignorance would be

the agent and disunity the result of the passage out of original perfection. And so it is.

Primordial Unity

In the “Gospel of Truth,” the All, who dwelt within the incomprehensible, inconceivable one, was ignorant of the Father. And this ignorance brought about anguish and terror. Anguish grew solid, like a fog, obscuring the Father and so created Error. Error foolishly, not knowing of the truth, made matter and thereupon a creature. With all its might it created “in beauty a substitute for truth” (*NH*, p. 38). So much for Keats.

In the “Tripartite Tractate” the Logos begot himself as a perfect unity for the glory of the Father, but he doubted. Out of that doubt came shadows, likenesses, a division in the unity, “forgetfulness and ignorance of himself and that which is” (p. 68). His perfection fled back to its source leaving only a weakling, a deficiency. Out of that, in turn, came arrogant thought which produced more shadows, likenesses, phantasms. These, knowing not that they had a source, grew vain, ambitious, and disobedient (p. 69), and had offspring (p. 70). In due course the Logos established an Archon over all images and used him as a hand to beautify and shape things below (p. 80), including man. The first man was led astray by the force of thought and desire, and through his transgression death came into the world (p. 83).

Sophia and Yaltabaoth

The “Apocryphon of John” tells the story not just of the Fall but of a series of Falls, a cataract that does not even end in the Great Deluge but continues beyond it. To begin with, the One, the Father of everything, had a thought, his first thought, his own image, and it

produced his feminine counterpart, Sophia (p. 101). She wanted to bring forth a likeness of herself without the cooperation of the spirit, and through the power of her thought she begot a creature, imperfect and different from herself, called Yaltabaoth (p. 104). He was the first Archon. She concealed him in a cloud, where he organized a universe on the model of the primordial reality, not because he knew it, but because of the likeness he took from his mother (p. 105). And having accomplished that he said to himself, "I am a jealous God and there is no other god beside me." In response a voice came forth from the heavens announcing the existence of First Man, who is the Father in human form (p. 106). Turning to the authorities that attended him, the Chief Archon said, "come, let us make a man according to the image of God and our own likeness, that his image may become a light for us" (p. 107). And even after 365 angels had labored over the task, man was still without motion.

Now the mother wished to retrieve the power Yaltabaoth had inherited from her. With the cooperation of the father, Yaltabaoth was tricked into breathing his power into the man, who thereupon moved, gained strength, and was luminous. Yaltabaoth did not know what he had done, "for he exists in ignorance," but that soul, fashioned after the One, was all the divinity Yaltabaoth had, and he lost it, deceived by his mother and the One, when he gave Adam life. Then the Archons were jealous of man, for they had given him all their light, "and they threw him into the lowest region of all matter" (p. 109). But the One, in his great mercy, sent a helper to Adam, luminous Epinoia ("after-mind"), whom he concealed in Adam, that the Archons might not know her.

The Archons placed Adam in paradise and bade him eat as he wished, but they did so because their luxury is bitter and depraved. But the Lord himself persuaded Adam to eat of the fruit. And Eve was

created in the image of Epinoia. When Yaltabaoth noticed that the two of them withdrew from him, he cursed his earth, cast them out of paradise, and seduced Eve. From this union were born Eloim and Yave, who are called Cain and Abel “with a view to deceive” (p. 112). Yaltabaoth's next depredation was the seduction of his mother Sophia, out of which union was born “bitter fate.” And from that fate “came forth every sin and injustice and blasphemy and chain of forgetfulness and ignorance and every difficult command and serious sins [sic] and great fear” (p. 114).

On account of man's superiority, Yaltabaoth repented of his whole creation and planned the Deluge. But the light of foreknowledge informed Noah, and he saved himself and the sons of men who would listen to him. Then Yaltabaoth and his powers created a despicable spirit, and his angels used it to change their likenesses into the mates of human beings. These, having nothing of the original light within them, led men astray with many deceptions. People “became old without having enjoyment. They died without having found the truth and knowing the God of Truth. And thus the whole of creation became enslaved forever, from the foundations of the world until now” (p. 115). The angels of the despicable spirit correspond to the “sons of God” in Genesis who “saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose” (6.1-2).

The Fall into Creation

The “Gospel of Philip” contains two Falls, the one is creation itself, “the world came about through a mistake” (p. 145); the other is the separation of Eve from androgynous Adam, because of which death came into the world (p. 142). In the “Hypostasis of the Archons,” Pistis (faith), who is also called Sophia (wisdom), wished to create without her consort,

and her wish produced a celestial thing (p. 157), whence a veil came into being between the upper and the lower realms, whence a shadow, whence matter, like an aborted fetus who, opening his eyes said, "It is I who am God, and there is no other apart from me," and in so saying he sinned against the Entirety. He knew envy and that envy became death (pp. 158-59). He tried persistently to separate the divine element from Adam and eventually threw Adam and Eve out of the Garden into a life of distraction and toil, that they "might be occupied by worldly affairs and might not have the opportunity of being devoted to the Holy Spirit" (p. 156).

"On the Origin of the World" adheres to the pattern associated with the rhetoric of Doomsday more completely than any other text in the Nag Hammadi library. Its cosmogony is the story of the Fall into creation. First there was only the boundless One, then the immortals, then Sophia flowed out of Pistis. Sophia wished to create an imitation of the primordial light, and immediately it appeared, an incomprehensible greatness that is like a veil separating the higher and lower regions. Although there was no darkness within it, it cast a shadow called chaos or the abyss. The shadow perceived that there was one stronger than itself and thereby begot envy, which permeates all the worlds, and it begot also wrath, which was cast into a region of chaos (pp. 162-63). Amid chaos a miscarriage, an afterbirth appeared, which is matter.

When Pistis was what her deficiency has brought about, she was sorely disturbed. That disturbance fled into the abyss, but she breathed upon it, and a ruler (archon) appeared, not knowing whence he came. He is called Yaldabaoth [sic], who saw only himself in his greatness and, ignorantly, thought himself alone. He moved to and fro over matter, separating the watery substance from the dry, and built himself a dwelling called heaven and a footstool called earth (p. 163). After he had

created the heavens and appointed governors, he said, "I do not need anything; I am God and no other exists except me," and in so saying he sinned against all the immortal ones (p. 164). His son, Sabaoth, rebelled against him and was rewarded with the light. When Yaldabaoth saw him, he grew jealous and angry and thereby begot death. Death begot seven androgynous sons: Jealousy, Wrath, Weeping, Sighing, Mourning, Lamentation, and Tearful Groaning, who have the female names Wrath, Grief, Lust, Sighing, Cursing, Bitterness, and Quarrelsomeness (p. 167).

Paradise

Justice created the beautiful paradise. Adam and Eve inhabit it after a series of descents that finally give them material bodies called "hedges for the light" (pp. 170-73). The messengers of the authorities forbade them the fruit of the tree of knowledge, but the Instructor came and persuaded Eve, and she Adam, and "their minds opened . . . the light shone for them . . . they knew that they were naked with regard to knowledge" (p. 174). When the rulers grew aware that their commandment had been transgressed, they cursed everything they had created. They cast Adam and Eve out of Paradise (pp. 174-75) and desired to diminish their lifetimes, but fate had already determined them for a thousand years. Those who do evil reduce that span by ten years. It has now been reduced by 930 years and will continue to proceed downward until the end of the aeon (p. 176).

The remaining texts of the Nag Hammadi library variously attribute the Fall to the arrogance of Yaldabaoth, which made necessary the appearance of the Redeemer (pp. 227-28); to unchaste spirits, by means of which matter came into being (p. 318); to the envy of the archons, who likewise are responsible for matter, "a counterfeit of fire and earth and a murderer" (p. 337). The chief archon or Yaldabaoth or

the Demiurge envied Adam that he had eaten of the tree of knowledge and cast him out of paradise lest he should eat of the tree of life and live forever (p. 412). The same daemon inspired Cain to the murder of Abel and generated the spirits who lusted after the daughters of men (p. 440).

Gnostic Influence

This form of mythological discourse is somewhat unusual in that most traditions, most of the time, prefer simpler and more concrete forms of expression. Furthermore, the above presentation is a drastic simplification of the complexity of the actual texts. The gnostic myths, nonetheless, had considerable influence in their time, and if they did not shape later mystical cosmologies directly, they anticipated them in considerable detail. The first verses of the Gospel according to St. John suggest that some version of gnostic dualism and its vocabulary were forces to be reckoned with in the earliest days of Christianity.⁵ Manichaeism, which was once on the verge of becoming a world religion and seems not to have died out until comparatively recent times, was deeply indebted to gnostic speculation.⁶

Manichaeans

The Manichaean cosmogony begins before the creation of heaven and earth, when there were only two principles, that of the Light and the Good and that of Darkness and Evil. The Good dwelt in the Kingdom of Light with five Aeons called Understanding, Reason, Thought, Imagination, and Intention, who were all at rest and at peace with one

⁵ Pétrement, *Le Dieu Séparé*, pp. 252 and 389, note 25.

⁶ “Manichaeism must be regarded as a form of gnosticism”: Lieu, *Manichaeism*, p. 50.

another. Evil dwelt in the Kingdom of Darkness with five Aeons called Smoke, Fire, Water, Wind, and Darkness, who were all engaged in furious activity and incessant battle with one another. The forces of Darkness were seized by desire—this must be the precise moment of the Fall—when they caught sight of the Light and planned an assault. The Lord of the Light saw through their plan, but, because of the rest and peace of his kingdom, had no forces to throw against them. So he evoked the Mother of Life, and she created First Man. First Man armed himself with five light elements called ether, light, wind, water, and fire. With these he engaged the forces of Darkness. But his forces were swallowed by the forces of Darkness and he himself captured.

In order to free him, the Lord of the Light evoked new deities, of whom the most important was the Living Spirit, who descended into the darkness, awoke First Man with his call, and conducted him back to the Kingdom of Light. The five elements of Light, however, remained behind in the clutches of Darkness. To begin the long process of recovering them, the Mother of Life and the Living Spirit conquer and destroy the Sons of Darkness and out of their corpses fashion heaven and earth, whose materiality is thus of the Darkness, even though the Light gave them shape. A third deity is evoked, the Messenger, who follows in the trail of First Man down into the Darkness. He inhabits the material sun, and his feminine counterpart, the Light Virgin, inhabits the material moon. Their business is to oversee the recapture of those fragments of the Light which remained in the Darkness when First Man was rescued. Those fragments pass from the earth to the moon, and from the moon to the sun to be purified before returning to the Kingdom of the Light. The whole of material creation, the great organized universe or macrocosm, is nothing but a device for winning back the light.

The forces of Darkness respond with a counter-creation, man, the small organized universe or microcosm, whom they shape after the Messenger and the Light Virgin for the purpose of concealing the fragments of the light which they, the forces of Darkness, still possess. Thus, with two exceptions, 1) the tiny fragment of the light within and 2) his shape (an imitation of the Messenger and the Light Virgin), man is wholly the stuff and work of Darkness. The Lord of the Light counterattacks by sending Adam a messenger, Jesus, who may endow Adam with salvific knowledge (*gnosis*) of the whole plan.

This is gnostic cosmogony or their story of the beginning of things. The corresponding story of the end of things or eschatology tells of how all the remaining light will eventually be freed, and the Messenger will return to the Kingdom of Light to announce the end of the world. Heaven and earth will collapse, since they are nothing but the dead stuff of darkness, and will be annihilated in a fire lasting 1468 years. Then the primordial condition will be reestablished, except that Darkness will have lost its furious activity and will lie in total immobility, as the peace and freedom of the Kingdom of Light spreads over it.⁷ The eschatology is out of place in this chapter, but it has been included only to show that the Manichaeian story of the universe fully conforms to the pattern of the rhetoric of Doomsday.⁸ The relationship between the Manichaeian myth and the gnostic stories is somewhat more complicated than has here been suggested. It is conceivable that some of the Nag Hammadi texts are late enough to have been influenced by Manichaeian proselytizing. It would, however, be a return influence, for historically and intellectually

⁷ Hans Heinrich Schaeder, "Urform und Fortbildung des Manichäischen Systems," *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg*, 1924-25 (Leipzig: Teubner, 1927), pp. 65-157; here, pp. 77-82.

⁸ *Manichaeism*, p. 8.

gnosticism comes first. The light and darkness imagery and the corresponding dualism common to both Mani and the Gnostics was widespread, extending at least from Persia to Qumran long before Mani came on the scene (born in Babylon 215-216; publicly executed for heresy by a recently reestablished Zoroastrian clergy in Persia in A.D. 273).

Repudiation of the Cosmos

It is characteristic of these stories to impose blame for the Fall on a prehistoric event. An apparent exception is in the “Tripartite Tractate” where human conformity to the operational forces of evil (thought and desire) brings death into the world. But even here the “fall into being” is antecedent and a much more serious business.⁹ In general, these stories relieve human beings of any personal responsibility for the present mess. It is the work of supernatural forces, and all the errors that result eventually in the creation of the cosmos are divine errors. The anti-biblical Gnostics go out of their way to demolish the very notion of human responsibility. By transforming the eating of the forbidden fruit into a virtuous act, inspired by the forces of good and leading to knowledge (*gnosis*), they are showing their boundless contempt for the cosmos, both macro (the universe) and micro (man). Any offense against the creator and his creation is a blessing, for the creator is a monster and his creation a divine nightmare. The best that human beings can hope for is an awakening that will liberate the human soul and give the nightmare less substance.

This radical repudiation of the cosmos deeply offended Neoplatonic pagans, who used a very similar mythological vocabulary but toward a

⁹ Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 62; Pétremont, *Le Dieu Séparé*, p. 24 and *passim*, s.v. “anticosmisme.”

diametrically opposite end: to affirm the cosmos as a projection of the divine mind.¹⁰ However, given the priority of idea over matter in both systems, the gnostic-Manichaean conclusion is no less plausible than the Neoplatonic. This must have been especially annoying to the Neoplatonists and might help to explain their extraordinary hostility.

As an expression of the rhetoric of Doomsday, these Fall stories not only dismantle the present, the world-as-it-is, they also dismantle the world in and of itself, present, past, and future, all time, all history. There may be a sense in which these myths seek merely to explain the world-as-it-is, but the evaluation they place upon it is as radically, totally, one-sidedly negative as can be imagined. The invention was not merely descriptive or allegorical. These story tellers meant to instill an attitude toward the world, which reflected a profound hostility to whatever realities surrounded them.¹¹

The Fall takes Place on Earth

The form of mythological discourse employed by these religions—even the Neoplatonism of those times was more a religion than a philosophy—denies any empirical similarity between the divine and the human. The unmediated transformation of will into reality may characterize the magical world of, say, childhood fantasy or trance, but it has little to do with ordinary waking experience. Contrast, on the one hand, the notion of simply propelling the idea of man into being with, on the other, the shaping of a lump of clay into a recognizable object. The writers of Genesis had certainly observed a potter at the wheel. In stories of the gnostic type, ignorance, anguish, envy, and wrath surely

¹⁰ Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, pp. 253-54.

¹¹ Green, *The Economic and Social Origins of Gnosticism*, p. 169.

derive from human behavior, but they are made to act independently. The Greek and Hebrew mainstream traditions, not to mention the native mythologies generally studied by anthropology, much prefer to bring things down to earth. Their Fall stories involve personalities, passions, and shortcomings all too familiar to the human scene.

Graeco-Roman Antiquity

Hesiod

Hesiod, in his eminent good sense, knows that all blessings are mixed blessings and, for that matter, all curses too. He points out that humanity requires struggle for life. Of course, there is the kind of struggle no one really likes, the kind that fosters evil war and cruel battle.¹² But there is also the kind that “stirs up even the shiftless to toil,” as neighbors vie with neighbors in the rush for wealth: “this strife is wholesome for men” (20-24). A certain degree of hardship is also healthy, and for this reason “the gods keep hidden from men the means of life.” Otherwise, men could possibly achieve in a day enough to keep them supplied for a year without the need for further work, with who knows what consequences. For one, the fields and the beasts of burden would go to ruin (42-44). Hesiod is clearly an agrarian primitivist. He speaks well of the simple diet of the poor (41) and has reservations about the Promethean gift of fire. Fire signifies for Hesiod the “means of life,” and it was not intended for man. Prometheus, the culture hero of the Greeks, thus becomes the occasion for the Fall.

¹² Hesiod, *Erga*, ll. 14-16: *Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns, and Homerica*, trans. Hugh Evelyn-White, Loeb Classical Library, 57 (1914; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1943), p. 2. Numbers in text refer to lines of this edition.

The architect of the Fall is Zeus himself.¹³ “Ere this” Zeus had allowed the tribes of men to live free of ill, hard toil, and burdensome disease (90-92). But now, furious at the Promethean theft, he plans an exquisite revenge, the very thought of which makes the great god laugh. The laughter of the gods rarely bodes well for mankind: “But we will give to men as the price for fire an evil thing in which they all may be glad of heart while they embrace their own destruction” (57-58). Although this could describe, from the primitivist's viewpoint, the gift of fire itself, the poet and Zeus had something else in mind. The instrument of the Fall is Pandora, fashioned by the gods with voice and strength and beauty and skill, but also with longing, care, a shameless mind, and a deceitful nature (69-68). To her the gods each give a gift, each gift “a plague to men who eat bread” (80-82).

Epimetheus received Pandora, forgetting until it was too late the counsel of Prometheus never to accept a gift from Olympian Zeus “but to send it back for fear that it might prove to be something harmful to men” (85-88). Being who he was (afterthought), Epimetheus “took the gift, and afterwards, when the evil thing was his, he understood” (89). Pandora, now present among men and insatiably curious, took the lid off the jar that contained the fearful gifts of the gods and, lo, all ills, hard toil, and loathsome diseases were loosed upon mankind, in addition to which “her thought caused sorrow and mischief to men” (94-95).

The motif of Pandora's box is to be found wherever curiosity, vanity, or sheer accident cause a vessel to be opened that looses death or misfortune upon the world.¹⁴ Among the Cherokee the motif is employed to explain both the need for the hunt and the discomforts of life in the forests. Kanati, the lucky hunter, used to keep all the game in a hole

¹³ Edelstein, *The Idea of Progress*, p. 45 and note 51.

¹⁴ Baumann, *Schöpfung und Urzeit*, pp. 285-86 and 304.

behind a rock in a great mountain. When he wanted meat he simply lifted the rock, released an animal, and killed it. His children, Wild Boy and his brother, once secretly watched their father's deeds and later went to the spot to do the same. But in their confusion they released all the game. Kanati was very angry, went to the cave, and kicked the covers off four jars, out of which swarmed bedbugs, fleas, lice, and gnats, which got all over the boys. When he felt they had been punished enough, he knocked off the vermin and lectured the boys, telling them that from now on they would have to hunt all over the woods for game and then maybe not find it.¹⁵

As Hesiod tells the story, the Fall might have been averted if Prometheus had not stolen fire, if Zeus had not minded the theft, if Epimetheus had declined the gift, and if Pandora had not opened the jar. This array of explanations—the transmission to men of forbidden knowledge, divine anger (or envy), carelessness, and curiosity—extends across a good part of the spectrum of possible Fall stories. At face value, Hesiod's story is a simple etiological fable explaining how evil came into the world. His ambivalence, however, makes it more complex. Zeus, on the one hand, means well by human beings in keeping them simple so that they need to struggle but is, on the other hand, the architect of all human misery. Prometheus disobeys a divine command, brings humanity a questionable boon, yet seeks to prevent the gods from working their malicious will on humanity. To compound the complexity, Hesiod makes light of this very serious business. In general, the laughter of the gods has an ominous, if not a positively terrifying ring. But here, Hesiod invites the audience, or at least the men in the audience, to join in on the laughter. By turning woman into the instrument of all human

¹⁵ James Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee* (1900; New York: Johnson Reprint, 1970), pp. 243-44.

misery—Pandora is the first of her sex—he leavens the gravity of the origins myth and makes it, in part, a misogynistic etiological joke at the expense of Mrs. Hesiod.

Hesiod does not leave the Fall in that uncertain state, but proceeds at once to offer yet another explanation and does so in so many words, “or if you will, I will sum up another tale” (106). This one tells the story of the degeneration of the races from gold to iron. As splendid as the golden race was, it passed away, and the gods fashioned a silver race among whom men “could not keep from sinning and wronging one another, nor would they serve the immortals, nor sacrifice on the holy altars of the blessed ones as it is right for men to do wherever they dwell” (134-37). The brazen race was even worse, loving war and violence (145-48). Hesiod interrupts the unrelenting course of human decline to make room for the Homeric heroes and their Elysium, but resumes the course with the iron race, our own, “who never rest from labor and sorrowing by day and perishing by night” (176-77).

Side by side Hesiod presents some Greek folklore, susceptible of various interpretations, and an unequivocally pessimistic theory of history. In the former, the Pandora story, the life of man is made only difficult and painful; in the latter, the four races story, the life of the race is subject to degeneration of the worst kind, beginning with discord and impiety and ending with a breakdown of all values, so that “men will praise the evil-doer and his violent dealing” (192-93).

Accusations of impiety, particularly important to the ancients of Greece and Rome, cut two ways. Wicked people were the intended brunt of the attack, but, implicitly, the gods were also being reproached for their failure to intervene in history to punish the wicked. The withdrawal of the gods from human affairs clearly indicated just how bad things had gotten.

Only the Age of the Heroes provides relief; and there are those rare places where Justice rules and where, on that account, peace prevails, the earth is fertile, the sheep laden with fleece, and people “do not travel in ships, for the grain-giving earth bears them fruit” (225-37). The degeneration is so terrible that Hesiod wishes he had been born in any age but this one, before or after (174-75), allowing that the degeneration may yet be reversed. No particular event initiated the long dismal process. The gods themselves seem vaguely responsible for their inability to make anything better. In the absence of an event, the process becomes equivalent to the Fall. The process is what distinguishes us from the Golden Age. The process is, furthermore, indistinguishable from the vice that characterizes it: discord, impiety, and all their consequences. Ever hovering at the edges is the distrust of all technologies beyond the plow, here explicitly, those of sea trade.

The Ancient Primitivists

Throughout Greco-Roman antiquity, the notion of the Fall and the degeneration of mankind retained very much the shape or shapes suggested by Hesiod,¹⁶ except that moral decay and technological development incline to be more closely woven together. Those who thought simply in terms of then and now and had some pet cause to cultivate had no trouble identifying the origin and course of human imperfection. Pythagoras, if Ovid is to be believed, makes eating meat the principal characteristic of the fallen state. It is the work of “some innovator” who introduced the snare and the rest of the technology of the

¹⁶ For whom the metallic metaphor and the non-cyclical, linear, degenerative process was far from original: Martin Noth, “Das Geschichtsverständnis der alttestamentlichen Apokalyptik,” in his *Gesammelte Schriften zum Alten Testament*, 2 vols. Theologische Bücherei, 6 and 39 (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1957-69), 1, pp. 252-53 and note 2.

hunt (*Primitivism*, pp. 61-62). Pythagoras could stand for all the primitivists of antiquity. They had a clear picture of what anti-primitivists would call progress. The most radical of them assumes an absolutely culture-free primordial condition, man as animal; what is more, man as herbivorous animal (pp. 19-20 and 32). Any departure from that condition is a departure from “nature” and the Golden Age.

The ancients were, furthermore, good anthropologists and recognized a sequence of cultural developments from the pre-cultural vegetarian starting point to the technology of the hunt (including fishing and snaring birds), to the domestication of animals (with its initially nomadic consequences and the first glimmer of the idea of private property, there now being something worth owning), to agriculture (with permanent settlements), to cities and civilization. Agrarians exempted agriculture from this degeneration, presumably because it resembled primitive vegetarianism. The ultra-primitivists, however, would have none of that. Without exception, whatever could conceivably have something to do with civilization was to be repudiated.¹⁷ Take, for example, that most civilizing of human institutions, the law. To have Justice herself walking in person on the earth was as much as saying that there was no need for law: thus Ovid in so many words (p. 46). The legal codes of Christian times routinely explain that law was unnecessary in the Garden of Eden, that law, at best, is a bitter remedy for some of

¹⁷ “For cultural primitivism by definition considers the arts and sciences as the source of evil; man would be better off without them”: Boas, *Essays*, p. 195.

the consequences of the Fall.¹⁸ Pompeius Trogus and Tacitus anticipate this bleak view (*Primitivism*, pp. 96-98).

The texts of the ancient primitivists generally do not distinguish between the vicious behavior of humanity and the civilizing practices that remove it from the “state of nature.”¹⁹ To be sure, the one is sometimes made prior and causal, and sometimes the other, but basically human vice and civilization act as the woof and warp of the fallen state. Empedocles knew that the world was a much better place before war, the thirst for power, and animal sacrifice came on the scene (*Primitivism*, p. 33). Aratus concurs, adding long-distance sea trade and eating meat (p. 35). Hyginus specifies avarice (p. 37). Tibullus names the destroyer “love of pillage,” which causes war, sea trade, and enclosure of common lands (p. 42). When Ovid takes a then-and-now stance and seeks a single explanation for the difference, he settles on the laceration of the face of mother earth: by the plow, mining, making boundaries, navigation (p. 63). When he is taking the degenerative stance, he follows Hesiod through the ages. In the silver age, Jupiter introduces the seasons in place of enduring Spring. In the bronze age, men take up arms. In the iron age, all manner of evil breaks out, deceit, treachery, force, avarice, sea trade, private property, mining. The laws of hospitality are violated, and family bonds ignored (pp. 47-48).

¹⁸ So, for example, *The Liber Augustalis or Constitutions of Melfi promulgated by the Emperor Frederick II for the Kingdom of Sicily in 1231*, trans. James M. Powell (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1971), pp. 3-4; and Charles IV's 1355 *Majestas Carolina*: Heinrich Friedjung, *Kaiser Karl IV and sein Antheil am geistigen Leben seiner Zeit* (Vienna: Braumüller, 1876), pp. 91-92. Both of these lament the Fall and ascribe the need for law to the loss of the primordial community of goods and the consequent greed, which caused princes to be instituted as a guarantee of justice and order.

¹⁹ Edelstein, *The Idea of Progress*, pp. 135-39.

Virgil treats the Fall variously, on some occasions as a progressive degeneration punctuated by war and avarice and navigation, the last two being interchangeable (*Primitivism*, p. 58 & note 74). On another occasion he closely follows Hesiod on the need for struggle in human affairs and makes the loss of the Golden Age a part of the divine plan for man: It was he who made nature hostile, whereupon navigation, hunting, fishing, metallurgy, and finally the plow came upon the scene, allies with man against hostile nature, but each a mixed blessing.

In Pseudo-Seneca it is first the hunt, then the domestication of cattle, the subjugation of the fierce bull to the wounding plow, mining, the drawing of boundaries around kingdoms, and the construction of new cities, all of which leads to war and slaughter, avarice, and finally “luxury, an alluring plague” (p. 52). Tacitus makes ambition and force the qualities that separate the righteous primordial age from the despotic present (p. 97). The Cynic Maximus Tyrus sums up Hesiod on the subject of the golden race and then turns directly to its collapse. Dividing the earth up into portions seems to have started it all. Then comes one misfortune after the other: walls and fortifications, soft clothing, ornament, locked houses, mining, navigation, the hunt, and in their path, avarice, treachery, tyranny, impiety, and dissension (pp. 148-49).

Judaeo-Christian Traditions

One should note in passing that not all the ancients were primitivists, indeed that not even all of these authors consistently took a primitivist stance. Primitivism was, rather, one of the conventional ways of looking at the problem of time in the context of evil. Despite the now prevailing consensus distinguishing Greco-Roman from the Hebraic sense of history—the Greco-Roman cyclical, determined by fate, and infinitely repetitive; the Hebraic linear and purposeful, demanding the

cooperation of God and man, variable but still the living realization of God's intentions—both had quite as much in common as they had proper to themselves.²⁰ History was, for both, the story of evil. To have the good without history was more than conceivable; it was a basic assumption. Good time, the Golden Age, is precisely the “time” without history, before Jupiter introduced the seasons. One could even imagine history without the good, as a tale of unrelenting misery. But history without evil was inconceivable, and evil without history was possible only in the peculiar logic of the Manichaean myth, especially in its concluding stages, and other kinds of gnostic speculation and its heirs. More simply stated, history was moral. Whether it fulfilled the divine purpose or blindly obeyed fate, history told the story of evil. History could, for the anti-primitivist and progressivist, represent the gradual conquest of evil by civilization; or, for the primitivist, it could represent the gradual triumph of evil. In both, however, evil generated history.

Radical primitivists had an easy time explaining evil. If creation itself was a mistake, then one does not have to look much farther to explain the miserable condition of things in general. The same can be said of the miserable condition of humanity in particular, if the works of man, those that differentiate him from the animals, are deemed “unnatural” and by definition degenerative. Evil is far more troublesome to those who believe in a perfect creator, one incapable of making anything but a fundamentally good creation. Evil then becomes a mystery of tremendous proportions, and no single or simple explanation really suffices.

²⁰ See for example, S. H. Hooke, *The Siege Perilous: Essays in Biblical Anthropology* (London: SCM Press, 1956), p. 126 and note 3; C. A. Patrides, *The Grand Design of History: The Literary Form of the Christian View of History* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 1-5; and Kermode, *Sense of an Ending*, p. 68.

Eve and Misogyny

Eve is thus wholly within her rights when she demands of the devil some kind of explanation for his wretched attitude. Just why does he go to all the trouble of tempting her and spoiling the happy life of mankind? The answer comes in a legend of early date and wide distribution. God gathered the clay from the four corners of the earth and made man. He summoned the angels to worship, for he had made man in his own image. At first one and then others refused, saying that they were higher and prior in the order of things. For their pride they were cast down and deprived of the divine glory. On this account the devil, quite reasonably, blames man for his catastrophe. Consumed with envy at the divine image in man, the devil is single-mindedly determined to ruin him.²¹

This legend detects and fills a gap in the Genesis stories: their failure to justify the wickedness of the serpent other than to mention in passing his subtlety. The ultimate responsibility for evil is here pushed back to an event before any human action, but not quite as far as the divinity itself. There are those who place the blame on Eve alone, “and from a woman sin had its beginning, and because of her we all die” (Eccles. 25.24), but the context reveals an exercise in misogyny rather than a serious attempt at explaining the Fall.²² Consider the laughter of Hesiod's Zeus. In the Slavonic Enoch, God himself admits that he created a Pandora-like Eve out of man's rib “that death should come to him by his

²¹ *Vita Adae et Evae*, 12-13: *OTP*, 2, p. 262; comp. Kautzsch, *Apokryphen*, 2, p. 513; Gospel of Bartholomew 4.52-60: Montague Rhodes James, ed. and trans., *The Apocryphal New Testament* (1924; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), pp. 178-79; Gregory of Nyssa, *Catachetica Magna* in *Texte*, 1, pp. 314-15.

²² Williams, *Ideas of the Fall*, p. 54.

wife” and seems thereby to confess that he cooperated in the Fall and may even have planned it from the very start.²³

Canonical Fall Stories

The idea of divine complicity is altogether foreign to the canonical narratives. The charge to abstain from the tree of knowledge (Gen. 2.17) does not appear in itself unreasonable, although the purpose of the commandment may not be self-evident. It could be regarded as a means of reminding humanity that it had a creator, that there was a limit on human sovereignty over the world: thus, for example, John Chrysostom (*Texte*, 1, p. 309). Human failure to observe the commandment could, in this interpretation, represent either simple disobedience or heaven-storming presumption, at best forgetfulness of the creator, at worst a will to remove the one limitation imposed by God and so to have a limitless existence, one proper to God alone. The text allows for the worst when the serpent specifically tempts Eve with the promise, “ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil” (3.5). But the tradition minimizes this possibility, preferring to ascribe it to the evil one and his cohorts. Instead it stresses the deception of Eve, the acquiescence of Adam, and their simple act of disobedience: thus, for example, Augustine (*Texte*, 1, pp. 310, 316-17). Interpreted in this way, the sin has its enormity not in some dark ulterior motive of the sinner but in the power and stature of the one sinned against. In either case the sin is enormous and is the principal cause of all human misery. The lord reminds his people that their wretched condition is of their own making, “thy first

²³ 2 Enoch 30.16: *OTP*, 1, p. 152; comp. Vaillant, *Le Livres des Secrets d'Hénoch*, pp. 102-103.

father hath sinned, and thy teachers have transgressed against me” (Is. 43.27).

The incident of Cain and Abel represents the second Fall story in Genesis. Irenaeus of Lyon explicitly called it such, blaming it on the inspiration of the rebellious angels (*Texte*, 1, 328), of whom, however, Genesis knows nothing. On the contrary, the Lord tells Cain that he alone is responsible for his good deeds as for his wicked ones; even though sin may seek him out, it is his business to be master over it (4.7). Cain then promptly kills his brother (4.8). He is cursed by the Lord, driven into exile, founds the first city, and fathers a line of patriarchs who are the ones who first domesticated cattle, invented music and metallurgy, and practiced murder (4.11-24). By making Cain the first city-builder and encompassing the introduction of culture with murder, the narrator plainly reveals a low opinion of the works of man.²⁴

The inclination to blame both the rebellious angels and the works of man recurs in the apocryphal literature surrounding the third Fall story in Genesis, the one that culminates in the Deluge. The canonical story mentions only that the “sons of God saw the daughters of men, that they were fair,” and that they took them to wife (6.2). The children of these unions and the giants are mentioned without any opprobrium, in fact with a hint of approval, “the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown” (6.4). One thinks of Hesiod's age of heroes. But then “God saw that the wickedness of man was great, and that every imagination of the thoughts in his heart was only evil continually” (6.5). This leads God to repent of his creation, to destroy it with the Flood, excepting only Noah, his kin, and the stock for the subsequent renewal.

²⁴ Williams, *Ideas of the Fall*, p. 50.

The Ethiopian Enoch takes the first of these verses and constructs a separate Fall story, beginning with the lust of the angels, the children of God, who are also called “the Watchers.”²⁵ They descend to earth, take wives whom they pollute and to whom they teach magic, conjuring, and the secrets of roots and herbs. Their offspring are giants who consumed the stores of mankind. When men had nothing more to give, the giants took to eating them. Men were driven to eat the flesh of birds, beasts, reptiles, and fishes, even of one another. The Watchers taught men the arts of weaponry, metallurgy, cosmetics, astrology, and prognostication, and practiced all manner of lasciviousness among them. The Testament of Reuben refers explicitly to these events as a reminder to avoid lust.²⁶ The Book of Jubilees connects the episode of the Watchers directly with God's displeasure at the corruption of all flesh and his decision to destroy his work with the Deluge and to begin again with Noah.²⁷

Lust recurs as a motive and motif throughout speculation about the Fall, but it plays no more important a part than, say, eating meat—Enoch, Reuben, and the popular wisdom notwithstanding. Yaltabaoth's behavior in the “Apocryphon of John” anticipates his late Manichaean successor, Satan, in the Bogomile *cum* Albigensian “Book of John the Evangelist.” Having shaped the world and imprisoned angels in the clay of Adam and Eve, Satan took the form of a serpent and wrought his lust with Eve and begot the sons of the serpent, “the sons of the devil even unto the end of this world.”²⁸ A remarkably similar doctrine appears as the chief text of a modern and very well-known messianic cult. The

²⁵ 1 En. 6-8: *OTP*, 1, pp. 15-16; comp. Kautzsch, *Apokryphen*, 2, pp. 238-40, and Boas, *Essays*, pp. 188-89.

²⁶ 2.8-9: *OTP*, 1, p. 782; comp. Kautzsch, *Apokryphen*, 2, p. 462.

²⁷ 5.1-3: *OTP*, 2, p. 64; comp. Kautzsch, *Apokryphen*, 2, p. 48.

²⁸ James, *Apocryphal New Testament*, p. 190.

Archangel Lucifer took a strong erotic interest in Eve and coupled with her against God's precept. Eve sought to remedy this wrong by sexual congress with Adam and thereby only made things worse, for the act had been performed without divine permission. Since then, the world has been under Satanic rule.²⁹

Large numbers of African Fall stories connect the discovery of sexual generation with death, the interruption of easy access to the deity, his departure from among men, and the loss of his instruction in immortality.³⁰ In a genteel variation, also of African provenance, polygamy brought all misery into the world, monogamy having been the primordial and proper condition.³¹

The fourth Fall story in Genesis (11.1-9) treats the work of man after the Deluge, his building of a city with a tower reaching to heaven, so that his name might be remembered and the people not scattered abroad upon the whole face of the earth. Seeing that there was nothing to stop them from accomplishing whatever they might imagine to do, the Lord confounded their language—before that the whole earth had been of one language and one speech—and scattered the people “abroad from thence across the face of the earth; and they left off to build the city.”

The Book of Jubilees develops the Tower of Babel episode for another Fall story. The children of Noah, now scattered across the earth, began to do battle with one another, to take hostages and kill them, to spill the blood of men and drink it, to build permanent cities and fortify them with walls and towers, to raise one man over the people and thus introduce kingship, to wage war, people against people, city against city,

²⁹ John Lofland, *Doomsday Cult: A Study of Conversion, Proselytization, and Maintenance of Faith* (Engelwood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1966), p. 16.

³⁰ Baumann, *Schöpfung und Urzeit*, p. 293.

³¹ Baumann, *Schöpfung und Urzeit*, p. 191.

to acquire weapons, to teach children the ways of war, and finally to take and sell slaves.³²

There is at least one canonical Fall story outside of Genesis but within its circle of reference, and it is to be found in Ezekiel (28.15-18). The extraordinary creature who inhabits paradise was perfect until the day that iniquity was found in him. And that iniquity was merchandise, violence, and sin. He was corrupted by his own beauty and defiled his own sanctuaries by the iniquity of his traffic. It was pride and trade that cost him paradise.

The canonical Fall stories consistently blame humanity and its works for all the ills of the world. The commentaries, among which we include the apocrypha, basically concur but seek again and again some further explanation prior or alien to humanity. They fully affirm the wickedness of human beings and generally share the primitivistic bias of the canonical texts but seem uncomfortable with the notion that anything that puny humans can do by themselves might possibly warrant the miserable consequences that are life in this world.

The Sibyls

The most important western traditions concerning the Fall were thrown together, as it seems, poorly mixed, and served as a new recipe by the Sibylline Oracles. They leave the impression that Hesiod had been allowed to edit Genesis. Only the Erythraean Sibyl, quoted by Emperor Constantine, believed with the popular wisdom that the primordial sin was lust.³³ Otherwise the Sibyls depart little from the mainstream of speculation about the Fall. The first Fall seems to have been a matter of

³² *OTP*, 2, p. 78; comp. Kautzsch, *Apokryphen*, 2, p. 60.

³³ Kurfess, *Sibyllinische Weissagungen*, pp. 216-17.

simple curiosity, a wish to know more about good and evil. The woman sinned first, and she deceived man. They were overcome by shame, and the wrath of the Immortal One was inflamed against them. He drove them out of the place of the immortals and made death their lot. Nonetheless, the first generation of men lived splendid lives and the Lord loved them, until sin, incest, treachery, and war overtook them. The second race was wonderfully skilled in practical matters and invented the plow, carpentry, ships, astronomy, prognostication, and magic, but they ended in infernal fire. The third race was haughty, violent, wicked, and murderous, and they, too, perished. The fourth race was brave but dimwitted. They spilled blood and regarded neither man nor God and finally did themselves in by war.³⁴ An even worse race followed, until the Flood destroyed all mankind except for Noah.³⁵ The subsequent generations flourished in unity—they all spoke one language—until by haughtiness they sought to build a tower to heaven, for which they were cast down in confusion.³⁶

The original Jewish Sibyl tells the same story later in the compilation. She appends to it the episode, such as it appears in the Book of Jubilees, of the quarrel among the children of Noah over the government of mankind, which led to the establishment of kingship. This was fine in the short run, for the dispute was decided in favor of Cronos; but in the long run it led to the foundation of empires and their tragic succession (borrowed from Daniel 2.31-45). It all began because the bastards of Cronos constructed the city of Babylon. An idyllic interlude, the life of the people of Ur among the Chaldaeans, is disrupted by an unknown man, draped in purple, wild, fire-breathing, a man of another

³⁴ 39-108: *OTP*, 1, pp. 336-37.

³⁵ 120-99: *OTP*, 1, pp. 337-39.

³⁶ 307-314: *OTP*, 1, p. 342; 1, 97-109, *OTP*, 1, p. 364.

law, who imposes a heavy yoke on Asia and drinks the blood of his murdered victims.³⁷

Yet another Sibyl fixes the blame for all vice on lawlessness and greed; they are the source of godlessness and disorder, the origin of war, the enemy of peace. Greed turns parents against children and against one another. It gives the land boundaries and the seas watchmen. If the heavens did not stretch so wide, then men would not have even light in common, for even it would be sold only to the rich, and God would have to create another world altogether for the poor.³⁸

The Worldwide Evidence

The Pre-historic Fall

The modes and motifs of Fall speculation in the west are anything but unique. Each, however extreme, has a parallel somewhere in another tradition, from the pre-cosmic Fall to the eating of the forbidden fruit. The Gnostic notion that the world was created by mistake can, for example, be found as far away as the Seneca nation of the Iroquois. Their cosmogony is a story, at one and the same time, of the creation of the world and of the fall from primordial splendor. The great chief and lawgiver decides to take a fair maid to wife. By the power of his breath alone she becomes pregnant. He did not know that, and, discovering her to be with child, is greatly distressed. A dream tells him how to alleviate his distress. His wife interprets the dream for him. She says, it means that the cosmic tree ought to be uprooted. "And the woman, his wife, saw that there was trouble ahead for the sky world, but she too found great pleasure in the uprooting of the tree, wishing to know what was

³⁷ 96-161, 217-264, 387-400: *OTP*, 1, pp. 364-65, 367-68, 370-71.

³⁸ *OTP*, 1, p. 418.

beneath it. Yet she did not know that to uproot the tree meant disaster for her, through the anger of the Ancient One against her.”³⁹ With tremendous effort the chief uprooted the tree, and his wife demanded to see what was beneath it. He sat her at the edge of the hole, and she peered down. He again grew angry, “for she had said nothing to indicate that she had been satisfied.” He pushed her twice. The first time she grabbed onto the soil and all manner of seeds that had fallen from the tree. The second time “the woman whose curiosity had caused the destruction of the up-above-world” fell into the hole.

This splendid story continues to tell how all the animals came to break her fall, how the world was established as her landing place, and how the rest of the universe, nature, and culture came to be. Although the story gives no more than a clue, Iroquois usage elsewhere, in texts of great authority, makes it plain that the hole resulting from an uprooted tree was a place for dumping undesirable items.⁴⁰ Except for the Desdemona motif, the erroneous presumption of adultery, the Fall aspects of the story reveal nothing unfamiliar: primordial splendor ends by ignorance of the consequences of an act of power, a woman's curiosity, the wrath of the divinity; the world itself comes into being because of a mistake or a casting down into the lower depths.

The Alien causes the Fall

This story takes place, like the Gnostic cosmogonies, on an alien plane. The Fall is prior to the world, and the world is a consequence of

³⁹ Parker, *Seneca Myths*, pp. 60-61.

⁴⁰ Arthur C. Parker, “The Constitution of the Five Nations or the Iroquois Book of the Great Law” (1916), pp. 9, 49, 102, 153, and 155: reprinted and separately paginated as in the original, in *Parker on the Iroquois*, William N. Fenton, ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1968).

it. Take, by way of contrast, a Fall story where the events are on one and the same plane, such as the Jewish Sibyl's evaluation of Ur and the man of another law. There an intrusion from without destroys the primordial condition, more good old days than Golden Age. Just so is the Fall story told by Handsome Lake. The story is housed not in a cosmogony but in a foundation myth of a new religion, one made necessary by the collapse of the old ways under European pressure. The story is meant to justify the new religion's moral code and its repudiation of the white man's ways.

Across the great salt sea there lived a young preacher. His queen once asked him to clean some old volumes. In these he read of a prophet, son of the Great Ruler. This prophet had been killed by the white man and had promised to return from the dead in three days and in forty days to establish his kingdom. All of this failed to happen, and the followers of the prophet despaired. The young preacher who read this story felt deceived and grew angry. He went to the chief preacher with his complaint. The chief preacher told him that indeed the prophet lived on this earth, and he sent the young preacher out to find him. When the young preacher woke up the next morning, he looked out of his window and saw in the middle of a river a beautiful island with a castle of gold upon it. He thought, this must surely be the abode of him whom I seek. He crossed over a bridge of shining gold and ventured into the castle.

There he found a handsome, smiling man, who told him of a land across the sea, toward the sunset, where people are virtuous. The smiling man gave the young preacher a bundle of things to bring with him—a pack of playing cards, a handful of coins, a violin, a flask of rum, and a decayed leg bone—and promised him riches if he should seek these people out. The young preacher confided his secret to a man named Columbus, who secured several big canoes, raised wings on them, and

sailed away. Columbus discovered the new country and, upon his return, spread word of his discovery all over the world. Then came many large ships, and the gifts of the bundle were distributed to all the men of the great earth island.

Then did the invisible man of the river island laugh and then did he say, "these cards will make them gamble away their wealth and idle their time; this money will make them dishonest and covetous and they will forget their old laws; this fiddle will make them dance with their arms about their wives and bring about a time of tattling and idle gossip; this rum will turn their minds to foolishness and they will barter their country for baubles; then will this secret poison eat the life from their blood and crumble their bones." So said the invisible man and he was . . . the evil one.

Now all this was done and when afterwards he saw the havoc and misery his work had done he said, "I think I have made an enormous mistake for I did not dream that these people would suffer so." Then did even the devil himself lament that this evil had been so great.⁴¹

Unusual here is only the devil's regret at the enormity of the suffering caused by the trick. Imagine his regret witnessing the century after the death of Handsome Lake (1815).

Placing Christ in the camp of the Evil One appears to be fairly commonplace among peoples whose cultural disruption was accompanied by Christian missionary activity. The following Fall story was told among the Samoyed peoples of Siberia. One fine day the devil visited the house of Itje, the culture hero, and asked for food and drink. Itje, recognizing him, gave him stones instead. Thereupon the Evil One looked up Christ who satisfies his hunger with human blood. A warm

⁴¹ Parker, "The Code of Handsome Lake, the Seneca Prophet" (1913), pp. 16-18, reprinted and separately paginated as in the original, in Fenton, *Parker on the Iroquois*.

friendship grew up between them. Christ, the friend of the devil and father of all Russians, came with his henchmen to Siberia. The evil forces triumphed, the Samoyed peoples were scattered to the winds, and the stranger became lord of the land. It was then that Itje left his people and prepared himself a dwelling on the side of the great sea. And there he sleeps to this day. But when the time comes⁴²

These two Fall stories, Handsome Lake's and the Samoyed, respond to very similar circumstances and obviously have very much in common. But there is at least one crucial point at which they differ, one strongly suggestive of the difference between the canonical and non-canonical treatments of the Fall in Judaeo-Christian tradition: the question of responsibility. In the Samoyed, as in the non-canonical stories, the responsibility for the Fall is shifted away from the people or lies wholly beyond them. In Handsome Lake's, as in the canonical stories, the responsibility for the Fall lies in part in humanity. The Fall requires the consent and cooperation of human beings or the people, no matter what the ultimate source of the evil may be. The people, after all, do not have to gamble, drink, trade in money, or mingle with the European and so become diseased. But the people have little choice when it comes to destruction by a more powerful enemy.

Occasionally the alien is unequivocally condemned as the one solely responsible for the end of the previous happy condition, without any expression of the complicity of the victim: so for example the Kiowa medicine man, Paingyu, who prophesied in 1887 that God would destroy the white man as the white man had destroyed the buffalo;⁴³ so also the Jewish Sibyl with the disruption of the just life of the children of Abraham by the man of another law; so also the Samoyed story.

⁴² Mühlmann, *Chiliasmus*, p. 204.

⁴³ Wilson, *Magic*, p. 296.

The People cause the Fall

But it is far more common to lay some part of the blame or all of it at one's own doorstep. The Dayak of Borneo, mentioned in the previous chapter (see above page 38) as that tribe which employs the marriage rite to recall and restore the primordial unity, remember also an original paradise, lost "because of quarrels and disobedience to the law, with the result that man henceforth cannot be cured from death."⁴⁴ The departure from this world by the culture hero Manseren was regarded as a catastrophe by his cultists on the New Guinean islands. He left because a woman had expressed doubt in his powers, and he swore not to return until the people had paid for the error of their ways.⁴⁵ The first Conde, a people from the northern end of Lake Nyasa, once enjoyed immortality and lived in the harmony of paradise with the animals about them. But that was before they gave up their vegetarian diet and started to eat the flesh of the buffalo. Then they began to die, and from that time on enmity ruled between men and beasts.⁴⁶

The Lambas of Zambia tell a story that the Lord of the Earth sent a messenger to God to collect seed grain. God gave the messenger two bundles with strict instructions not to open one of them. The messenger, consumed with curiosity, opened the bundle anyway, and death escaped into the world. The Lord of the Earth had the messenger killed. But the punishment was to no avail, for death remains at large in the world.⁴⁷ The Luba people of the lower Congo place primordial man in a Genesis-like paradise, free but for a single prohibition, the fruit of the

⁴⁴ Justus M. van der Kroef, "Messianic Movements in the Celebes, Sumatra, and Borneo," in Thrupp, ed., *Millennial Dreams*, pp. 80-121; here p. 110.

⁴⁵ LaBarre, *Ghost Dance*, p. 246; Wilson, *Magic*, p. 205.

⁴⁶ Baumann, *Schöpfung und Urzeit*, p. 295.

⁴⁷ Baumann, *Schöpfung und Urzeit*, p. 285.

two forbidden banana trees, which, of course, he tastes. When God demands an explanation, man denies guilt and accuses the sun and the moon. God buries all three, the sun, the moon, and man, as a test of innocence. The sun returns on the next day, the moon on the third day, and man stays buried. So God discovers the guilty one, and so it is that men die and do not return from burial in the earth. Cognate African myths implicate man even further. He refuses to pay tribute to the divinity, indeed, steals the palm wine set aside for tribute, or kills the son of God come to collect tribute. In each case he accuses others falsely, fails the divine ordeal, and thereby hands his successors the legacy of death.⁴⁸

There are many others who, like the Graeco-Roman ancients, find it difficult to pinpoint a specific action to blame and so identify the Fall more generally with the vicious life of mankind or an ineluctable degenerative process in which humanity is both cause and effect. The Yoruba of the lower Niger let an overall corruption of morals—incest, robbery, and murder—lead up to the Fall, the introduction of death into the world.⁴⁹ The Tupí-Guaraní of Brazil suffered from general world-weariness, a conviction that everything was on the decline, and that flight in to the Land without Evil was the only way to escape the inevitable, terminal disaster.⁵⁰ The Taiping revolutionaries of nineteenth-century China took all of human events—history as such, from the period of the Great Peace, the blissful beginnings, until their own intolerably corrupt times—as a single, sinful interim, thousands of years of apostasy.⁵¹ However unspecific these Fall explanations may be,

⁴⁸ Baumann, *Schöpfung und Urzeit*, pp. 286-87.

⁴⁹ Baumann, *Schöpfung und Urzeit*, p. 295.

⁵⁰ Nimuendajú Unkel, “Die Sagen,” pp. 335 and 399; Wilson, *Magic*, p. 212.

⁵¹ Boardman, “Millenary Aspects,” in Thrupp, ed., *Millennial Dreams*, p. 70.

none is ready to relieve humanity of the burden of responsibility for the deplorable direction of events.

Identical sentiments characterize the great cross-section of very specific Fall stories from around the world. One way or the other, human beings are responsible. In most stories, the process is not quite so abstract and generalized. Some specific person, people, event, deed, or series of deeds makes the process concrete. The adherents of a Brazilian messianic movement of this century look forward with dread to some terrible cataclysm due soon to occur because they have offended Dyai, the culture hero, by corrupting their ancient spiritual culture under the influence of civilized peoples.⁵² Contamination casts the intruder, if there is one, into the role of scourge for the sins of the people.

In that case the intruder is as much a consequence as a cause of the Fall. In the North American plains the participants of the 1890 Ghost Dance were ready to admit that the Great Spirit had sent the white man as a punishment for their own wrongdoing.⁵³ A century earlier, the Shawnee prophet, Tenskwatawa, told his tribe that “when they had become corrupt, the Great Spirit had removed their power and given it to the white man.”⁵⁴ Even earlier, the Delaware Prophet reproached his people with their offenses against the Master of Life, which had driven the game from the forests. In their wickedness, the people had gone over to new ways, for example, to the use of bad-smelling gunpowder instead of bows and arrows when they hunted.⁵⁵ The Ekoi people of southern Nigeria expressed a similar sense of technological primitivism and had an ecological quid pro quo to go with it. For every

⁵² LaBarre, *Ghost Dance*, p. 204.

⁵³ Mooney, *The Ghost Dance Religion*, p. 787.

⁵⁴ Wilson, *Magic*, p. 231.

⁵⁵ LaBarre, *Ghost Dance*, p. 206.

animal killed a human being dies, according to the Ekoi, and since the introduction of firearms human beings in general were not living as long as they used to in the old days.⁵⁶

The Columbia River prophet, Smohalla, preached a doctrine so opposed to technology that it would have warmed the heart of the most radical primitivist of classical antiquity. He explained that the Great Chief Above punishes people for their sins. For example, in the beginning the Great Chief Above had made men with wings, but because of their quarrelsomeness he took their wings away. And now people were engaged upon a whole new course of sinful activity—agriculture, mining, trade—with some terrible consequences in store:

You ask me to plow the ground! Shall I take a knife and tear my mother's bosom? Then when I die, she will not take me to her bosom to rest.

You ask me to dig for stone! Shall I dig under her skin for her bones? Then when I die I can not enter her body to be born again.

You ask me to cut grass and sell it, and be rich like white men! But how dare I cut off my mother's hair?

Smohalla was also opposed to the domestication of animals.⁵⁷

Cultural primitivism is an understandable response to the threats posed by an intruder who comes with a critical technological advantage. Indeed, it may seem an especially appropriate response—however it may run counter to the interests of the survival of the people. But the evidence reveals nothing necessary or intrinsic about the connection between cultural primitivism and the threat from a technologically

⁵⁶ Baumann, *Schöpfung und Urzeit*, p. 295.

⁵⁷ Mooney, *The Ghost Dance Religion*, p. 721; LaBarre, *Ghost Dance*, p. 219.

superior intruder. A technologically simple people may welcome innovation enthusiastically, even if it is brought by an oppressive intruder: certain natives of Melanesia delighted at the white man's "cargo" and objected only to the incomprehensible wickedness that allowed the ghostlike stranger to keep control of it to himself.⁵⁸ A technologically sophisticated people may, on the other hand, profess a primitivism as radical as Smohalla's; witness ancient Rome and the modern West. And in between those extremes, even a technologically conservative people may regard as tainted the very skills and activities that permit them and their culture to survive.

The technology of the hunt is made to suffer this taint in a Cherokee story that explains how disease came into the world. There was a time when animals and men lived together in peace. But then men increased and their settlements spread out over the whole earth until the animals began to feel themselves cramped for space. And then men invented bows, knives, blowguns, spears, and hooks to slaughter the larger animals for food and clothing; and the smaller animals they trod upon out of pure carelessness or contempt. The animals called a parliament to find measures for their common safety. It was decided to put a limit on human expansion by introducing all manner of disease.⁵⁹ The plants, we may note in passing, come to man's rescue.

The Gods cause the Fall

But it is precisely this rescuing technology that bears the taint elsewhere. In an East African story, God had meant to keep the secret of medicinal herbs to himself, but, once, a child got sick and the father

⁵⁸ Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, pp. 15-16.

⁵⁹ Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee*, pp. 250-52.

sought and found the curing herbs. As a punishment God sent death into the world.⁶⁰ In the tales of an ancient Nigerian people the parents of the race were forbidden work and sexual congress. They were to fetch their food from heaven and to sleep apart. The woman nonetheless plants a field precisely because she does not want to make the long trip to heaven for food. In due course, the parents of the race sleep together despite the divine prohibition. When the woman gets pregnant, the man makes the trip to heaven alone and is obliged to confess his fault. God then sends death into the world, as much to compensate for the new technology and the new life as to punish the acts of disobedience.⁶¹

This punishment does not rest on ecological principles like the decision of the parliament of the animals in the Cherokee myth, but rather, on divine distrust of humans, which runs wide and deep in the mythologies of the world. This distrust is suggested in Zeus's response to the Promethean theft of fire and even in Genesis (3.22-24):

And the Lord God said, Behold the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever:

Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken.

So he drove out man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.

The object of divine distrust is never the cruelty, cupidity, or injustice of human beings but instead some threat to divine prerogative. The myth-makers had a sure grasp on the proper roles of god and man. The gods always lived up to their roles; humanity never did. It is human failure

⁶⁰ Baumann, *Schöpfung und Urzeit*, p. 295.

⁶¹ Baumann, *Schöpfung und Urzeit*, p. 292.

to be humble enough, subjectively and objectively, that brings down divine—or the myth-maker's—wrath. This attitude presumes a very low estimate of human beings and their activities, in some cases low enough to conceive of humanity as the sole mistake of creation. For those who believe in this way, the universe will never be orderly until humanity is removed from the scene altogether or somehow ceases to be human. It is this distaste for things human, amounting often to revulsion, that characterizes the primitivism of modern times. It is wholly anticipated by the traditions.

Divine Malice

Primitivism, driven to its extremes, repudiates not only the works of human beings but also the very faculties that make those works possible. The faculties are what make human beings human and so separate them from “nature.” In one apocryphal work the serpent goads Eve with her ignorance, her brute-like existence, because she lacks the knowledge of good and evil.⁶² If the devil ridicules her ignorance, her life like unto the simple animals, then that condition must have been the divine intention. Maximus of Turin, commenting on the Genesis story, says explicitly that “the original sinful transgression in Adam was the allurements of the intellect.”⁶³ There are those who hold that the “good and evil,” the knowledge of which was to be kept from humanity, meant in fact “beneficial and noxious” and referred to the technologies necessary to human life in culture. The serpent, the subtlest of creatures, becomes “the incarnation of the irrepressible spirit of intellectual curiosity,” from which God seeks to protect the human race.⁶⁴

⁶² “Apocalypse of Moses,” 18: Kautzsch, *Apokryphen*, 2, p. 521.

⁶³ Boas, *Essays*, pp. 61 and 121-28 on anti-intellectualism in general.

⁶⁴ Williams, *Ideas of the Fall*, p. 43.

There is no great distance between the divine desire to keep human beings from being human on the one hand and, on the other, the simple, outright hostility to humanity that occurs, for example, in the Gnostic myths—there, to be sure, on the part of a wicked deity far below the supreme being. It is the “high god,” the supreme being, who is especially mean and dangerous for at least one east-central Congo people. He dwells above the clouds. In the beginning he had three children, Sun, Moon, and man. When they grew up, the Sun burned so hot that the god was obliged to let forests grow to protect frail man. Man did not have to hunt or work. The god gave man springs of water and supplied all his needs. This paradise was lost when, one day, the god died, and the Sun and the Moon rushed to his side, summoned by the voice of his thunder. Man was busy adjudicating a quarrel among the animals and so missed the event. The god was furious and punished man by making the animals shy and hostile, presumably so that he should not again miss such an important event because of his intimacy with the animals. The god gave the Sun and the Moon eternal life and consigned death and hard work to man.⁶⁵

Whatever the death of the god may have meant to this people, it was plainly more a test than anything else. Man failed it. But he did not refuse the summons to attend the god for some malicious reason. On the contrary, he was occupied with a beneficial activity. The god's reaction can be interpreted as quite unreasonable and the punishment quite disproportionate. The people fear and probably do their best to disregard this vain and insecure Lear-like god—which would be no better than he deserves.

⁶⁵ Baumann, *Schöpfung und Urzeit*, p. 113.

Summation

The vanity, caprice, or positive hostility of the gods closes the circle opened on the Fall by ritual error, as in the southern Luba “ladder to heaven” story which opened this chapter. The two, the hostility of the gods and the disaster of ritual error, meet at the point where humanity stands helpless before the blind irrationality of events. Humanity can do its best to placate (or ignore) the hostile deity. It can observe ritual meticulously. But that makes no difference. Some error is bound to creep in sooner or later. Misfortune is at once inevitable and unpredictable. Catastrophe lies in wait behind every moment. At this extreme, responsibility for the Fall lies beyond humanity. Humanity is the victim of higher forces—sheer fate or divine malice—and has no choice but to submit to them. A suspicion that this might be the true condition of the world infects even those at the opposite extreme, those who place the blame squarely on humans.

The degenerative process may be wholly the responsibility of human beings, but it is beyond their remedy, as is the catastrophe in which the process must end. Human beings can seek the Land without Evil. They can withdraw to the mountaintops like the Cherokee faithful of an early nineteenth-century revival.⁶⁶ They can hope to survive the cataclysm and so be renewed into a world where the old degenerative laws no longer obtain. They may even try to hinder or hasten the end by coercive magical action (moral or ritual or both) but they can do nothing to ascertain the precise moment or cancel it. In short, the consequences of the Fall are identical wherever one begins, be it with divine malice or human deficiency.

⁶⁶ Mooney, *The Ghost Dance Religion*, pp. 676-77.

The extremes of solely human and solely extra-human responsibility for the Fall have to be projections of one another. There is no way of telling which comes first, at least not without an act of faith. Together the two extremes rest on the assumption that the world is in a deplorable state, and, individually, they provide the ultimate alternatives for explaining how it got that way: it is either my fault or someone else's. Any number of combinations lie in between but none beyond, for that would let the world be blameless. Bad events not weighed down by prior malice, arrogance, or stupidity incline to float off into the realm of mere chance. World systems in general are designed precisely in order to keep that from happening. When they fail, the rhetoric of Doomsday is ready to take their place.

The consequences of an act are, by themselves, insufficient to identify the quality of the act. After all, an act with laudable (the Promethean theft of fire) or indifferent (Cherokee population explosion) motive may have horrible consequences. Of course, the temptation to reexamine the act after the fact to see whether it was truly laudable or indifferent is hard to resist. But antecedent evil motives combined with horrible consequences fix the quality of the act beyond reasonable doubt. It is such certainty that Doomsday requires and assures.

At the same time the rhetoric of Doomsday has an acute sense of the indeterminacy of misfortune—good fortune is outside its purview—and compensates for the indeterminacy by endowing it with moral value. And this moral value is wholly bound up with responsibility, with blame. There is no strictly irresponsible action or blameless misfortune in the rhetoric of Doomsday. The Fall, the principal misfortune of all time, defines itself by someone's malice or error. That definition responds to the possibility of accident by denying it. Malice and error take what might appear to be arbitrary and make it purposeful.

But even so, suspicion of accident and the arbitrary lurks intact behind the rationalizations and forces much of Fall speculation into paradox: the sinful accident (Pandora) and the accidental sin (the southern Luba ceremonial error). Such paradoxes are finally unstable and far too precarious to satisfy the need for order and meaning. What might have appeared accidental or arbitrary is reexamined in the light of the consequences: life in this world. The paradox disintegrates, and its accidental component yields to its far less troublesome sinful component. The dominant form of Fall story presents straightforwardly criminal action, and all doubts are dispelled at the certainty that the condition of the world is evil.

The Fall is determined by its environment, and the environment, in turn, is determined by the Fall. What destroyed the primordial bliss? The Fall. What is the Fall? That which destroyed the primordial bliss. What brought the present misery? The Fall. What is the Fall? That which brought on the present misery. What is the present misery? It is the destruction of the primordial bliss. Assumed and affirmed in this circularity is the evil of the present condition, the axis, the keystone, the central reality of the rhetoric of Doomsday.

CHAPTER IV

The Abominable Present

The System defines the Present

Systems in general, that of the rhetoric of Doomsday like any other, define themselves in at least three ways:

- by contrast to other systems,
- by application to experience, and
- by the relations of the parts to one another.

Let us, for a moment, ignore the first two criteria and concentrate on the third, the complex of internal relationships. The Fall, as we have just seen, can with difficulty be extracted from between its antecedents and consequents for separate examination. But that action, insofar as it succeeds, falsifies. The Fall is nonsense as an independent entity. It describes a particular relationship between two apparently fixed points, then and now, and participates in defining the value that the system gives those points. The then, of course, was splendid, and the now is terrible. The Fall links the two points by suggesting a reason for the

change or by giving the change an identity. It provides continuity as well as explanation.

Given the experience of the present as the most transitory of moments, how could it possibly be regarded as anything permanent enough to provide a fixed point? The answer lies in the way the question is asked, “what made the present what it is?” The question pretends that the present is known and some kind of constant, while it seeks to discover an unknown, a “what,” which it assumes to be an agent, “what made . . .?” The reply, “the Fall,” merely gives a name to the question. One has assumed a process for the unknown and a constant for the known, and the answer affirms the assumption: a process resulted in this constant.

When the Fall acts as the force intervening between the Golden Age and the present, then the present acts as a point of reference; when, on the other hand, the present comes under scrutiny and is perceived as something fleeting, inconstant, and troubled, then the Fall by contrast acts as a point of reference, the source of all present woes. The Fall is a continuity only as long as it holds the center of attention. In the moment that the deplorable present commands that position, the Fall becomes a point of reference and the present assumes the active role.

The Present as Transit

At the center of attention the present has nothing of the constant about it. It is unconditional transit from one moment to the next. St. Augustine, looking upon the mutability of things, sees everywhere death in that which has been and no more than a suggestion of life in that which is to be, and in between, in the present, only the momentary, the transitory, a world without constancy. Truth alone, which rests with God, has an abiding present with no hint of past or future. Saying explicitly that Christ came into the world to liberate mankind from time,

he calls upon the faithful to pursue the truth and so to transcend time (*Texte*, 4, pp. 395, 408). That solution to the unrelenting passage of time is orthodoxy's answer to the refusal of time to end imminently, in the here and now, as the first Christians and, if not they, then certainly the first Montanists fully expected.

Trading Doomsday for Transcendence

St. Augustine conducted into orthodoxy a congregation of “Tertullianists,” successors of the first Montanists. When he did so, he closed an important chapter in the history of the Church and performed an act of considerable symbolic significance: the domestication of Doomsday. The conversion cannot be ascribed to the sect's prior disappointment. The failure of the promised transformation of the world to take place on schedule rarely has much influence on the hard core of believers. The grand culmination of things gets postponed as often as necessary. The Tertullianists had, after all, been waiting around for several hundred years. What difference would an additional generation or two make? Nor did orthodoxy offer them another, even longer delay in the fulfillment of their hopes and fears. On the contrary, orthodoxy demanded of them a fundamental reinterpretation of history, in which the present both gains and loses. The moment may no longer be charged with the expectation of imminent wonder—and just how long can that be sustained?—but as though in compensation, the whole of history acquires in orthodoxy a sacred aspect: that is, the moment never ceases to offer the possibility of transcendence.

All the Fathers, not Augustine alone, and orthodox tradition in general heap contempt on this mutable world, but their contempt is praise by comparison to the convictions of the radical doom-sayers. For them the world as it is and the times as they are lack any redeeming

quality whatsoever. Above all, they lack the possibility of transcendence. In accord with the first of the three criteria enunciated above (see p. 107), this is the principal difference between the rhetoric of Doomsday and orthodoxy. The world and the times are not merely mutable and transitory, they are the very antithesis of the divine. Hope of redemption lies solely in their annihilation.

Despite this basic distinction, orthodoxy cannot disclaim its basic debt to the rhetoric of Doomsday. There is, indeed, such broad overlap that the differences grow apparent only at the edges. In both systems the present is perceived negatively, in opposition to the Golden Age: here in the present the divine is alien, there in the Golden Age the divine is familiar; here discord prevails in nature, there concord; here history governs, there timelessness; here death, there immortality. In radical Doomsday speculation the opposition is absolute. In the moderate Doomsday speculation of orthodoxy, the opposition can be resolved in this world in the life of the spirit.

Displacement

The complaint that the world is inverted or has gone awry is shared in common by radical and moderate doom-sayers, those who feel themselves displaced, and those who have become disoriented. An aristocrat in ancient Egypt lamented, “the lowly have become mighty, the noble mourn and the ignoble rejoice.” A dejected Brahmin knew that the worst of ages, the present, was rushing to its end because the world had turned upside down and crooked.¹ Although this repudiation of the present clearly refers back to better times when the world was, presumably, upright and straight, its full force is not evident until one

¹ Mühlmann, p. 309.

hears the rhetoric of the forthcoming catastrophe. Consider the famous verse of Deutero-Isaiah (40.4):

Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain.

Prophecy of this sort is generally meant both literally for the earth and figuratively for society. The “signs” of the correction include great natural catastrophes which will entirely reshape the face of the earth; likewise, the haughty will be brought low and the humble raised. Everything on earth is precisely the opposite of what it is supposed to be. In the final Golden Age the correct order of things will be restored.

The Contemptible Present defined by Other Times

For simply exposing the wretchedness of the present, it makes little difference if the Golden Age in question is the first or the last. But for isolating the present and reducing its stature to the negligible, the placing of the Golden Ages at the ends of history does make a difference as do the intervening calamities. In its avoidance of itself, the present of the rhetoric of Doomsday may, for example, explain the world wholly as a consequence of the Fall. The present then becomes a punishment, and the Fall hangs over it as an abiding reproach. Not merely vice, pain, and egregious human suffering indicate the Fall. All of human experience is fallen, from the basic means of life—sex and work—to the whole of the social enterprise from property and trade to law and government.

The Abandonment of Property

The rhetoric of Doomsday allows no notion of the autonomy of the present. If, in certain circumstances, the stress is less on the present as a wretched extension of the Fall, then it is more on the negligibility of the

present over against the coming events. This is no mere pose. Exchanging the present for the future has led repeatedly to the abandonment of work and property and the destruction of tools, stores, and wealth. Doomsday cultists in all corners of the world have made every effort to cut ties with the present, to deny its validity, so to force its extinction, and to bring on the new epoch—often at horrendous cost to life and well-being, which, incidentally, does nothing to forestall another similar outbreak.

In 1790 the South Greenland Eskimos underwent a revival. In expectation of the end of the world they stopped hunting and consumed their winter stores.² Similarly, when the Cherokee migrated to the Carolina mountains to await (and escape) the great catastrophe, they sold or abandoned all they had.³ In 1857 the Xhosa people of southern Africa heard the prophecy of a young girl telling them of the imminent resurrection of the ancestors. When the ancestor arrived, they would drive the English back beyond the seas and bring along masses of cattle and corn. New corrals and barns were to be built to hold it all. In the corrals, meantime, the presently available cattle were to be killed and corn no longer planted or eaten. Over 150,000 cattle were killed. Some 50,000 Xhosa perished in the subsequent famine.⁴

In anticipation of return of the culture hero, Manseren, to New Guinea, all foodstuffs were to be destroyed, gardens ruined, and swine killed. Manseren would bring all necessities with him.⁵ Neighboring Cargo cultists similarly abandoned their gardens, fled their jobs, hid in the villages, and consumed their provisions in expectation of the

² Mühlmann, p. 319.

³ Mooney, *The Ghost Dance Religion*, p. 677.

⁴ Wilson, *Magic*, p. 239.

⁵ Wilson, *Magic*, p. 149.

forthcoming reversal of the topsy-turvy condition of the world. Thus the Marafi and Mambu cults of the 1930s.⁶ Only somewhat less drastic was the behavior of some Flying Saucer cultists of mid-century mid-America. They sold off their treasured property to settle their debts, quit their jobs, and abandoned disbelieving friends and family to await unfettered the Flying Saucer that would take them off to a better planet while this one was turned on its head.⁷

The Contemptible Present defined by Experience

If experience demonstrates the tragic folly of this attitude toward the present, how is it possible for such events to recur, even among people disappointed more than once? The second of the above criteria for defining system (page 107) expects some coordination between the system and experience. If experience persistently defies the system, then the system will sooner or later have to be abandoned. A corollary of that is: if a system is not abandoned, it must have some conformity with experience. There is no sense in mocking Doomsday speculation for its countless failures to predict the end of the world accurately. The system does not continue to seize the minds of great numbers of people on account of its failures. It must succeed somewhere. It must conform to experience sufficiently to survive as a system, indeed to flourish. It does so in its evaluation of the present.

The rhetoric of Doomsday is a counsel of despair. People are desperate when they perceive that they have reached an impasse, when

⁶ Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, p. 103; Mühlmann, pp. 174-77.

⁷ Leon Festinger, Henry W. Reichen, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group that Predicted the Destruction of the World* (1956; New York: Harper & Row, 1964), pp. 78-79, 82, and 140-41.

prospects are bleak, terrifying, or entirely uncertain, and when conventional wisdom has proved powerless to improve the prospects. Although this may appear to be stated in terms of the future, the evaluation of prospects is chiefly a quality of the present: a terrible present can be altogether tolerable if tempered with decent prospects, and conversely, a decent present can be made intolerable by poor or uncertain prospects. It is this common feature more than any other that unites the Ghost Dancer of 1890 with the white collar doom-sayer of more recent years. When the present loses promise, and with it value, because of some real or perceived failure of the ordinary way of doing things, then a circumstance prevails wholly in conformity with Doomsday ideology. That failure, however, does not inevitably lead to some kind of millennialist outbreak. It may lead to withdrawal or rebellion or any number of extraordinary forms of behavior. In the course of history property and society have been abandoned by many more monks in their search for transcendence than Doomsday cultists in their expectation of the Last Days.

Even so, Doomsday expectation is not an unreasonable choice. It accounts for the wretched present, has a whole worldview constructed on it, and seems to be universally and spontaneously available. The desperate can find the central doctrine of the rhetoric of Doomsday—the unredeemable nullity of the present—confirmed in experience every day and everywhere about them. They have only to look for it. In that, the most important feature of Doomsday speculation, they are never disappointed.

The Present defined as Contemptible

The unconditional character of Doomsday pessimism toward the present must, at one point or another, defy experience. For Doomsday to

continue to provide order and solace, that defiance has somehow to be discounted. To condemn all of the present, good and bad alike, as fallen is the principal way. The condemnation is often combined with variations that call the present an illusion, a deception, a distraction. Dualists, such as Gnostics and Manichaeans, built elaborate mythical structures squarely on their contempt for the nullity of the present. Everything that led into history from the primordial totality was an error: "Thus the world came to be in a distraction and an ignorance and stupor" (*NH*, p. 177). Another Gnostic text dismisses the present aeon, the one between the Flood and the Fire, as "a small one . . . defiled." In it was begotten "every work . . . of wrath, anger, envy, malice, hatred, slander, contempt, and war, lying and evil counsels, sorrows, and pleasures, basenesses and defilements, falsehoods and diseases, evil judgments . . . " (p. 286). It is then for very good reason that the present is to be repudiated.

And just how is the present repudiated, other than by calling it names? By consigning it to the realm of non-being, as the Manichaeans do, or by reducing it to a mere interim, a hiatus. The angel Uriel tells the prophet Esdras in so many words, "this present world is not the end; the full glory does not abide in it" (2 Esd. 7.42).⁸ The Greek theosophic fragments attached to the Sibylline Oracles make it clear that this life is supposed to be lived in fear, as a sojourn in exile. All is deception that mortals pursue in their daily lives.⁹ The present may also be traded in for some kind of future that represents a restoration of the past. The message of the Gnostic "Gospel of the Egyptians" is meant for those who

⁸ Egon Brandenburger, *Die Verborgenheit Gottes im Weltgeschehen: das literarische und theologische Problem des 4. Esrabuches* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1981).

⁹ *Sibyllinische Weissagungen*, pp. 262-63.

await the salvation coming from on high, which is what Christ spoke of as a “bringing back” (*NH*, pp. 45-46). Salvation is not available to the present in this radical sect as it is in orthodoxy. To consume the present in awaiting the coming change is for the Doomsday cultist the sole proper use for it. Without worth in itself, the sooner the present is done away with the better. And the very least one can do is turn away by facing the future, or for that matter, the prelapsarian past.

The Church Fathers on the Present

John Chrysostom, hardly an eccentric and much less a heretic, despises the greed and vanity of this world and demands of Christians that they live with similar disregard for it and in expectation of glory (*Texte*, 4, p. 388). The rhetoric of world-denial is much the same whether it comes from the lips of the Gnostic or one of the shapers of orthodoxy, in part because the Doomsday pattern informs them both. What is the present but the realization of the Fall? John himself makes the equation but distinguishes between Adam's sin and our own: the general Fall only brought death and toil into the world; our own sin means damnation (4, p. 389). Human beings could once discourse with God as a friend, and all of nature trembled in respect before man (1, pp. 332-33). There was no need for arts or commerce, nor for clothing, structures, or artifacts, neither was there trouble, worry, death, nor the whole bundle of human sufferings. But then, through unspeakable frivolousness and the misuse of freedom, Adam trespassed the limits of the law (1, p. 324). All of brute, even inanimate nature fell with him (1, pp. 329-30). And now humanity trembles in fear of nature (1, p. 332).

Athanasius, the synonym of orthodoxy, held similar views of past and present, even employing the Gnostic metaphor of distraction. Man

was created in the image of God, with knowledge and understanding of his likeness. Man's purpose was to preserve this primordial condition, never to turn away from his divine origins, and never to upset his commerce with the holy. But by distraction, by turning away from the divine to the carnal, man fell. When carnal gratification became habitual, the habit led to fear of loss of gratification. That is how fear entered the world, and with it the great catalogue of vices beginning with the pursuit of pleasure and ending with injustice and murder (1, pp. 339-41).

In Augustine, too, the unfallen state represents divine intentions, the present world a departure from them. The intervening Fall changed things and made them changeable. The consequences of the Fall are first, spiritual death, that is, separation of the soul from God, then loss of the mastery over our own lives, strife between flesh and spirit, and, finally, physical death, which was never meant to be and hence is not a “natural” event. Death is, rather, a punishment for sin, in which doctrine Augustine concurs with Tertullian (1, pp. 326, 337-39). Mesrop the Armenian points out that now, after the Fall, the seasons not only nourish but also destroy; likewise the elements. Limited is that which supports life, unlimited that which threatens it (1, pp. 329-31). Irenaeus of Lyon uses the thorns and thistles of Genesis as the symbol for human alienation from nature (1, p. 328). The “unnatural” condition of humanity after the Fall is a commonplace of patristic thought kidnapped from the primitivists of classical antiquity, baptized, and disguised in the language of the Hebrew Bible.

For the pagan primitivists, the *then* required and knew no arts, no medicine, no property and hence no luxury, no war, and no ambition. The *now* has all those and worse, and is dominated by man, the unnatural animal. Everything distinctively human was considered a sad

departure from the “natural” condition; even reason was a poor thing by comparison with the sureness and directness of instinct (*Primitivism*, p. 20f.). Diogenes deplored human inventiveness. It was never used for manly virtue and justice but always in pursuit of pleasure (p. 132).¹⁰ Tibullus saw in property mainly the inevitability of luxury (p. 42). For the primitivist of classical antiquity human alienation from nature was both crime and punishment.

Their Rhetorical Arsenal

Borrowing even-handedly from the pagan and Jewish ancients, the Church Fathers preserved and handed on the old and noble *contemptus mundi* (contempt for the world) tradition. In John Chrysostom the fortune of human life has become nothing better than a rolling wheel, from whose relentless tumbling it is impossible to tell what is up and what down (*Texte*, 4, p. 398). The wheel of fortune is only one of the familiar rhetorical conventions employed by John to put the present in its place. Life is so temporary, it is no more than a theatrical spectacle (*theatrum mundi*) or a dream (*somnium vitae*), an illusion shattered by the removal of the scenery or the first rays of the sun (4, p. 404). You may plant a tree or build a house. The tree and house remain, but the planter and builder are torn away and destroyed: “O Vanity of Vanity, all is Vanity” (*Texte*, 4, p. 405). Basil the Great gives warning to the momentarily prosperous listener: death impends (*momento mori*). Basil asks, where are they now (*ubi sunt*), all the powerful politicians and orators, the satraps and tyrants. Dust, all dust (4, p. 403).

¹⁰ Edelstein, *The Idea of Progress*, p. 138.

The Biblical Basis

The fundamental text for most of this speculation was Genesis (3.16-19):

Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.

And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life;

Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; thou shalt eat the herb of the field;

In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return.

God takes the role of judge, finds the primordial pair guilty of disobedience, and sentences the woman to the pangs of birth and subordination to the man, the man to the labor of bringing forth from the earth the stuff of life, and both of them to death. Birth, labor, death, the irreducible basics of the human condition, thus become punishments.

Alienation from Nature

The apocryphal elaborations of the Genesis account take God's curse of the earth and make of it the general alienation of man and nature. The animals, of which Adam was once master, will henceforth rise without warning against him.¹¹ On the day that Adam was driven

¹¹ *Vita Adae et Evae*, 24: *OTP*, 2, 283; comp. Kautzsch, *Apokryphen*, 2, p. 523.

out of paradise, the mouth of all the animals, cattle, and birds ceased to speak; before that, everyone spoke one common language.¹² The Lapps of Finland have always known that dogs, for example, can speak. It is only that, nowadays, men have forgotten how to understand. In olden days everything spoke, all animals, trees, stones, everything on earth; and everything will speak again at the Last Judgment, where dogs and the other animals will accuse man depending upon his treatment of them.¹³ The notion of the final accusation of man by the animals had occurred also in the oldest parts of the Slavonic Enoch.¹⁴

Adam's Fault

One author of the Esdras books, writing in the wake of the destruction of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) knows that the present evil condition of mankind is an inheritance from Adam (2 Esd. 3.21-22):

For the first Adam burdened with an evil heart, transgressed and was overcome, as were also all who were descended from him.

Thus the disease became permanent; the law was in the people's heart along with the evil root, but what was good departed, and the evil remained.

Knowing of Adam's sin, Esdras nonetheless asks the angel Uriel why Israel has been given over to the Gentiles as a reproach, why we pass from the world like locusts, why our life is like a mist, why our years are evil and few (4.23-24, 33). The angel admits that "this age is full of sadness and infirmities" but consoles Esdras with the knowledge that

¹² *Jubilees*, 3.28: *OTP*, 2, p. 60; comp. Kautzsch, *Apokryphen*, 2, p. 45.

¹³ Mühlmann, p. 200.

¹⁴ 2 Enoch 58.6-7: *OTP*, 1, p. 184; comp. Vaillant, *Le Livre des Secrets*, pp. 56-57.

“the age is hastening swiftly to its end” (4.26-27) and reminds Esdras of the Fall (4.30):

A grain of evil was sown in Adam's heart from the beginning, and how much ungodliness it has produced until now, and will produce until the time of the threshing comes!

The rest of the text of Esdras deals chiefly with the threshing and what is to follow. As to the proximity of the events, the Lord himself tells Esdras: as a woman bears smaller children later in life, so too the world, “you and your contemporaries are smaller in stature than those who were born before you, and those who come after you will be smaller than you, as born of a creation which already is aging and passing the strength of youth” (5.54-55).

The Biological Metaphor

The irresistible biological metaphor, based on the passage of life from youth to old age and from birth to death, gives form to Doomsday speculation of many kinds, some of which are less than self-evidently apocalyptic. The clear and certain limits of history in Doomsday speculation would seem to demand a linear conception of history or, at the very least, would seem inappropriate to cyclical conceptions. But in point of fact, cultures thought to be cyclically disposed are not immune to millennialist outbreaks, and Doomsday sentiment occurs among them far too frequently to be dismissed as irrelevant or secondary.

One has to look far to find a believer in cycles who believes the world about him to be in the full flower of its youth.¹⁵ The world is, rather, almost always well past its maturity and tumbling rapidly toward

¹⁵ Some believe the present is the best of all times, that the arts have reached perfection: Edelstein, *The Idea of Progress*, p. 161.

the conclusion of the cycle: winter, old age, death.¹⁶ A rigorous and consistent cyclical theory would have to conclude that cycles lack objective beginnings and ends, that they could be measured equally well from peak to peak, from trough to trough, and from anywhere in between. Any moment, especially the present moment, could be regarded as the fresh, youthful beginning of the cycle. The present moment, however, rarely receives that kind of endorsement, perhaps most rarely among those who espouse cyclical theories.

Theories of time that pretend to be cyclical but regularly deprive the present of autonomous value and surround it with catastrophes and preferable alternatives are, in practice, indistinguishable from linear Doomsday speculation. In other words, any apparently cyclical theory that sees the present moving through time at or near a trough of the cycle might as well be a linear theory. Anyone who can honestly place the present anywhere on the cycle, even at the beginning or on the rise and approaching the peak is, like the progressivist, a very different person from the doom-sayer.

In certain environments, some of them quite ordinary, the evaluation of the present as a fresh start or as something on the rise is likely to suggest a pep talk and not a serious consideration of the way things are. Why does even moderate optimism deserve less *prima facie* credit than pessimism of all kinds? It is probably the biological metaphor

¹⁶ Hermes Trismegistus speaks of the aging of the cosmos and prophesies the fall of Egypt to barbarians, the prohibition of religion, and the consequent purification of the universe by water and fire (*Asclepius*, 24-26); but his heady affirmation of the cosmos removes him from the company of Doomsday pessimists: A. D. Nock and A.-J. Festugière, eds., *Corpus Hermeticum*, 4 vols., 1st and 2nd ed. (Paris: Société d'Édition "Les Belles Lettres," 1954-60), 2, pp. 326-34. This does not stop Lactantius from using this text as his authority for a statement on the senescence of the world: see Nock and Festugière, 2, p. 330, and Kurfess, *Sibyllinische Weissagungen*, p. 247.

at work. All the “signs” point to senescence. The old plainly do not get younger in any agreeable sense of the term. They grow older. The cycle can never free itself from the trough, winter, old age, death. Rebirth may be implied in the recurrence. But it is at the other end of the catastrophic turn of the cycle.

The biological metaphor gives the appearance of being equally cordial to cyclical theories in general and a degenerative bias in particular, depending on the emphasis, whether it is on species or individual. The degenerative bias makes the cycle begin at the best and decline into the worst before starting all over again (*Primitivism*, p. 79). But things do not gradually improve as they return to the starting point; rather, they continue to worsen until the end. The new beginning occurs abruptly at the other end of a break in the continuity of history, a death. The metaphor clearly takes human beings—or a particular individualistic, primitivistic, and pessimistic opinion of human beings—as one point of the comparison and not, or only secondarily, the seasons. The regular recurrence of man in the species, with individuals observing the same or similar routes from birth to death, creates an illusion of cyclical activity. But that comes solely from the overlap of the “cycles,” that, of necessity, some begin before others end. Upon closer inspection then the process is not cyclical at all but thoroughly discontinuous.

The primitivists of classical antiquity were presumably without a linear sense of history, if one accepts the modern consensus which reserves that sense of history to Hebrew (and perhaps Zoroastrian) ideology.¹⁷ Nonetheless, something that looks astonishingly like Doomsday occurs among them. In the relevant chapters we have seen the Golden Age and the Fall among the Greco-Roman ancients. Among

¹⁷ See Chapter III, note 20, p. 82.

them the Fall was coupled with a degenerative bias on history. Applied to the moment, that bias demands that the present be regarded as bad and getting worse. The classical primitivists regularly place the present at or near the trough of the cycle; to that extent they might just as well have had a linear system.

The World is Growing Old

“Signs” properly belong to the subsequent phase of the Doomsday scheme, the forthcoming end, but it is difficult to extricate them from the present. Hesiod does not mean to say that the present moment is free of filial impiety, perjury, and violence, only because some dim future condition will be so burdened. Rather he means that wherever these vices appear they announce the end of the age, at which moment they will be triumphant and no longer mixed with the good. Hesiod’s prophetic gloom is hard to distinguish from its counterparts in biblical literature. The coming of the end of the age is inevitable and necessary. There is no sense in blaming the trend of the times or chiding the age. He who does so “does not grasp that all things gradually decay and pass to the grave, wearied by the long spell of life.”¹⁸

The extraordinary anthropologist Curt Nimuendajú Unkel believed that his Brazilian tribes had doctrines of racial decline, world-weariness, and impending cataclysm well before European contact. The World Creator had constructed the earth upon a great wooden cross lying on an axis facing east. At the end of things the Creator plans to draw the main beam out from under the earth eastward, so that the destruction will start in the west, first fire, then flood. The migrations in search of the Land without Evil, generally eastward, were attempts to escape that

¹⁸ Guthrie, *In the Beginning*, p. 71.

fate.¹⁹ They knew that the world had gotten old. They could tell by the fact that the tribe was no longer increasing. The medicine men who had taken the ecstatic journey to the beyond reported to their people upon their return that they had witnessed Earth herself pleading before the World Creator: “I have eaten too many corpses, I have had enough, I am tired, put an end to it, O Father.” So also the water begs for rest, so also the trees, so also the remainder of nature.²⁰

A Samoyed shaman of primordial times, Urier by name, once had many reindeer herds and had visited many lands and known many peoples, but he grew weary of the burdens of life. Here, he said, the reindeer grow weaker and weaker year after year, the moss on which they feed grows poorer and poorer year after year, and the game rarer and rarer. Theft, deception, and injustice among men ever increase—“I go to seek my home in heaven.”²¹

The 1890 Ghost Dance among the plains Indians depended in part upon the same notion of the aging of the world and the worsening of mankind. An Arapaho leader of the event is quoted as saying, “this earth too old, grass too old, trees too old, our lives too old.” The Great Spirit told Wovoka, the Ghost Dance prophet, that the earth was getting old and worn out and that people were getting bad, which were “signs” of the forthcoming renewal of the world as it used to be. Only this time it would be made much better. There would be universal peace, and the youth of man would return to him every spring.²²

¹⁹ “Die Sagen,” pp. 332, 357, 358, 393, and 400; Mühlmann, pp. 29-31; Wilson, *Magic*, p. 212 and note 58.

²⁰ Curt Nimuendajú Unkel, “Die Sagen,” p. 335; Mühlmann, p. 28; Wilson, *Magic*, p. 211.

²¹ Mühlmann, p. 204.

²² *The Ghost Dance Religion*, pp. 748-49 and 818.

The Cheyenne too believed that the world was wearing out, the grass and trees as well, and that mankind was growing wicked. Furthermore, the world was getting too small, and soon God was going to destroy the heavens and fashion a new and bigger earth, big enough for both the living and the ancestors.²³

In the most elaborate of cyclical systems, the Hindu of India, the worst of all ages, the Kaliyuga, the present age, ends in a cosmic catastrophe that renews the world and restores the primordial Golden Age, the Krtayuga. This system spread well beyond India in Buddhist variations.²⁴ What, according to the Brahmins, are the signs of the impending end? That everything is growing smaller and worse, that aging has been speeded up, and that now youths get grey.²⁵

As skeptical and hard-nosed as he was, Lucretius nonetheless professed to believe that “the earth is so broken and worn-out that she can scarcely generate small animals, she who once generated all kinds and gave birth to the huge bodies of wild beasts.” So also can she no longer produce the great crops.²⁶ Pliny the Younger believed that the human race as a whole was growing measurably shorter, that men rarely grow taller than their fathers, and that the fields likewise suffer from the increasing exhaustion of the fertility of the land (*Primitivism*, p. 101).

In Pseudo-Seneca we read an evaluation of the present: “we are crushed beneath a heavy burden of an age in which crime rules, mad impiety rages, violent lust dominates in shameful love, and triumphant luxury has long since seized the huge wealth of the world, only to lose it.” This is joined to the warning: “If this great world grows old, there will be

²³ LaBarre, *Ghost Dance*, p. 320.

²⁴ Mühlmann, pp. 299 and 366.

²⁵ Mühlmann, p. 309.

²⁶ Guthrie, *In the Beginning*, pp. 71-74.

a return to blind chaos, and the world's last day will be at hand, which will crush a wicked race in the downfall of the sky, so that a world born again in better form may bring forth a new stock, as once it bore in its youth, when Saturn reigned in heaven" (*Primitivism*, p. 53). The present is removed from the primordial Saturnian age by an irreversible downward momentum and from the rebirth by the catastrophic conclusion of history.

Death of the Present and Rebirth

The complaints of the social critics of antiquity could be multiplied many times over. Implicit in every lament is that things are now not as they once were, that the present evil represents a degeneration of a past good. The alternative idea, that the evils of the times might be an effect of a present and reachable cause and, hence, be tractable, seems to have been largely alien. The evil of the present, like the present as a whole, lacked autonomy. They were both a function of history. And history was wholly equivalent to the degeneration of the ages and the senescence of the world. As a consequence, the criticism of the present sounded a note of despair. Nothing in the present as it was constituted could itself reverse the deterioration. Only a re-volution of the cycle could accomplish that. Such an event was not only possible, it was certain to come. But that event represented a denial of the present.²⁷ It is even possible that the birth or accession to power of a hero could herald the restoration of the Golden Age, but that too meant a new, a different era. The repudiation of the world as it is cannot be sufficiently stressed. There is no amelioration, only termination and rebirth.²⁸

²⁷ Guthrie, *In the Beginning*, pp. 78-79.

²⁸ Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, p. 52.

Similarly pessimistic conclusions about the world as it is were reached, it appears independently, by certain North and South American Indian peoples. In 1790, when European penetration was still comparatively slight, the beliefs of the Okanagon tribe of the northwest inter-mountain plateau were recorded: rivers were undercutting the earth and would, sooner or later, set it afloat like the island it was in the beginning—"the whole earth, just as men do, would die and be reborn." This caused them to live in a state of perpetual anxiety. The neighboring Modoc people regularly danced themselves into a frenzy to keep the aurora borealis from setting fire to the world at the edges.²⁹

The Present viewed from the Golden Age

What Hesiod had predicted for the end of the present age, the flight of the gods of virtue from men, Theognis (ca. 544 B.C.) saw as having already occurred. Only the goddess Hope dwelled among men; Good Faith, Moderation, and the Graces have left the earth. Oaths are no longer observed, no one dreads the deathless gods, justice and pity are no longer known (*Primitivism*, p. 32).

Hesiod's metallic metaphor allowed for a gradual decay of human affairs, leading down to the present. Aratus made the gradation explicit in his adaptation of Hesiod (*Primitivism*, p. 36). When the imagery was taken over by others it was, as often as not, simplified into a then and now comparison, the then being the Age of Saturn, the now the Age of Jupiter. So, for example, Dicearchus set the men of the Golden Age side by side with those of the present and found the latter "made of base and inferior matter" (p. 95).

²⁹ LaBarre, *Ghost Dance*, pp. 216-17.

Tibullus places the present in stark contrast to the Golden Age: “Now, under Lord Jupiter, there are always murders, always wounds; now there are shipwrecks; now there are a thousand roads to sudden death. Spare me, Father; false oaths do not terrify me nor impious words spoken against the sacred gods” (*Primitivism*, p. 59). Ovid notes the departure of Justice from among men so that she is unavailable to the poor (p. 63). For Juvenal this avaricious, perjurious, luxurious age is one “worse than that of iron” (p. 71). In our day, as opposed to the good old days, according to Pausanius, evil covers the whole earth and every city, men are no longer deified except in flattery, and punishment for the wicked ones comes only after they have departed from this life (p. 98).

Lucian contrasts the primordial time of milk and honey, of a fertile and abundant, unplowed, unsown earth, with this age of iron and worse: “Most of us earn our food by toil, live in poverty, want, and helplessness, with cries of ‘Ah me!’ ‘Whence comes this?’ and ‘Oh that such a fate should be!’ such is the lot of us poor men. And we should suffer less, mark you, in these things if we did not find the rich enjoying such a happy lot” (p. 64). That is what has happened to primordial equality and community of goods.

Responsibility and Repentance

Repudiation of the present makes considerable sense for people whose business it is to note the injustices of the world and to seek some improvement; all the more so, for those who believe their existence threatened for ideological reasons; and equally or even more so for peoples whose existence is physically threatened by a palpable enemy. It is surprising to find the extent to which the external circumstance is often internalized and made the fault of the victims themselves. This is, however, not quite so self-abasing as it may appear. If the present

appalling condition is due to their own action, then they could conceivably escape from it by their own action as well. The central problem is far less that the present world has been unkind to the victims than that they have not been able to do anything about it. In the act of making the present the punishment for their sins, they are reasserting control over their own fate.

The Master of Life, speaking through the Delaware Prophet (ca. 1762), denounced the new ways of the Indian: “when I saw you inclined toward evil, I removed the animals into the depths of the forest that you might depend upon your brothers [the French] for your clothing. Again become good and do my will and I will send animals for your sustenance.”³⁰ The pioneer ethnologist J. Heckewelder reports that the Indians believed that they had lost the land to the whites by disobedience to the Great Spirit: “the misery . . . they had brought upon themselves by neglecting their duties” (p. 667). During the 1806 revival the prophet Tenskwatawa told his people it was “to punish them for their disobedience and to bring them to a sense of their duty [that the deity] had called the game from the forest and shut it up under the earth, so that the tribes were now on the verge of starvation” (p. 675).

When Handsome Lake preached his new religion to the Iroquois, he repeatedly announced that the Creator was sad because of the sins of his people.³¹ The founder of the Indian Shakers, John Slocum (1881), blamed whiskey, gambling, idleness, and general vice for the current sorry state of the Indian.³²

³⁰ Schoolcraft in Mooney, *The Ghost Dance Religion*, p. 665; further references in this paragraph are also from Mooney.

³¹ Parker, “Code of Handsome Lake,” pp. 31, 34, 36, and 37.

³² Mooney, *The Ghost Dance Religion*, p. 751.

The Sioux Ghost Dancers of 1890 regarded the oppression by the white man as a penalty for their sins. The Great Spirit had personally organized history in that way; but now the Indians had suffered enough and deliverance was at hand.³³ The Mambu cultists of New Guinea (1938) knew that all the cargo had been manufactured by the ancestors for the use of their descendents. But by some perverse circumstance, the white man managed always to intercept it. The cultists decided that their own marital strife and adultery were at fault. The white man was, presumably, free of these vices. If the cultists would only make all the women the common property of all the men, then the strife would cease and God would send the cargo straight to his people.³⁴ If this is not quite the same as the western sense of sin, it at least admits of wrongdoing as a cause for the otherwise inexplicable injustice of the world.

These peoples took the radical stance toward the present in response to great cultural disruption. History had turned against them, and they turned against history. They much reduced the senselessness of history's assault by taking up responsibility for their woes. But the radicals among them did not capitulate to history or even accommodate themselves to it. Their repentance, their change of heart or behavior was not meant to make the present world acceptable. It was meant to put an end to it and coerce God into bringing on the new world.

Availability of the Myths

A degree of pessimism over against the present helps to make sense of the blatant evils of the times. Pessimism enjoys a certain inherent plausibility since the times are never free of blatant evils. But

³³ Mooney, *The Ghost Dance Religion*, p. 787; LaBarre, *Ghost Dance*, p. 236.

³⁴ Mühlmann, p. 179.

it is one thing to make injustice, vice, and suffering the brunt of the attack and quite another to condemn the whole of human experience—which is the inclination of Doomsday speculation. Some cultures or subcultures, such as Nimuendajú Unkel's Brazilian tribes, are wholly dominated by extreme Doomsday pessimism. Other cultures or sub-cultures allow for such pessimism as an option, never rejecting it entirely and intermittently giving themselves over to it with abandon, especially in circumstances of unusual stress.

The Xhosa catastrophe of 1857 is an instance of such abandon (see above, page 112). It did not occur in a mythological vacuum. The devaluation of the present was readily available in a host of sub-Saharan myths that identified as consequences of the Fall not only blatant evils like slavery and starvation but the basics of life in the world.³⁵ Whatever may have brought about the Fall, man is now separated from God and must struggle to survive. Man's disobedience and sinfulness drove God from the earth (Baumann, p. 327) or caused God to drop man on to the earth without the possibility of return to heaven (p. 328). Primordially forbidden sexual congress punishes men with the burden of providing a dowry and having to work, and women with the pangs of childbirth (pp. 328-29). Pandora-like curiosity prematurely released animals into the wild, when they all were meant to be domestic, and so man must hunt (p. 335). Similar stories make agriculture, the grinding of grain, stratification by occupation, exogamy, and most other givens of the social circumstance a deplorable result of some kind of Fall (pp. 327-37). These stories are not far from Genesis in their evaluation of the human condition.

³⁵ Baumann, *Schöpfung und Urzeit*, p. 318; further references in this paragraph are also from Baumann.

It would be consoling to ascribe Doomsday pessimism toward the present solely to circumstances of evident and unusual stress, such as accompanies obvious cultural disruption from without or revolutionary social change from within, or what is called “relative deprivation.”³⁶ The subjective variables, say, the adaptability of the affected populations, makes such an ascription impossible. There are circumstances where evident and unusual stress produces no more than the customary pessimistic rumblings, and, conversely, where notable Doomsday outbreaks occur in the absence of evident and unusual stress.

Nonetheless, the coincidence of Doomsday longings and stress is striking. The coincidence justifies the regular search through the social, political, and psychological settings of a Doomsday outbreak to find the stress wherever it may be lurking. But there is a danger in restricting Doomsday speculation to evident and unusual stress: that restriction inclines to make the idea and the violent outbreak coextensive. It is plain that—by definition and so, without exception—the rhetoric of Doomsday precedes any given social outbreak of Doomsday hopes; what makes the activity an expression of a longing for Doomsday and not something else, say, a call for reform, is the prior ideology. The ideology need not turn into action to be a threat. It can and, far more often, does just stand in ready reserve.

This last feature of the rhetoric of Doomsday is easy to overlook and undervalue, especially in the presence of some spectacular realization

³⁶ See Wilson, *Magic*, pp. 290-91 and 445 for an outline of the “relative deprivation” controversy, and James M. Olson, C. Peter Herman, and Mark P. Zanna, eds., *Relative Deprivation and Social Comparison*, The Ontario Symposium, 4 (Hillsdale, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1986). See also Carolyn Osiek, “The Genre and Function of the *Shepherd of Hermas*,” in Adela Y. Collins, ed., *Early Christian Apocalypticism: Genre and Social Setting*, Semeia, 36 (Decatur, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1986), pp. 113-21, here, esp. p. 116 on “crisis” and “perceived crisis.”

of the rhetoric like a Ghost Dance or a Cargo cult. To explain the repudiation of the present in such events, one looks first for the stress. And, not surprisingly, one finds that ordinary activity, the close environment of the day-to-day, has ceased to provide basic needs and becomes more a burden than a gratification. In general, the present historical world has treated, or seemed to treat, the cultists badly long before the cultists reciprocated by rejecting that world. When the cultist seeks reason and relief, the doctrine of the Fall is available to explain why the world is as it is, and forthcoming catastrophe is ready to liberate all from the world as it is. Doctrines of the Fall, of the end of the world, and of the surrounding Golden Ages need not be invented on the spot to provide answers only in this situation. They preexist in the culture. Furthermore, the prior availability of the myths is not specific to the crisis; it is general. Most of the texts which house these myths were not composed or compiled in association with some dramatic outbreak of millennial frenzy. Many of the myths are just etiological fables. Others participate in commonplace criticism of the imperfections of the world. A crisis will organize available myths into the shape of a rhetoric of Doomsday; or a crisis may restore a neglected rhetoric. In both cases the makings were available prior to the crisis, which means, in the everyday life of the culture.

Nihilism

This is equally true of Doomsday pessimism over against the present and near future as of all the components of the rhetoric of Doomsday. Optimism facing an alien, future condition is persistently available, as is pessimism facing the familiar present. Without complementary optimism, it is conceivable that the pessimism could lead into sheer nihilism. Nihilism, on the other hand, becomes a perverse but

recognizable form of Doomsday longing if it looks with glee to a destruction that will restore the primordial nothingness. The negation of the present so important to conventional Doomsday rhetoric does not have far to go to become simple and universal negation, negation as such. Nothingness then becomes a kind of Golden Age. The destructiveness of Doomsday outbreaks—modern ones in particular but not them alone—rests in part on nihilism of this sort. In its extremism it converts all real, positive experience into a moral negative and vice versa. In this light the conviction that all things are getting steadily worse hardly counts as pessimism at all but as a kind of mad optimism.

When observed head-on, Doomsday pessimism puts forward its orderly, reasonable, and morally earnest aspects. These endow pessimism with plausibility, and without them it could be dismissed as an occasional aberration. Doomsday pessimism is, of course, much more than that; it helps constitute one of the few widely accepted systematic organizations of time. The plausibility of Doomsday pessimism does not alone suffice to give it the explosive power that actually moves events. This it takes from a great and hidden intensity of feeling. The emotional aspects of displeasure with the present fully reveals itself only when the observer is not looking, or at least not looking at the present. The forthcoming catastrophe gives a clue as to the intensity of the displeasure. The catastrophe, which is next to be examined, puts an end to the present world and does so with overwhelming violence. It is deemed not only inevitable but necessary and preferable to the world as it is. Doomsday revulsion over against the present is so extreme that it greets with relish the prospect of these horrors.

CHAPTER V

Impending Disaster

Worldwide Distribution of the Myth

The possibility, likelihood, or inevitability of disaster occurs in the mythologies of the world as persistently as the myth of the Golden Age. And the descriptions of the forthcoming disaster in these cultures resemble one another at least as closely as do their Golden Ages. The close resemblances should be useful and comforting. They end up, however, by being highly disturbing.

When the rhetoric of Doomsday speaks or is spoken about, it is usually the impending disaster that stands out. It is by far the most thoroughly studied and differentiated feature of the system. Some of the familiar motifs such as the appearance of Antichrist, the return of the Messiah, and Armageddon do not require the attention given here to those motifs which cross cultures, appeal to experience, and tie the catastrophe to the other elements of the rhetoric of Doomsday.

One does not have to look far to see that imminent catastrophe is everywhere about. The event appears in literate cultures as the purifying conflagration of various Indo-Europeans (Heraclitean, Zoroastrian, Brahmin, and Icelandic evidence); as the messianic woes of biblical prophecy; as the Days of Distress, the warnings of the Day of

Judgment in the Koran. Across the cultures of the world, the catastrophe appears as flood, earthquake, pestilence, as reversal of everything familiar, the young turned old, the day turned dark, the world turned upside down. As impending doom, the catastrophe is dreaded for its totality, for the uncertainty of what will follow. Afterwards, nothing will be the same. But, as the moment of universal retribution some long for the catastrophe. In psychoanalysis the catastrophe appears as the disintegration of the personality and the wish-fulfilling fantasy of the destruction of the uncooperative outside world; in Marxism as the absolute necessity of bloody revolution.¹

The Present undone by the Disaster

The Disaster's Suddenness

In each case a sudden and huge catastrophe responds to an unbearable present circumstance. Although “catastrophe” may imply

¹ Axel Olrik, *Ragnarök: Die Sagen vom Weltuntergang*, trans. Wilhelm Ranish (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1922), remains the classic study, very wide in scope, variously updated in part by later studies, but it still stands on its own. A similar classic for biblical apocalypticism broadly defined is R. H. Charles, *Eschatology: The Doctrine of the Future Life in Israel, Judaism and Christianity*, 2nd ed. (1913; reprint New York: Schocken, 1963), with an introduction by John Wesley Buchanan that surveys the subsequent discussion up to 1960. For a recent defining and typing of pre-Islamic apocalyptic expression in the literate cultures of the West and Middle East see John J. Collins, ed., *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*, Semeia, 14 (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1979), and the challenging sequel, Adela Y. Collins, ed., *Early Christian Apocalypticism: Genre and Social Setting*. On the role of the imminent catastrophe in Muhammad's mission see Tor Andrae, “Der Ursprung des Islams and das Christentum,” *Kirkohistorisk Årsskrift*, 24 (1924): 213-92. For the Christian Middle Ages: McGinn, *Visions of the End*. Lanternari, *Religions of the Oppressed*, focuses on preliterate non-European cultures. For the psychoanalytic approach see LaBarre, *Ghost Dance*, passim; on world destruction, esp. pp. 312-13 and 347. Marxism as modern apocalyptic has been a focus of the discussion since the 1920s: see Alfred Doren, “Wunschräume und Wunschzeiten,” pp. 158-59, note 1, and pp. 200-205 with notes; this observation was at the core of the controversy surrounding Norman Cohn's magisterial *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, rev. ed., pp. [9] - [11].

suddenness and great magnitude without the help of adjectives, the characteristics are too important to be left to implication. The present condition may announce the imminence of the catastrophe by worsening precipitously, but that is a “sign” which only the knowledgeable will understand. There is no general warning available to everyone, and the precise moment is unknowable even by the elect. In any case the event is not to be a gradual, drawn-out process in the proportions of geological time. The catastrophe is instantaneous.

Such temporal denominations are, however, relative. “Instantaneous” may mean a matter of a split second to the faithful awaiting the *parousia* or a matter of days or months to the modern revolutionary.² But whether at these extremes or in between, the suddenness stands in diametrical opposition to the enduring, intolerably self-extending present. For that very reason the suddenness itself is cherished. It defies the durability of the present.

The Present reduced to “Sign”

The defiance of the present is the principal activity of the rhetoric of Doomsday. Anticipation transforms the wretched present into a more or less acceptable moment. By anticipation the present loses autonomous value, that is to say, any importance the moment may have in reference to itself or its immediate circumstances. Paradoxically, anticipation also enhances the moment, but only by reference to the future. Take the great increase in immorality that is supposed to announce the end of the age (for example, 2 Tim. 3.1-8). Some people may think of it merely as a sign of the times, their own times, and wish that something be done

² When it becomes a matter of years, then the “revolution” has undergone a transformation similar to the postponement of the end of days in Jewish and Christian orthodoxy and most modern sectarian apocalypticism.

about it. The doom-sayer knows that it refers to the amazing events forthcoming. There is no point in correcting the immorality. All of that will be taken care of by the catastrophe. Indeed, an improvement of the situation might deprive the moment of the quality of “sign” and so act to postpone the end of the age. As deplorable as the wickedness of the world may be, its gradual correction is hardly desirable. The wickedness must continue and worsen.

Another paradox is involved in transforming the present into a moment acceptable to the doom-sayer: certainty and uncertainty, both absolute, certainty that the catastrophe will occur, uncertainty as to when other than relatively soon. This uncertain certainty possesses the principle of anticipation like a demon. Everything that happens in the present, especially anything unusual, might just be a clue that will somewhat alleviate the uncertainty: thus falling stars, earthquakes, or the sighting of a low flying, double-headed goose.³ A Korean-American “Doomsday Cult” seems to have considered the stock market a similar force of nature. They took as a “sign” the market's dip of 28 May 1962, the worst up to then since the 1929 crash: “While most of the nation stood in fear of another depression, [the cultists] rejoiced over the wonders of the spirit world and the imminence of the end.”⁴

Signs as Magic

In this way, the rhetoric of Doomsday participates in the mechanistic, magical worldview, where all events are related and take their meaning from their effect on the rest of the system. In that kind of

³ LaBarre, *Ghost Dance*, p. 216. On the “signs” in the medieval West see William W. Heist, *The Fifteen Signs before Doomsday* (East Lansing: Michigan State College Press, 1952).

⁴ John Lofland, *Doomsday Cult*, p. 200 (see above p. 87, note 29).

universe no event is merely itself and nothing else. The event also signifies, though perhaps only the wise, enlightened, or elect will understand the full significance. The event as sign loses the possibility of being self-explanatory, but for that loss it gains in importance. Why did that black cat cross my path? Not possibly just to get from one place to another in my vicinity, but rather to indicate to me coming misfortune. The event is thus transformed into something very different from itself and has meaning only insofar as it is made to point beyond itself to greater events.

Discord among the Mighty as Sign

Most of the “signs” of impending doom can be found well within the real experience of mankind. Some are perhaps uncommon, others quite the ordinary disposition of life in the world. Consider discord among the mighty. It occurs as a sign of the end of days in Esdras, as the “wavering of leaders, confusion of princes” (2 Esdr. 9.3). The Gnostic apocalypse, “On the Origins of the World,” expresses it this way: “kings will be drunk from the flaming sword and they will make war against one another, so that the earth will be drunk from the blood which is poured out” (*NH*, p. 178). In the *Mahabharata* at the end of the era, “ill-intentioned kings will hire assassins . . . foolishly, though thinking themselves wise, prepare for reciprocal murder.”⁵ The princes will be enraged with one another, sings the Tataric “Song of the End of the World.”⁶ The messengers told Handsome Lake, “now when the earth is about to end, the chiefs

⁵ 3(37)188.32: J. A. B. van Buitenen, ed. and trans., *The Mahabharata*, 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 594; see also K. Kerényi, “Das Persische Millennium im Mahabharata, bei der Sibylle und Vergil,” *Klio*, 29 (1936): 1-35 (from *OTP*, 1, p. 319, note 23), see esp. pp. 11-13 on the decay of the age.

⁶ Olrik, *Ragnarök*, p. 389.

and head-men will disagree and that will be a sign.”⁷ Given the history of nations, which very largely tells the story of discord among the mighty, one wonders just what made such discord something so special as to be endowed with the distinction, “sign.” To take the ordinary or arbitrary and inflate its significance is part and parcel of the magical worldview, different in scope but not in kind from overinterpreting the perambulations of black cats.

Magical Actions

The transformation of the day-to-day into a prelude to a great event suspends certain responsibilities and imposes others. The need to provide for a future that is merely an extension of the present is obliterated. So there is little point in taking ordinary precautions against hunger, exposure, and aggression. Other activities become urgent. During an outbreak of Manseren messianism in New Guinea the cultists were warned “manna would not fall from the heaven unless the people did their share by dancing and singing a special dance, full of power-creating magic.” The cultists by the hundreds “danced day and night in ecstasy, praying to the ancestors and expecting an earthquake, the sign of Manseren's arrival, hourly.”⁸ In Brazil in 1940 an Indian boy learned from the spirit that a place needed to be cleared in the jungle and a temple built there, for “as soon as this command had been fulfilled, a deluge would engulf the white man, sparing only the [Indians] gathered in the temple at that time.”⁹ The coercive character of the actions, “if I do this, the spirit will do that,” makes them magical.

⁷ Parker, “Code,” p. 58.

⁸ Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, p. 139.

⁹ Lanternari, *Religions of the Oppressed*, p. 170.

Unsuitability for the Day-to-Day

The Sioux medicine man Yellow Bird ignited the catastrophe at Wounded Knee (29 December 1890) when, in the presence of government soldiers searching for weapons among the Indians, he urged the warriors in the Sioux language “to resistance, telling them that the soldiers would become weak and powerless, and that the bullets would be unavailing against the sacred ‘ghost shirts,’ which nearly every one of the Indians wore.”¹⁰ LaBarre lists about twenty-six other episodes of belief in invulnerability among millennial cultists and others.¹¹ Dancing, building temples, engaging a hopelessly more powerful enemy, slaughtering the cattle and refusing to plant the crops, gathering at the mountaintops, disposing of one's property as though preparing for death, all differ categorically from profane, day-to-day behavior. The activity's very unsuitability for the day-to-day becomes the measure of its suitability for the catastrophic future.

This principle obtains rigorously among the extremists. The Flying Saucer cultists insisted on the removal of all metal from their persons, as it would be dangerous upon entering into the craft when it landed to take them up from the destruction and purification of the world. The precaution regarding metal applied to coins, keys, eyeglasses frames, tinfoil around chewing gum, and, finally, the metal zippers from one observer's trousers.¹² Permutations are evident in less bizarre situations. A vague sense of imminent crisis may permit behavior that would in the absence of a threat be considered quite irrational, as, for example, hoarding or the attempt to achieve personal or family autarky.

¹⁰ Mooney, *The Ghost Dance Religion*, pp. 868-69.

¹¹ LaBarre, *Ghost Dance*, pp. 307-10.

¹² Festinger, *When Prophecy Fails*, pp. 161-62.

The Disaster's Magnitude

As to the magnitude of the event, all traditions agree that it is going to be stupendous; scarcely a third of mankind will survive, according to the most optimistic estimates. These optimistic estimates occur chiefly in the West and run as a leitmotif through the prophecy of the centuries surrounding the turn of the eras. Finally, even in the West and certainly elsewhere, everyone is going to be destroyed except the elect. There will be no safety anywhere except in the places reserved for the elect: certain mountaintops, the Land without Evil, the flying saucer. General disorder announces the arrival of the event, increases and becomes one with the event at its culmination. The universe in its totality and in every part is afflicted with disorder: inanimate nature on earth and in the heavens; life of all kinds, the crops and the animals, domestic and wild; mankind in the life of the person, the family, society, government, and each of these among one another. They all succumb to disorder.

*The World turned Upside Down**Disorder in Society*

The principle of disorder expresses itself most clearly in those prophecies that treat social disruption as a sign of the coming end. In Hesiod, Zeus will intervene to destroy the generation when comrades, brothers, fathers and children, guests and hosts will be in discord (*Erga*, §181-84). These represent the closest personal relationships of the culture. Disruption there is disruption indeed. Isaiah sees the disorder as an inversion of the way things ought properly to be (3.5): "The child shall behave himself proudly against the ancient, and the base against the honorable." Likewise the Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch: "the mean will

rule over the honorable, and those of low degree will be extolled over the famous.”¹³ Lactantius predicts a great mutation in human affairs as the age draws to a close. All things will be confused. No one will revere the aged, the evil alone will have riches, and the good will fall into disgrace and want.¹⁴ In the age of Kale every aspect of social life is affected: the class structure disintegrates and, with it, the sanction of law and the trust that keeps the economy going. “Brahmins do the work of serfs, as the Eon expires, serfs become gatherers of wealth or practice the law of baronage. . . . People trade their wares mostly with false measures, and the merchants abound with tricks . . . the Law-minded become short-lived and impoverished and the lawless long-lived and rich, at the close of the Eon.” Thus the *Mahabharata*.¹⁵ In the Old Irish “Dialogue of Scholars,” kings will turn to wanderers on the land as the end approaches; nobles will be demeaned and the lowly rise; artists will engage in mere imitation; pupils will no longer support their aged teachers.¹⁶

Disorder in Nature

Disorder in society reflects and is reflected by disorder in nature.

In Esdras (2 Esdr. 5.4-5):

. . . The sun shall suddenly shine forth at night and
the moon during the day,
Blood shall drip from wood
And the stone shall utter its voice. . .

So also the Sibyls. They say that it will rain blood and the stones will

¹³ Baruch, 70.3: *OTP*, 1, p. 645; comp. Kautzsch, 2, p. 430, ch. 70.3; Charles, *Eschatology*, p. 329.

¹⁴ *The Divine Institutes*, 7.15 and 17: Sister Mary Francis McDonald, trans., *Fathers of the Church*, 49 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1964), pp. 512-13, 517-19.

¹⁵ 3(37)186.26, 46, 48: van Buitenen, trans., 2, pp. 586-87.

¹⁶ Olrik, *Ragnarök*, pp. 32 and 382.

begin to speak; cultivated land will turn into desert; the oceans will dry up and Asia will be a sea; abysses will be raised and mountains leveled,¹⁷ with which Isaiah agrees (40.4), and concerning which the Koran observes:

. . . My Lord
will uproot them [the mountains] and scatter
Them as dust;
He will leave them level as plains
Smooth and level;
Nothing crooked or curved
Wilt thou see in their place.¹⁸

The prophet Malekala on the island of Alor in eastern-most Indonesia announced that an earthquake would turn the world upside down.¹⁹ The Flying Saucer cultists predicted that North America would become a great inland sea, and the now submerged continents of Atlantis and Mu would rise out of the surrounding oceans.²⁰

Amid rumors of the imminent return of the ancestors, the Baining of New Britain in 1929-30 believed “the mountains would collapse into the valley to form a great plain covered with fertile gardens and fruit trees which would require no cultivation. Dead pigs and dogs would come back to life, but native skeptics and Europeans were to die in an earthquake.”²¹ A little later, during a Manseren outbreak in New Guinea, the doctrine spread that the order of society was to be reversed and with it the order of nature: “yams, potatoes and other tubers would grow on trees like fruit, while coconuts and other fruits would grow like tubers.

¹⁷ 2.11-13; 3.796-804; 5.447-50; 8.232-34: *OTP*, 1, pp. 345, 380, 403-404, 423; comp. Kurfess, pp. 54-55, 108-11, 144-45, 172-73.

¹⁸ 20.6.105-7: Abdullah Yusuf Ali, trans., *The Holy Qur-an* (New York: Hafner, 1938), p. 812.

¹⁹ LaBarre, *Ghost Dance*, p. 307.

²⁰ Festinger, *When Prophecy Fails*, pp. 30-31, 42, 56-57.

²¹ Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, p. 99.

Sea-creatures would become land creatures, and vice-versa (Worsley, p. 136). The Tataric “Song of the End of the World” sums it all up nicely, asserting that garlic would grow head up, and that that would be a sign.²²

Disorder in both Society and Nature

Disorder in nature and disorder among human beings occur variously from text to text, even from moment to moment in the same text. The relationship between the two disorders may appear as reflections, one from the other. Consider the examples just cited, or the joint complaint that the world has grown old and men wicked as cited in the last chapter in Siberian Samoyed, American Indian, and ancient primitivist versions (supra pp. 125ff.) Or the two may be interwoven, as in Esdras (2 Esd. 5.8-9):

There shall be chaos [or: the abyss shall open²³] in many places, and fire shall often break out, and the wild beasts shall roam forth beyond their haunts, and menstruous women shall bring forth monsters,

And salt water shall be found in the sweet, and all friends shall conquer one another; then shall reason hide itself, and wisdom shall withdraw into its chamber

In the Tiburtine Sibyl the apparent relationship seems slightly shifted yet again, from the instantaneous response of a reflection and the back and forth of the Esdras citation to the sequential response of an echo. She predicts in detail the horrendous immorality of church and state, come the Last Days, specifying the sins of the clergy and laity and concluding,

²² Olrik, *Ragnarök*, p. 389.

²³ Kautzsch, 2, p. 360.

In those days men will become rapacious and greedy and perjurious and lovers of the rewards of mendacity. Law and truth will be destroyed, and earthquakes will appear here and there, and the island cities will be washed away in floods, and pestilence will break out among men and cattle, and there will be a great dying among men.²⁴

Human disorder reveals itself in particular sins, then in general vice, and lastly in the destruction of the chief props of the moral order. Syntactically, this last feature—the collapse of the moral order—is separated from the rest of wrongdoing and put into the same period with a series of catastrophic disruptions of the elements (earth, water, air). Nature picks up where human destructiveness leaves off and destroys the destroyers, their persons and sustenance in town and country.

The return destruction of disorderly humanity by disorderly nature might seem to represent a compensatory activity, just punishment that restores the balance. In the general magical worldview that would be so. Plague, for example, made sense and had meaning as long as it served as a punishment of the sins of the community; in that context, the repentance of the community could terminate or ward off plague. In the special perspective of Doomsday such magical connections may bind sin and plague but that magic is no longer of any importance. Present plagues do not merely respond to present sin. They suggest on a small scale the grand scale of retribution.

Doomsday transcends whatever significance such events as plagues have in themselves. With the ability to look back on all of history, including past and future, The doomsayer knows what is important and what not. Sin and plague, the degeneration of mankind and the aging of

²⁴ Kurfess, *Sibyllinische Weissagungen*, pp. 274-75.

the world, moral and natural disasters may be images or echoes of one another, they may reinforce or compensate one another, but all of that shrinks before the magnitude of the final event. As far as Doomsday is concerned, they are all one and the same thing, signs warning of the end.

The Young turned Old

The fundamental unity of the signs, whether in nature or among human beings, comes out in the exceedingly troublesome portent of the young growing prematurely old. The portent appears in Hesiod in the form of children born grey at the temples (*Erga*, §180-81): “and Zeus will destroy this [iron] race of mortal men also when they come to have gray at then temples at their birth”; in the Book of Jubilees: “and the heads of the children will grow white as the hair of the aged, and a child of three weeks will seem as old as a man of a hundred years”;²⁵ in the Sibyls: “when throughout the world this sign appears, that children are gray at the temples from birth, then . . .”;²⁶ and in the Koran:

then how shall ye
If ye deny (god)
Guard yourself against
A Day that will make
Children hoary headed.²⁷

In the *Mahabharata*, the gray is postponed, but not by much: “Men turn gray in their sixteenth year, and quickly live out their lives.”²⁸ Esdras expresses the same idea a little differently (2 Esd. 6.21): “Infants a year old shall speak with their voices, and women with child shall give

²⁵ *OTP*, 2, p. 101; comp. Kautzsch, 2, p. 80; cf. Andrae, “Der Ursprung des Islams,” p. 224.

²⁶ 154-55: *OTP*, 1, p. 349; comp. Kurfess, pp. 56-57.

²⁷ 73.1.17: Ali, p. 1636.

²⁸ 3(37)186.53: van Buitenen, 2, p. 588.

birth to premature children at three and four months, and these shall live and dance.” In Mongolia a child born at night will already be running around the fire in the morning, be ready to marry at age five, and die at the advanced age of ten.²⁹

The sign of the old child combines human and natural disorders in one image and ignores the notion of a distinction between the two. The old child represents an inversion in respect to the normal course of human life comparable to the leveling of mountains in respect to landscape. The Doomsday evaluation also inverts the far more common laudatory use of the image of the old child in rhetoric. In the rhetorical tradition it is conventional to praise the young man skilled or wise beyond his years, and the convention is known as the topos of the *puer senex*.³⁰ These inversions are in themselves no more surprising in the Doomsday context than garlic growing head up. It would, however, be quite disturbing if the notion of head-up garlic occurred specifically as a sign of the end all the way from Greece to southern Siberia from the eighth century B.C. into modern times. That the sign of the old child has precisely that kind of distribution is only a little less disturbing.

The Signs and the Pattern of Doomsday

The Golden Age

The spectacle of the “signs” and of the destruction they portend inclines to obscure their deep dependence upon the other elements of the

²⁹ Olrik, *Ragnarök*, p. 389.

³⁰ Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, Willard R. Trask, trans., Bollingen Series, 36 (New York: Pantheon, 1953), pp. 98-101; cf. Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, p. 128, where the son of Manseren demonstrates that he is no ordinary mortal, “for he spoke immediately after birth,” and could at two weeks of age identify his father.

Doomsday pattern. One could argue that contrast with the ordinary, the day-to-day, would be enough to endow the disorders with unusual meaning and turn them into “signs.” The fact is, however, that many of the “signs” do not contrast with the ordinary at all but rather occur in the day-to-day and fit comfortably in the scheme of things as they are: for example, discord among the mighty or such natural phenomena as storms or earthquakes. The norm against which these disorders are measured is not the world as it is, where they might indeed represent a kind of order, but the world as it is supposed to be, the Golden Age. Then there was no discord among the mighty or no mighty to be in discord; then nature was consistently beneficent and, as it seems, largely at rest. This state of affairs expresses itself in experience as a universally available racial memory. Anyone critical of the world as it is can count on the comprehension of others, if not their agreement, by an appeal, implicit or explicit, to this perpetual norm. The threat of impending doom is pointless if the doom does not right a wrong, correct an imbalance, restore order. By endowing doom with meaning, Doomsday assumes a right, balances, orderly, a Golden Age.

The Fall

If the Golden Age is the world as it ought to be, then there must be a reason for the failure of the Golden Age now to be the condition of men. Doomsday knows the reason: the Fall. It is never far off when doom is impending. The Last Days remember the technology through which human beings fell from their natural condition, “men will not sail the sea nor will they know the stars of heaven” (*NH*, p. 304); in the words

of the Sibyl, “No longer will a ship bearing cargo sail on the waves.”³¹ Immediately after the Lord has revealed to Baruch at some length the tribulations of the End of Days, Baruch exclaims in response, “O Adam, what did you do to all those who were born after you? and what will be said of the first Eve who obeyed the serpent, so that this whole multitude is going to corruption? and countless are they whom the fire devours.”³² Esdras expresses similar sentiments in a similar context but additionally makes the Fall the individual responsibility of every sinner: “O Adam, what have you done? For though it was you who sinned, the fall was not yours alone, but ours also who are your descendents. For what good is it to us, if an eternal age has been promised to us, but we have done deeds that bring death?” (2 Esdr. 7.48[118]-49[119]).

Some prophecies concentrate on the destruction of the alien, the oppressor, the wicked. These prophets point the accusing finger at those responsible for the present mess. Such guilty ones are often the living representations of the Fall; the palpable punishment is thus no accident or simply some expression of a fit of pique. Responsible for all misery, they are doomed to a miserable end. The Sioux Ghost Dancers believed that in the forthcoming catastrophe a “landslide would be accompanied by a flood of water, which would flow into the mouths of the whites and cause them to choke with mud. Storms and whirlwinds would assist in their destruction.”³³ Certain Cherokee believed that a terrible storm with a mighty wind and hailstones as big as hominy mortars would destroy both the whites and unbelieving Indians, while the elect would be warned in time to take refuge on the highest summits of the Great Smoky

³¹ 8.348: *OTP*, 1, p. 426; comp. Kurfess, pp. 178-79; cf also 2.210; 8.236-37: *OTP*, 1, pp. 350, 423-24; comp. Kurfess, pp. 58-59, 172-73.

³² 2 Baruch, 48.42-43: *OTP*, 1, p. 367; comp. Kautzsch, 2, p. 430.

³³ Mooney, *The Ghost Dance Religion*, p. 788; further references in this and the next paragraph are also from Mooney.

Mountains (p. 676). The sense of co-responsibility for the Fall—having abandoned the old ways—comes out in those myths where destruction overwhelms everyone, but the elect are resurrected afterward. So it is with some northern Indian tribes who believed that the mountains would overturn and bury the whole surface of the earth, especially what the white man's civilization had put there. Whites and others were not to benefit from the subsequent resurrection (p. 723).

The alternatives—the destruction of (1) the alien alone, (2) the alien and the renegade, (3) everyone, with the elect to be resurrected into the Golden Age—recur as a theme throughout the world. These variations on the Fall and its correction do not, however, exhaust the possibilities. The Gnostic texts from Nag Hammadi offer at least two scenarios for the Last Days. One is a variation of the world turned upside down; the other reverses Gnostic cosmology and forces it back on itself. In both one finds the usual signs: “All the powers of the sea will tremble and dry up . . . the springs will cease to flow . . . the depths will be laid open and bare . . . the stars will grow in size and the sun cease” (*NH*, p. 288); “And the seas will be troubled by . . . war. Then the sun will darken and the moon will lose its light. The stars of heaven will disregard their course and a great thunder will come out of a great power that is above the power of Chaos . . .” (*NH*, p. 178). In the first text, “The Concept of Our Great Power,” those who know, that is, the Gnostics, are to be spared the agony of the final destruction. Here the Gnostics take a position little different from that of any other religion of the elect. The oppressor, alien, or unbeliever is not specified, but he does not have to be. He is included in the great destruction from which the Gnostic alone is excepted. In the other text, “On the Origins of the World,” Pistis Sophia finally corrects her mistake, by which the world came into being, and does so by putting aside her wisdom and donning senseless wrath. She

will cast both First Father and the gods of chaos into the abyss where they will destroy heaven, earth, and one another. When everything has fallen into it, the abyss itself will be overthrown (*NH*, pp. 178-79). The next act of the drama belongs to the next phase of Doomsday, the restoration of the primordial condition.

The Present

The forthcoming disaster refers above all to the present, which is, however, no more clearly definable in this context than it is when it holds the center of attention. Whatever the present may be, it is most certainly not the combination of distress and gratification, sorrow and joy, failure and accomplishment that make up ordinary personal and interpersonal existence. That existence is not irrelevant, but it is entirely transformed by the magnitude of the rhetorical present of Doomsday—intolerably wretched, wretched on a grand scale, a scale involving nations, the elements, the cosmos. The principal clue to the transformation of ordinary existence into the doom-sayer's present is the particular way all occurrences, ordinary and not, are endowed with meaning, that is, exclusively in reference to the limits of history, the beginning and end of that time (or condition in which change prevails), which implies uncertainty, oppression, pain, unhappiness, etc. The Fall and the forthcoming catastrophe set those limits. There is no history to speak of on either side of them.

The reduction of the present to a receptacle for misery and uncertainty places it in binary opposition to the Golden Age. Precisely this is the position of the then-and-now primitivists of classical antiquity (*Primitivism*, p. 55). From their perspective the Fall, the wretched present, and the forthcoming catastrophe all merge into one and the

same thing, the non-Golden Age. Here the present seems to expand to embrace both the Fall and the coming catastrophe where it can be lost in insignificance. Whatever significance it may have comes from its status as a repository for the consequences of the Fall and the portents of the coming end. Either way, with a great present embracing the Fall and the end or a little present squeezed out from between the two, the results are the same, the rejection of things as they are in favor of how they ought to be.

The sudden catastrophe that is to put an end to history may occur at any moment. Its proximity is an abiding reality for the doom-sayer and permeates the present as thoroughly as does the Fall. The signs are a partial realization of this conviction—they destroy and overturn in part, as the catastrophe destroys and overturns in toto—but even so, they are a sop. By indicating imminence the signs deny immediacy. They admit of postponement, however brief. The really important thing is that any moment can be the last, even or especially this moment. This principle promptly turns around to minimize the difference between the signs and the event. When a great disaster occurs, say an earthquake, the doom-sayer will know only that it is a sign if nothing but ordinary reality follows upon it. At the moment of the occurrence, the disaster may be the end itself. Here is one reason for the disaster, any disaster, being so welcome (e.g., the stock market decline of 1962, *supra* p. 140). The signs therefore lead a double existence. On the one hand, they encompass the world as it is; they describe it fully; they are present everywhere in it and are available to any moment. On the other hand, they refer to the future. At any moment they may cease to be signs of the end and become themselves the feared or longed-for destruction of the world.

Psychiatric Analogues

World destruction fantasies, as psychoanalytic literature reports, are exceedingly common among schizophrenics. The psychopathology of individuals seems here to mimic the collective belief of Doomsday cultists in some strange variant of the ontogeny-phylogeny recapitulation. The fantasies are thought to be a projection of an internal catastrophe onto the outside world.³⁴ They fall into two broad categories: those in which some cataclysm—the traditional ones, earthquakes, floods, wars, revolution, or pestilence—destroys the whole human race, the patient included;³⁵ and those in which the patient survives the cataclysm alone or saves himself and his sinless family.³⁶ The first class conforms to Gnostic, Manichaeic, and modern nihilistic doom-saying that regards the cosmos or some part of it, humanity for example, as a terrible mistake in need of being wholly undone. The second conforms to the more common doom-saying of the religions of the elect.

Psychiatric inferences can be applied—naturally, with extreme caution—to the Doomsday scheme at large. The fantasy of world destruction, the notion that the world of objects has come to an end, is interpreted as the patient's own withdrawal from the world of objects.³⁷ This is not very different from the Doomsday repudiation of the present that occurs when a doom-sayer turns his back on history because history

³⁴ I. M. Kogan, "Weltuntergangserlebnis und Wiedergeburtphantasie bei einem Schizophrenen," *Internationale Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse*, 18 (1932): 86-104, here pp. 100-102, quoting Freud; LaBarre, *Ghost Dance*, pp. 312-13 and 324, note 42.

³⁵ William J. Spring, "Observations on World Destruction Fantasies," *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 8 (1939): 48-56, here p. 54.

³⁶ "Weltuntergangserlebnis," p. 91; and Gustav Hans Graber, "Realitätsflucht und Weltuntergangssphobie," *Zeitschrift für Psychoanalytische Pädagogik*, 3 (1929): 213-21, here p. 219.

³⁷ Spring, "Observations," p. 48.

has turned its back on him. The observation, “like other delusions and obsessive fears, the idea that the world is coming to an end represents the fulfillment of a wish,”³⁸ applies with particular force to radical doom-sayers with the exception that the doom-sayer does not pretend to fear the event but openly welcomes it.

The danger of such easy transit between individual psychological and collective religious behavior comes when the two are made equivalent rather than employed to illuminate one another. The legitimate psychiatric inference, “Some patients appear to identify their own deaths directly with the end of the world,”³⁹ is less legitimate when applied to the rhetoric of Doomsday. Combined with the mighty persuasive power of the biological metaphor, of which this observation is a clear instance, such an interpretation might well be used to explain Doomsday away altogether. Is the forthcoming catastrophe not merely a projection onto the universe of the uncertain certainty of individual death? Although the possibility cannot and should not be excluded in principle, its usefulness has to be judged in the full context of the rhetoric of Doomsday. All forms of the rhetoric of Doomsday without exception, even the nihilistic, make the destruction of the world not an end in itself but always the means to a restoration. The biological metaphor, strictly construed, offers no point of comparison for the final restoration. Human biology provides an unconditional termination in the disaster of death. Rebirth belongs to another category of experience.

The transformation of the rhetoric of Doomsday from an objective and public matter affecting everyone collectively to a subjective and private matter affecting people individually has always been one of the main weapons used against it. The indisputable and largely inexplicable

³⁸ Spring, “Observations,” p. 49.

³⁹ Spring, “Observations,” p. 55.

capacity of the rhetoric of Doomsday to make trouble invites opposition of all kinds. It is necessary, regularly, to cut it down to size lest its disruptions get entirely out of hand. The circumstances of that necessity differ. Sometimes the rhetoric of Doomsday threatens the very survival of the people who espouse it, say, the Jews of the first and second centuries A.D. Persistent millennial activism would certainly have taken them the way of the Münster Anabaptists. Sometimes the rhetoric of Doomsday threatens the peaceful status a group may have won, in part, with energy derived from the rhetoric of Doomsday itself, say, Christian orthodoxy as it was gaining acceptance among the Romans, or modern adventist sects as they adjust to success in the world. Perhaps the most abiding and annoying threat posed by the rhetoric of Doomsday is its obstinate refusal to flee before the bright light of reason. The rhetoric of Doomsday thereby threatens reason itself, which is compelled to come to its own defense with reductive explanations.

All of this is simply to say that psychiatric interpretations of Doomsday sound very like its domestication at the hands of orthodoxy. St. John Chrysostom (*Texte*, 4, p. 477) scolds the diehard doom-sayer by asking, what use is it to us to know the date of the end of the world? Is not everyone's own death his own world end? Is it not better to spend one's time in preparation for death than in vain speculation about the end of the world? No more than superficial differences separate John and the psychiatrists. They disparage the importance of any historical Doomsday in different ways, but they both disparage it, and they both put the individual and individual fate in first place. They would reduce the rhetoric of Doomsday from cosmic history to biography. Biography, like the biological metaphor, does not observe all the rules of the rhetoric of Doomsday: resurrection is biographical only in a limited and special sense. Furthermore, the weight of evidence for the rhetoric of Doomsday

from around the world reveals little or nothing of the individualism prerequisite for biography as it is understood in the West.

The Spiritual Biography of Heroes and Prophets

The traditions do, however, have at least one more satisfactory model to offer in this regard. It is the life of the prophet who announces Doomsday. That life is not bound by the biological rules of biography. This freedom takes the prophet very close to the pattern of the rhetoric of Doomsday. It is common for the prophet to claim or have claimed for him some deathlike experience, be it only a trance, a dream, or a vision that taught him his mission. The claim that death itself occurred is so widespread that the argument does not even have to appeal to deathlike experiences to make the point. The resurrected prophets ended their ordinary lives in some version of the usual catastrophe and returned from death thoroughly transformed and extraordinary.⁴⁰

Paradigmatic is the case of Handsome Lake. Speaking of himself, "He thinks how he has been evil ever since he had strength in this world and done evil ever since he had been able to work." He grows sick and is nothing "but yellow skin and dried bones from four years of sickness in bed." One day, after an exclamation of "So be it!" he arises from his bed to go outdoors. His daughter looks on. "He totters and she rises quickly to catch him but he falls dying. Now they lift him up and carry him back within the house and dress him for burial. Now he is dead." The announcement is sent out to the nobles, "he who lay sick for so many years is dead." All assemble about him. One noble notices a single warm spot on his chest and holds out hope. "Now it is morning and the dew is drying. This is a time of trouble for he lies dead." As the noon hour

⁴⁰ Mühlmann, pp. 46-47.

approaches the warm spot spreads and he revives entirely, saying, "Never have I seen such wondrous visions!" In these visions he received the cure of his malady and the Code of Handsome Lake with its explicit but moderate Doomsday orientation.⁴¹

Handsome Lake's contemporary Tenskwatawa took that name ("Open Door") only after he had been lifted up to the spirit world where he too learned a moral code that urged the Indians to return to the "ancient law of their ancestors." He also predicted a catastrophe in the form of two days of universal darkness that would usher in a new era.⁴² Before his mission he had only been known for his stupidity and intoxication. But one day when he was lighting his pipe "he suddenly fell back apparently lifeless and remained in that condition until his friends had assembled for the funeral. . . . He revived from his trance, and after quieting their alarm, announced that he had been to the spirit world and commanded them to call the people together that he might tell them what he had seen" (pp. 672-73).

Smohalla, the prophet who would not ravage his mother the Earth (supra p. 98), had been left for dead after a duel. His slow recovery was followed by long journeys that ended in his return to his homeland along the Columbia River in Washington. There he "announced that he had been dead and in the spirit world and had now returned by divine command to guide his people." His message included the notion of a *parousia* and the resurrection of all Indians (p. 718).

John Slocum, founder of the Indian Shakers, says in his own account, "My breath was out and I died. All at once I saw a shining light. Angels told me to look back. I died, and saw my own body lying dead. It

⁴¹ Parker, "Code," pp. 21-24.

⁴² Mooney, *The Ghost Dance Religion*, p. 676.

had no soul. My soul left my body and went up to the judgment place of God My soul was told that I must come back and live on earth.” The scene on earth was confirmed by witnesses: “Many Indians were present when he was sick and apparently died. They said his neck was broken, and that he remained dead for about six hours, when he returned to life. . . . [Slocum] stated that he died and attempted to go to heaven, but could not enter it because he was so wicked. There he was told, however, the way of life, and that he must return to earth and teach his people the way” (p. 747). The way included a strict moral code, intensely emotional worship, and a conviction that the world would end on a Fourth of July very soon (p. 749).

Wovoka, father of the 1890 Ghost Dance, received his first inspiration, according to a Paiute disciple, as follows: “One day, while at work he heard a great noise which appeared to be above him on the mountain. He laid down his ax and started to go in the direction of the noise, when he fell down dead, and God came and took him.” In an interview with the ethnologist Mooney, Wovoka said that God had sent him back with the mission to “tell his people that they must be good and love one another, have no quarreling, and live in peace with the whites.” He was clearly understating the Doomsday features of the Ghost Dance for the benefit of his guest, but he did not suppress them altogether. The message of the Ghost Dance held out promise of paradise: “if they faithfully obeyed his instructions, they would at last be reunited with their friends in this other world, where there would be no death or sickness or old age By performing this dance . . . they would secure this happiness to themselves and hasten the event” (p. 772).

In 1922 a Doomsday panic arose among the Navaho, apparently not related to the white intruder. Fleeing Indians told an observer “they were going back to the Black Mountain to escape the flood that was

coming. An old man had been struck by lightning and left for dead, and after many days he had come back to life, and told what he had seen and heard. He told of a great flood, which would destroy all the flocks and cornfields”⁴³

The phenomenon is, despite these examples, not peculiarly North American. In southern Africa the Xhosa catastrophe of 1857 (supra p. 112) was preceded by rumors that Ulanjeni, the prophet of an earlier uprising, had returned from the dead.⁴⁴ In New Guinea “one prophet, it was said, had ‘died,’ and had lain for three days guarded by other leaders who prevented friends and relatives from approaching. During this time rats actually gnawed his ears. On the third day, he arose again, and announced in ‘German’ in a loud voice that he had returned from the Land of the Dead, bringing back a new morality. . . . He was carried around the village on a litter which he claimed to be the steamer of Lavara, a legendary ancestress who had returned to Papua.”⁴⁵

A repeatedly imprisoned cult leader active in Madang in northeastern New Guinea around 1944-49 “claimed to have been killed whilst in gaol, and to have gone to heaven where named him Konsel (Council?)” (p. 215). Runovora, a leader of similar stamp on Espiritu Santo in the New Hebrides, was sentenced to death by the authorities. He “had already returned from the dead once and faced execution quite fearlessly” (p. 49).

Stripping death of finality might appear to the modern to be the central message of all these extraordinary reports. This could be so if the finality of death were not a notion of limited distribution and, for most of

⁴³ Wilson, *Magic*, p. 442.

⁴⁴ Wilson, *Magic*, p. 229.

⁴⁵ German was the language of the predecessors and enemies of the present English-speaking overlords in New Guinea: Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, p. 91. Subsequent references also to Worsley.

the world, a very recent ideological possibility. The prior and more widespread notion is the one implicit in all these stories: the rites of passage, the conversion, the ordeals of the hero, the descent into hell, the return with the boon for mankind. It is as though Handsome Lake and Mooney had, anachronistically, been reading Joseph Campbell.⁴⁶

The folklore of the world tells this story again and again. It is biography in a higher sense, one that transcends biology. The conformity with the rhetoric of Doomsday is not perfect. They are, after all, not one and the same myth. The primordial Golden Age and the Fall do not necessarily describe the early stages of the development of the hero, though they may. The dismal present, the catastrophe, the subsequent renewal do, however, describe that development exactly. Take the examples of Handsome Lake, Tenskwatawa, and John Slocum. Their moral and physical decay was leading inevitably to a death, that death, however, a dramatic, virtually instantaneous purification, a marvelous resurrection into a state free of the previous evils. Their public message was one of a similar experience much enhanced, pointing out the sickness of the world, predicting its imminent death and resurrection.

There is no indication whatsoever that the prophets deliberately projected their own experience onto the world at large. That is to say, they were not intentionally raising autobiography to history in a reversal of the debunking process. It is, in fact, not at all clear that they detected the slightest formal connection between subject and object, between their experience of conversion, of turnabout, and their inspired, post-conversion understanding of the turnabout of events in the world. The parallels are nonetheless undeniable.

No bridge, however, seems to be there to connect the parallels.

⁴⁶ *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 2nd ed., Bollingen Series, 17 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

They do not trade characteristics back and forth. Rather, they are joined, if anywhere, at their base and take their resemblance from a common source, lost, no doubt, in some abyss of the psyche. The ultimate reason for the universality and basic familiarity of the prophet's story—and with it, of the rhetoric of Doomsday—may well lie irretrievable in that abyss; but more proximately, it should be safe to argue that the universality and familiarity both lie in daily experience, the daily experience of fatigue, rest, and awakening refreshed. That sequence prevails as well in the many greater and lesser turnabouts of ordinary life where, again and again, fresh starts follow upon old and tired endings.

The story of the prophet, like the whole of the pattern of the rhetoric of Doomsday, does then finally refer to everyday life. To that extent it participates in the biological metaphor after all. In this diurnal variation of the metaphor, however, the frame is shifted. Usually the day is surrounded by darkness. Here, not noon but midnight commands the chronological center. That leaves room in the picture for a bright new morning.

CHAPTER VI

The Golden Age Restored

The Worldwide Similarities

The Danish chronicler of the end of the world, Axel Olrik, seems to be parodying *Anna Karenina* when he observes that the destruction of the world has many possible shapes, but its subsequent renewal is much more uniform.¹ Starting out from mythology and folklore as they were understood two or three generations ago, he reached his conclusion on the basis of great erudition in a clearly circumscribed field of study. The circumscription generally excluded the established religions of the West, except insofar as they may have colored his mythological evidence, and he largely ignored the cults (as opposed to religions) of the rest of the world. He was nonetheless aware that his observation applied to Christianity and would probably not have been surprised to find it applicable to the Cargo cults of Melanesia, the Taiping rebellion of nineteenth-century China, the early phase of colonial India's fight for independence, or African and American Indian response to European incursion.

¹ Olrik, *Ragnarök*, p. 104.

As compelling as the evidence is, the general uniformity of the regenerate world has not been uniformly acknowledged. There are those who observe it only to dismiss it. Others suspect “contamination” from western eschatology.² And yet others have tried by subtlety to reduce the general uniformity from a class of events to the individual instances making up that class. Yet others try to distinguish between what they deem to be truly revolutionary movements and movements tainted by conservatism, as though a backward glance at the primordial Golden Age would turn the revolution into a pillar of salt. For these ideologically encumbered observers, the forthcoming paradise on earth has got to be entirely new, like nothing the world has ever known, by definition, then, without a past model.³

To achieve and maintain this position, formidable obstacles have to be circumvented or ignored: first, the intrinsic difficulty of imagining anything entirely new; second, the tyrannical power of the real or imagined past to maintain or convulse the status quo; and third, the dominance of the present, of the world as it is, in shaping by contradiction the image of the better world, be it past or future. The post-catastrophic, regenerate world has, at the very least, a negative model in the present as does the prelapsarian world. The notion that the two Golden Ages are unrelated, that only the first is fantasy and only the second realizable, can be traced in every case back to the misapprehension that political extremists of opposing ideologies represent categorical opposites and divide the possibilities into the sole true alternatives. The contrast in ideological positions fades to insignificance in the light of the rhetoric of Doomsday where the broad common ground between superficially opposing attitudes reveals itself beyond question. The

² Baumann, *Schöpfung und Urzeit*, p. 315.

³ Wilson, *Magic*, p. 215.

genuine antithesis does not lie between those who look back and those who look ahead to better times; rather it lies between those who incline to accept the present on its own terms and those who do not.⁴ Those who do not, whatever they may label themselves, and insofar as they are not mystics, gravitate toward the rhetoric of Doomsday.

The Present as Negative Model

The better world offered by rhetoric of Doomsday as an alternative to the present is, with one or two important exceptions, strongly reminiscent of Cockaigne, Schlaraffenland, the Big Rock Candy Mountain. Those who place the ultimate realities on an other-than-terrestrial plane may finally escape the easy life, but even most of them tend to linger in some Elysium before moving on to the grand spiritual culmination. Otherwise the post-catastrophic, regenerate world is the very image of comfort and bliss. It might seem that one person's bliss would be another person's boredom. But that is not the case in the actual description of the forthcoming Golden Age. The areas of agreement predominate; the differences, although revealing, are minimal. Generally, the new order represents an unconditional victory over all the consequences of the Fall: discord with nature, want, labor, pain, disease, aging, and death. Strife, greed, and the panoply of vice complete the picture. The combined miseries constitute the present. Negate them, and one has the Golden Age. A specific painful circumstance may make the woes especially burdensome, and then negation of that circumstance will also find its way into a given picture of the Golden Age. It is in this category where most of the differences lie. The woes may also be inflated

⁴ Kurt W. Back and Kenneth J. Gergen, "Apocalyptic and Serial Time Orientations and the Structure of Opinions," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 27 (Fall, 1963): 427-42.

and made to occupy the whole of the human condition or, as in the case of the Gnostics and the Manichaeans, the whole of creation. Then the negation will expand proportionately.

As extreme as the Gnostic-Manichaean position may appear to be, it is, in one sense, only an extension of the world denial central to all doom-sayers. The various doctrines may fix on special or general miseries, but their negation of these miseries implies also the negation of certain fundamentals of material existence, like the irreversible passage of time. Descriptions of the regenerate world routinely address this basic fact of the world-as-it-is, some explicitly by refusing it a place in the new order altogether, others by removing its sting, by taming the seasons, rejuvenating the living, and resurrecting the dead. Time is thus denied, neutralized, or made reversible, and so presented as a function wholly contradictory to ordinary experience. This repudiation of reality differs in degree and not in kind from the Gnostic repudiation of creation as a whole.

The Extremists

Disgust with the world as it is brings the forthcoming disaster and the new order so close together that, in certain cases, the very act of destruction is hardly distinguishable from the restoration of things as they were. It is among the Gnostics that this negation is so positively valued. Creation disturbed the primordial peace, and only annihilation will restore the primordial peace: "And in the Last Days, the forms of Nature will be destroyed with the winds and all their demons; they will become a dark lump, just as they were from the beginning" (*NH*, p. 327). The Gnostic apocalypse, "On the Origins of the World," concludes with all the classic "signs" of disordered nature and disordered society leading up to the cosmic catastrophe in which First Father aids in the destruction of

the gods of Chaos and then destroys himself. His heaven will fall in upon the earth and together they will fall into the abyss, and the abyss itself will be overthrown, until the light will cover the darkness, and the glory of the unbegotten will appear (pp. 178-79). The catastrophic conclusion and the return to a clear, unobstructed view of the divine are basically one and the same thing, since the glory of the unbegotten was merely obscured by creation. The annihilation of creation simply means overcoming a regrettable error, ending the division of the one, a “restoration to that which used to be a unity” (p. 95), and bringing back the primordial condition, “so that the end might be like the beginning” (p. 93).

This eschatology, reminiscent of “Big Bang” physics, would seem to have little room for personal salvation. But, lo, those who “keep the commandment of the Lord of glory, instead of the momentary hour . . . will inherit the eternal kingdom” (*NH*, p. 95). How, in view of the totality of destruction, is such a thing possible? Those who know, the Gnostics, “we” the elect as opposed to “them” the benighted, have already transcended the worst diversities of creation: “For when we confessed the kingdom which is in Christ, we escaped from the whole multiplicity of forms and from inequality and change. For the end will receive a unitary existence just as the beginning, where there is no male or female, nor slave nor free, nor circumcision and uncircumcision, neither angel nor man, but Christ is all in all” (*NH*, p. 95).⁵

This appears on the surface to be a mystical form of salvation, that is, salvation available to the believer at any moment when the believer is ready to transcend the mundane. But the subsurface thrust of the statement points toward the end of things. That in Gnosticism the form

⁵ Comp. I Cor. 12.13; Gal. 3.28; Col. 3.11.

of salvation is more eschatological than mystical, destined for the end of time and not potentially present all the time, is made clear by “The Concept of Our Great Power.” There the Savior predicts the usual natural disasters, after which “I shall withdraw with everyone who will know me. And they will enter the immeasurable light, where there is no one of the flesh nor the wantonness of the fire to seize them” (p. 288). The fire is to consume everything, “and when it does not find anything else to burn, then it will perish by its own hand.” But surviving this purification are “I and those who know me,” who will fill the aeon of beauty, the unchangeable aeon (p. 289).

The strictly anti-materialistic attitudes of the Gnostics did not encourage the fantasies of ease and natural abundance more common in other systems. Nonetheless, the rhetoric of Doomsday, with its backward glance at origins does bring to Gnosticism some notion of an earthly paradise near the beginning and end of history. Justice created the Garden (*NH*, p. 168). In it grows the tree of immortal life that rises to heaven and is like unto the sun and whose fruits are like clusters of white grapes. It was meant to give life to the immortal saints “in the consummation of the aeon.” An olive tree also grows in the Garden, meant “to purify the kings and chief priests of justice, who will appear in the Last Days” (p. 169).

Judaeo-Christian Traditions

For this Gnostic writer, the Garden was obviously planted from the very start with a view toward the Last Days, something the writers of Genesis did not necessarily have in mind. The eschatological potential of the Garden was, however, recognized in later Old Testament and early Christian times. Isaiah promises for the renewal of Zion that her wilderness will be made like Eden and her desert like the garden of the

Lord (Is. 51.3). In the *Testaments of the Patriarchs* Dan foretells the captivity of Israel, the coming of the Messiah, the battle with the forces of evil, after which peace will prevail and the saints will rest in Eden.⁶ At the conclusion of a long degenerative catalogue of worsening misery Levi predicts the coming of a new priest who will shine like the sun, banish all darkness from the earth, and bring universal peace. The new priest will personally open the gates of Paradise, take down the sword once raised against Adam, and give the saints to eat of the Tree of Life.⁷ Esdras looks to the end of time and sees that the world will return “as it was in the first beginnings” to primordial silence for seven days, corresponding, it seems, to the week of creation (2 Esdr. 7.30). And thereupon the Garden is to be opened again, and the faithful will enjoy the tree of life, plenty, rest, goodness, and wisdom. Evil, illness, death, hell, and sorrows are all banished, “and in the end the treasure of immortality is made manifest” (2 Esdr. 8.52-54).⁸

The treasure of immortality is nothing new in the story of mankind. Its appearance at the end of things, like the Garden itself, points back to the beginnings, and is not merely an occurrence but rather a recurrence. The Creator had made man the king of all creation under heaven and had invested him with every grace, including that of life everlasting. Indeed, it is absurd to think that a loving God called man into being merely to give him over to corruption. That was brought upon man by his own sin. But the divine love determined that man would in due course be renewed in the original condition: thus Gregory of Nyssa and with him Christian orthodoxy (*Texte*, 4, p. 502).

⁶ 8-13: *OTP*, 1, pp. 809-10; comp. 7.5 [2.12]: Kautzsch, 2, p. 485.

⁷ 1-11: *OTP*, 1, pp. 794-95; comp. 3.18[5.26]: Kautzsch, 2, pp. 470-71.

⁸ Cf. Kautzsch, *Apokryphen*, 2, p. 382, note “i”: the opening of the Garden here is meant to correspond to its closing in Genesis.

The Church Fathers, promulgating this central doctrine of Christianity, turned repeatedly to cycles of nature as parables of human regeneration: the daily course of the sun, the waning and waxing of the moon, the return of the seasons, the death and resurrection of the seed (John 12.24), even the all-too-human experience of sickness and recovery. Come the resurrection, however, all of these cycles are to be terminated and their quality made straight. John Chrystostom writes to Theodore: in the resurrected state there will be no want, no disease, no bitterness, envy, greed, or storm of passion: there will be only day, brightness, and light, no twilight and no night; there will be no heat or frost or season of any kind, no aging with its infirmities; everything transitory will become permanent and incorruptible.⁹

The Hebrew Bible provides precedents—clear and obscure, general and exclusive to the chosen—for these doctrines and the forms in which they were expressed. Isaiah (26.19) proclaimed that “the earth shall cast out the dead,” whom he calls upon to awake and sing, “ye that dwell in the dust.”¹⁰ The new world that the resurrected are meant to inherit is free of the cycle of day and night. The sun shall neither shine nor set, the moon neither illuminate nor wane, “but the Lord shall be unto thee an everlasting light” (Is. 60.19-20).

The Johannine Apocalypse refers to these verses in the description of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21.23): “and the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof.” In the Slavonic Enoch there will be, after the great destruction, neither months nor days nor hours, nor will there follow one year upon the other or be counted. There will be eternal life.

⁹ Theophilus of Antioch, Peter Chrysologos, Tertullian, and Ambrose: *Texte*, 4, pp. 490-99.

¹⁰ Comp. Dan. 12.2-3; Charles, *Eschatology*, p. 131.

All transitory things will pass away leaving one aeon, one great light, and a paradise bright and incorruptible.¹¹ In the Ethiopian Book of Adam and Eve, God promises the primordial pair that, when the covenant is fulfilled, they will be brought into a land of gladness where there is neither sorrow nor suffering but rather joy, a light that never fails, praises that never cease, and a beautiful garden that will never pass away.¹²

The elimination of time from the human condition, explicit in all these examples, unites the diversity of the Sibylline Oracles. In the surviving fragments of the lost second book—most probably of pre-Christian provenance—the Sibyl proclaims for the new era: “No longer will anyone say at all, ‘night has come’ or ‘tomorrow’ or ‘it happened yesterday’ or worry about [make provision for] many days. No spring, no summer, no winter, and no autumn, no marriage, no death, no sales, no purchases, no sunset, no sunrise. For he will make a long day.”¹³ A sister Sibyl of similar antiquity places the destruction of time back into the purifying catastrophe, “There will no longer be twinkling spheres of luminaries, no night, no dawn, no numerous days of care, no spring, no summer, no winter, no autumn.”¹⁴ The very confused eighth book—containing specific attacks on Nero and so, in part, of first-century provenance—concludes the Last Judgment with an expression of relief at the termination of time, quoting the second book more or less exactly, adding an expression of longing for the eternal light of the deity, and proceeding with a Christian paraphrase of the creation story.¹⁵ The mind

¹¹ En. 92.3-5: *OTP*, 1, p. 74; comp. Kautzsch, 2, p. 301 and Boas, *Essays*, pp. 189-90.

¹² Ch. 26: Malan, *The Book of Adam and Eve*, p. 27.

¹³ *OTP*, 1, p. 353; comp. Kurfess, pp. 66-67.

¹⁴ *OTP*, 1, p. 364; comp. Kurfess, pp. 76-77.

¹⁵ 8.424-55: *OTP*, 1, pp. 427-28; comp. Kurfess, pp. 182-83.

organizing the narration would not have been disturbed by the un- or anti-chronological order of the events, for it would know that the end is like the beginning.

The reduction of time to a nightless, seasonless, changeless uniformity lies at the very heart of the rhetoric of Doomsday. There is hardly a more complete repudiation of the world-as-it-is, except perhaps for the gnostic dualistic repudiation of matter and, with it, of creation in its totality. Such expressions, however, are too easily susceptible of a spiritualizing and ultimately transcendentalizing interpretation. That is to say, the timeless, seasonless, immaterial condition suggests a familiar and available earthly alternative to the world-as-it-is, an alternative that can be achieved subjectively by indifference or ecstasy or in consequence of individual bodily death. And that alternative is not genuinely apocalyptic, at least not on the surface. Indeed, on the surface, it is the antithesis of the rhetoric of Doomsday, for it lets the world-as-it-is proceed on its own course, whereas the rhetoric of Doomsday demands objective termination of the world-as-it-is and its complete transformation according to the rules that the rhetoric itself imposes.

These seek to erase the world-as-it-is. The absolute transformation of everything into nothing or one thing—such as the great gnostic-dualistic systems espouse—represents a logic inherent in the rhetoric of Doomsday. Most Doomsday rhetorics, however, pursue the inherent logic to a point far short of annihilation. They define the world-as-it-is not by its totality but merely by what they find objectionable in it. The objectionable does not, in most cases, rise to include the metaphysical; on the contrary, the objectionable is usually quite earthbound. The whole world may be thrown into the purifying furnace, but there only the objectionable will be burned away, leaving behind a perfect or at least unobjectionable world.

The Ethiopic Enoch proclaims that, come the new world, the flowers of Justice and Truth will bloom and labor will become a blessing and a veritable joy. The Just will live until they have conceived a thousand children, and the span of life from youth to old age will be spent in peace. Wine will flow in abundance, the seed grain will produce a thousandfold, and the olives will deliver great masses of oil. The earth is to be purged of violence, injustice, sin godlessness, and impurity.¹⁶ As blissful as this vision may seem, it is altogether moderate by contrast to the more typical escalations of the good life into the preposterous. The moral and material conditions described by the text are the result of projecting the real into the ideal. Except for the astonishing fertility of the Just, this Golden Age is not too far from the experience of humanity in good times. Its moderation, plausibility, and proximity to experience in the real world set this vision at the pole opposite to that of the nihilists. It represents a practical rhetoric of Doomsday. Some version of this vision informs the social policies of most modern states.¹⁷

The language employed to describe the perfect or unobjectionable world refers, in the first instance, to those events in nature that threaten or cancel well-being: famine, pain, danger, disease, and death. In the second instance, political, social, economic frustrations—oppression, stratification, and poverty—determine the descriptive language. And in both instances the language proclaims the invalidation or reversal of these deplorable conditions. A compact example of this may be found in the minor Old Testament prophet Joel. His brief book is occupied in describing the deplorable conditions of the world, both natural and political, and their worsening into the catastrophic in which they are to come to their violent end. But thereafter the Lord will send corn and

¹⁶ 1 En. 10.16-21: *OTP*, 1, p. 18; comp. Kautzsch, 2, p. 243.

¹⁷ Mühlmann, pp. 406-409.

wine and oil in quantities sufficient for everyone (2.19), and the moderate rains that used to fall will return to the land (2.23), “and the floors shall be full of wheat, and the vats shall overflow with wine and oil” (2.24). As though the restoration of plenty on a natural, more or less realistic level were not enough, finally “the mountains shall drop down new wine, and the hills shall flow with milk” (3.18).

In defense of Joel, it is worth pointing out that representations of the Golden Age routinely mix the materialistic and the idealistic, the imaginable and the improbable, and that the line between them is not drawn by reason but by poetry. It is altogether likely that, in this passage, the prophet has let the poetry tip his language into the naturalistically absurd only as a figure of speech, as a metaphor, that the great abundance of the new world will make it seem as though the mountains flow with wine and the hills with milk.

The high poetic diction of Isaiah raises similar problems: an inclination to allegory and an obscuring of the realistic base to which his brilliant imagery refers. The familiar passage (11.6),

The wolf shall lie down with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
and calf and the young lion and the fatling together;
and a child shall lead them,

has invited the most far-reaching interpretations. But on the face of it the passage simply promises an end to predation, that is, safety for the livestock and such harmony in nature that even a child could husband the animals. To be sure, the idyllic scene does describe a kind of nature far from anyone's experience in reality, but it is almost identical to the prelapsarian world. Then man and the animals were not at odds with one another, nor the animals among themselves. The idyll expresses itself as the opposite of the war for survival and thus as the very image of peace. But the lofty ideal raised in the vision—however broadly

applicable and variously interpretable—almost certainly stems from the down-to-earth economic woes of the husbandman and the living threat of untamed nature ever poised to decimate his flocks.

The hardships of everyday life are usually visible just behind the most luxuriant fantasies of peace and abundance, such as were produced by the competing and succeeding traditions: intertestamentary apocalypticism and certain Church Fathers. These seem to drop all restraint and let their fantasies grow to extravagant proportions, usually combining, like Isaiah, the highest spiritual ideals and the most basic material needs and desires of mankind, sometimes, however, obscuring the spiritual beneath the material.

The Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch, for example, proclaims that the fertility of the earth will increase a thousandfold, that each vine will have a thousand branches, each branch a thousand clusters, each cluster a thousand grapes, and each grape will yield a barrel of wine.¹⁸ Those who have hungered will be satisfied. The morning breezes will bring the aroma of fruit, and the evening winds will bring a healthy dew. And manna will again fall from heaven.¹⁹ The vision of the earthly paradise at the end of time occurs twice in this book, each time succeeding terrible catastrophes. In the recurrent paradise, bliss and rest will prevail. Health will descend in the dew, and disease will flee. Sorrow and trouble and sighs will pass away from among men, and joy will wander freely about the earth. No one will die prematurely, and no sudden misfortune will strike. Trials, accusations, conflict, vengeance, feuds, greed, envy, and hate will all be damned. And the wild animals will leave the forest

¹⁸ Irenaeus of Lyon describes a similar circumstance but raises the figure by a factor of ten: Mühlmann, p. 301.

¹⁹ Bar. 29.5-8: *OTP*, 1, pp. 630-31; comp. Kautzsch, 2, p. 423; cf. Charles, *Eschatology*, pp. 323-36.

and serve man. The vipers and serpents will creep out of their hiding places and become the playthings of children. Women will no longer suffer pangs at birth. Neither will the reapers nor the builders work themselves into weariness, for all work will proceed of its own accord. That time will be the end of things transitory and the beginning of things enduring.²⁰

Virgil and the Sibyls

The Fourth, the so-called messianic Eclogue of Virgil is filled with images and sentiments disquietingly similar to these. The parallels—the introduction of the child into the picture, the domestication of wild nature, the gross plenty of foodstuffs arising from the spontaneous fertility of the earth, which in turn puts an end to labor—all these have been observed and critically examined; and the disquiet survives unabated.²¹ Virgil witnesses in the new Golden Age adawning the birth of a child on whom the earth, untilled, will bestow his playthings. Wild nature will be tamed. The domestic herds will no longer fear the mighty lion. Poisonous serpents and noxious herbs will vanish. The fields will bear their mellow grain, the grapes hang heavy from the wild thornbush, and honey shall form like dew upon the heavy oak. As the child matures, sea trade will diminish to nothing, for each land will produce all things. And finally, the land will no longer need the plow, nor the vine the sickle. The oxen will be freed, and there will be no need for the deceiving technology of the dye, for “the ram's own fleece will shine with ruddy purple or crocus gold; spontaneously vermilion will clothe the grazing lamb.” All of this, incidentally, is to be brought about after wars that will

²⁰ Bar. 73.1-74.1-3: *OTP*, 1, pp. 645-46; comp. Kautzsch, 2, pp. 439-40.

²¹ Eduard Norden, *Die Geburt des Kindes* (1924; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1958), p. 52.

undo the last “vestiges of the old wickedness,” those that “bid men to tempt the sea with ships, gird town with walls, and dig the plough to earth” (*Primitivism*, p. 89).

Virgil's distaste for long-distance trade and his notion that even agriculture is too much technology to tolerate attach him firmly to the traditions of Greco-Roman primitivism. Furthermore, the imminent recurrence of the Golden Age points not to the End of Days but rather to the renewal of the great cosmic cycle. That means an eventual deterioration, which is wholly unmentioned in the Eclogue. Thereby Virgil implicitly removes it to some very distant, not quite pertinent future, but the classical context, from Hesiod to Virgil's Roman contemporaries, demands a deterioration nonetheless. Virgil was, therefore, not an apocalyptic writer in the same sense as his counterparts across the Mediterranean Sea. That notwithstanding, the appearances alone suggest an affinity. It may be merely coincidental or attributable to common sources in Hellenistic culture. Jewish speculation may also have found its way into the vigorously syncretistic intellectual life of Rome, say, by way of the Sibyls. Whatever the explanation, the Eclogue's resemblances to Jewish apocalypticism are striking and struck the Christians who were heir to both traditions.

The late and hopelessly corrupt form in which the Sibyls have survived precludes any certainty as to their condition in the first century B.C. when Virgil might have read them. It is, in fact, more likely that the surviving Sibyls read Virgil than he them. Of their overwhelming emphasis on the forthcoming catastrophe hardly a trace appears in Virgil, if indeed the “authentic” Sibyls had any such emphasis in the first place. And the intense Jewish nationalism of the second, probably the oldest surviving Sibyl would certainly have struck Virgil as alien.

She predicts that the divided Hebrews will join together again, and the Heathens will perish, and that the elect will enslave their enemies and govern the world.²² The restoration of Davidic grandeur runs parallel to the reign of peace and justice predicted by Virgil for the divine child. Virgil, of course, simply presumed Rome's continuing right to world government and did not develop the idea as an antidote to political humiliation, which the Jewish Sibyl clearly felt compelled to do. Nor did Virgil address the question of the end of history, as the Sibyls did. The Sibyl divided the Golden Age in two. The punishment of the oppressor and the restoration of Israel occur after terrible natural disasters and before the great cosmic catastrophe, the conflagration, upon which the world will be filled with plenty, and there will be no government at all, neither master nor servant, mighty nor humble, and no kings and rulers. All people will live together in the heavenly city with all goods in common.²³

The end of property, of the divisions of the earth, and of social gradation recur in the Sibylline Oracles, consistently thrust to the end of history.²⁴ In Virgil, as in most of the other primitivists of classical antiquity, the propertyless, unified, egalitarian condition prevailed primordially. Its collapse was caused or signaled by some technological, social, or economic innovation. The Sibyls acknowledge the process by pointing back to the beginnings as they describe the end: the ports and anchorages will be free to all men, *as they once were*, and insolent extortion will vanish forever—obviously the sentiments of a merchant.²⁵

²² 2.173-76: *OTP*, 1, p. 349; comp. Kurfess, pp. 58-59.

²³ 321-24: *OTP*, 1, pp. 346, 353; comp. Kurfess, pp. 56-57, 66-67.

²⁴ 8.110-113, 208-10: *OTP*, 1, pp. 345, 420, 423; comp. Kurfess, pp. 54-55, 164-65, 170-71.

²⁵ *OTP*, 1, p. 345; comp. Kurfess, pp. 54-55.

After the universal conflagration God will fashion mortals anew out of the dust and make them *as they were before*.²⁶ Virgil would certainly not have approved the notion of free trade. He would have recognized the return to origins, but it would probably have meant to him the renewal of the great cosmic cycle and not the end of things. But the distinction should not be overdrawn. The renewal of all things could not have been quite so depressing a phenomenon even to the most doctrinaire adherent of cyclical doctrines, as the modern investigator might want to believe. The inherent “deterioration” in the seasonal cycle does not keep one from celebrating the return of the spring.

The renewal of all things crosses a broad spectrum of meanings in the Sibylline Oracles, from something as practical as free trade to the full manifestation of the deity. The Sibyls accomplish this shift across the spectrum with little regard for differences between matter and spirit. The reappearance of God with all his might brings with it peace and deep insight but also an unimaginable fertility of the earth and an elimination of property.²⁷ Justice herself will return to earth and, in her train, bring love, loyalty, harmony among men, and friendship even with strangers. Poverty, dissension, theft in the night, and every evil will vanish from the earth.²⁸ In those days all the cities and fertile fields will be full of wealth, and the sword of battle will be put away. The earth will no longer groan in quakes. There will be no famine but only deep peace. One common law will prevail over the whole earth, one eternal government, one sacrifice, one worship.²⁹ The Sibyl here echoes the sentiments of the “Testament of Judah,” where the resurrection of the patriarchs reverses

²⁶ *OTP*, 1, p. 389; comp. Kurfess, pp. 120-21.

²⁷ *OTP*, 1, p. 345; Kurfess, pp. 54-55.

²⁸ *OTP*, 1, p. 370; Kurfess, pp. 90-91.

²⁹ *OTP*, 1, pp. 378-79; comp. Kurfess, pp. 106-109.

the unholy work of the Tower of Babel and brings one people and one language to the face of the earth.³⁰

The relationship between the ideal of world unity and the reality of a diverse world bears more than superficial similarity to the relationship between the ideal of a timeless, stress-free world and the reality of change: unity is to diversity as eternity is to history. The Sibyls understood that intimately. Their call for world government resounds no less apocalyptically than their repudiation of time. The one is eternally present, the other historic. Unity is the obvious good, diversity a calamity. In this respect the implicit judgment of the Sibyls and the Testament of Judah resemble, structurally, the gnostic evaluation of cosmology. Both the primordial and the terminal good are characterized by unity: absolute unity among the Gnostics; political, liturgical, or linguistic unity among those less radically disposed. The intervening diversity represents the evil that must and will be overcome.

Lactantius and the Problem of Duplication

The ideal of social unity seems to have inspired the early Christians knotting together of many of these various eschatological strands. Christianity, having expanded beyond a national base, transformed the particularism of local Doomsday speculation into something transnational. The envisioned unity of the Last Days, therefore, referred more to worldwide divine government than to the final victory of one people. That is, the model in history is less to be sought in the Davidic kingdom than in the Hellenistic ecumene or the Roman Empire, however inimical that institution may have been to the early Christians. Nonetheless, the Christian synthesis could not or would

³⁰ *OTP*, 1, p. 802; comp. 4.27-31 (12); Kautzsch, 2, p. 477.

not extinguish hopes for the political vindication of the oppressed, such as the restoration of the Davidic kingdom promised. Putting order into this confusion of expectations was not a simple matter. Lactantius, quoting widely from Virgil and the Sibyls, tried.

Into the midst of the messianic troubles Christ himself descends from the heavens and receives the kingdom of the world as “Liberator and Judge and Avenger and King and God.” All other chiefs and tyrants will be condemned, and all idols consigned to the flames.³¹ To that extent and largely by negation Lactantius transmits some notion of political and religious unity. But he contaminates it for the benefit of sweet revenge: “the nations, however, will not be completely extinguished, but certain ones will be left unto the victory of the Lord, so that they may be triumphed over by the just and subjugated to perpetual slavery” (7.24).

With this single exception, and Lactantius may not have considered it an exception at all, the rest of creation enjoys perfect harmony when false religion is destroyed, wickedness defeated, and the whole earth has become the victorious conquest of the Lord. Then, as Lactantius read in the Sibyls, “the wolves and sheep will be given a feeding place together in the mountain haunts, and the earth will produce wine and honey and sweet, white milk, and grain, and whatever is best for all men.” The streams will flow from honey-dripping rocks “and from the water fountains sweet nectar will flow for all mortals.” The abundance of nature will, in Virgilian fashion, make human technologies unnecessary: “the trader himself will leave the sea [for] every land will bear all things. The earth shall not suffer the plough nor the vine the pruning hook. And the sturdy ploughman, too, will unyoke the bulls” (7.24b).

³¹ *Divine Institutes* (above, page 145, note 14), 7.24: pp. 530-31; 7.24: p. 532; 7.36: pp. 535-36.

The subjugation of certain of the nations in this period of bliss seems to have a chiefly vindictive function. But Lactantius lends it a structural function as well. He links the subjugation of the nations to the subjugation of the Evil One, who, after the world has enjoyed his imprisonment for a thousand years, will escape at last and “stir up all the peoples, who will then be under the sway of the just,” in order to make war on the holy people. God will then intervene with a great conflagration and many of the other natural disasters of the previous messianic troubles. But the just will be hidden in the bowels of the earth for three days “until the wrath of God against the nations and the last judgment is ended.” The wicked will perish “and there will be no longer war, but peace and everlasting rest.” When the thousand years have passed, “the earth will be renewed by God, heaven will be folded up, and the earth changed.” Men will be transformed into the likenesses of angels “and they will always be in the sight of the Omnipotent and will sacrifice to their God and serve him forever.” And in the same moment, the second, the general and public resurrection will take place in which the unjust and the unbelievers will be raised in order to be condemned. The Evil One, his ministers, “and the whole band of the impious will be burned in perpetual fire forever in the sight of the angels and the just” (7.36).

Lactantius's attempt to homogenize the traditions basically failed, and he ended up with a very heterogeneous composite. And this got him into trouble with the authorities in later times, when his literal Doomsday speculation was considered a danger to orthodoxy. He also had one or two resurrections too many. Complications of this sort are what happens when Doomsday prediction is made to serve too many causes at once, when the divine kingdom is made to mean a real government on a real earth (the millennium), but also a transformed and

perfect world with all evil not simply suppressed temporarily but permanently condemned, and to mean in addition, the wholly spiritual aftermath of the history of creation (eternity).

Lactantius applied the principle of repetition to his sources to straighten out the mess. He was hardly the first to do so. Indeed, he is known for his unoriginality. It makes him a generally reliable guide through early Christian orthodoxy, though, significantly, he does lose his way in the details of Doomsday. His beloved Sibyls provided him with a precedent for recurrence. They allow the disasters to repeat themselves but incline to smudge the distinctions between the subsequent periods of bliss far more than Lactantius does.³²

When Lactantius reduced his comprehensive and complex *Divine Institutes* to an *Epitome*, he somewhat simplified his picture of Doomsday and made a real effort to clarify it: first, the messianic woes were to take place (soon); second, the resurrection of the just and the kingdom of the saints would happen with unimaginable material well-being to last a thousand years; third, the rebellion of the nations, the unchaining of the Prince of Demons, and great destruction would take place; fourth and finally, the earth would be renewed, the righteous transformed into angelic shapes, and the wicked resurrected “not unto life but to condemnation.”³³

The first of these final Golden Ages is thus outrageously terrestrial, the second the very opposite. Except for his confusion of the

³² The Syriac Baruch (see p. 144, and p. 145, note 13) can stand for the corpus of the intertestamentary rhetorics of Doomsday available to Lactantius. Baruch presents one sequence of disaster and bliss and then another, with no genuine distinctions between the two sequences, presumably because two separate apocalypses had been taken up into the book, each describing the same events.

³³ E. H. Blakely, ed. and trans., *Lactantius' Epitome of the Divine Institutes* (London: SPCK, 1950), p. 123. Here at least Lactantius conforms with the Johannine Apocalypse (Rev. 20-21).

resurrections and his calculation that all of this was imminent, due within the next two hundred years or so, Lactantius's sequence of events represents the prevailing opinion of early orthodoxy in the Christian West.

The concatenation of Doomsday crises and renewals appears to be an attempt to accommodate conflicting beliefs, literalist on the one side and figurativist on the other, if they may so be labeled, to lay down a both/and solution for an either/or problem, and to do so in the context of a linear temporal system. For the literalists, the events have to occur in history, transform, and eventually terminate it. For the figurativists, the events speak to stages in the divine plan for the salvation of souls and may or may not have mundane manifestations.³⁴

In a sense, the literalists won, since the terrestrial paradise restored came over intact into the solution. But that is a hollow victory; it was bought at the price of an indefinite and indeterminable postponement of the events into the remotest future. The compromise deposits the events in history with unequivocal certainty and then promptly turns around and forbids calculation of the dates and indeed condemns any such speculation as vain and blasphemous. The second catastrophe, furthermore, purges the picture of all expressions of material abundance and earthly comfort, as physical time is set aside in favor of a spiritual eternity. So the literalists lose in the end, bequeathing to the successor only a remarkably vindictive streak, as though the elect should enjoy the spectacle of the suffering damned.

³⁴ On the development of the domesticated, figurativist neutralization of apocalypticism see above page 55, note 48, and, on Tychonius and Augustine, cf. Horst Dieter Rauh, *Das Bild des Antichrist Im Mittelalters: von Tychonius bis zum deutschen Symbolismus*, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters, Texte und Forschungen, N.F. 9 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1973), pp. 169 and 218.

In comparison with Doomsday speculation in other times and places, the Christian recapitulation of the final events appears, at first glance, odd, a redundancy. The two catastrophes and the two glorious consequences can be reduced to a single pattern. The sequences are, in a sense, mere reflections of one another, a choice of expressions for a single underlying need. They attempt to fix in images what the alternatives might be to present evil; they attempt to name the future good and to guess how the future good is to come about. It is dismaying only that these images have been wrenched from their timeless dimension in fantasy and, as it seems, clumsily glued together for the benefit of a naive historical consciousness. This consciousness is unwilling or unable to leave imagination in its own realm and demands its translation into the realm of literal, historical reality.

This kind of rationalizing argument, whatever its apparent merits may be, is deeply anachronistic and explains little. But Christianity's peculiar solution to the problem of the Last Days invites such rationalizing argument. The redundancy of the solution disturbs the symmetry, and worldwide, even where Western apocalypticism has taken root in other cultures, the redundancy has largely been ignored.³⁵ The reason for that evasion is fairly obvious: the doubling of the events does not double the impact of the rhetoric of Doomsday, but rather halves it—just as the Church Fathers intended. The history of early Christianity is, in part, perhaps in large part, the story of the reduction of the rhetoric of Doomsday to an inferior function in the elaborate moral and theological system of the new religion even or especially in its

³⁵ Islam is a notable exception. When apocalyptic expectations arose in the form of Mahdiism, they took a form structurally identical to literalist Christian apocalypticism: Mühlmann, pp. 223-24, 376.

eschatology. The orthodox solution is opposed to Doomsday speculation. That is why it is so troublesome and has so perplexed its students.³⁶

That Christian eschatology defies or transmutes the pattern does not, however, mean that it is so eccentric as to lack any model at all in the reservoir of religious thought. Cyclical systems provide a precedent for the principle of repeated sequences. The orthodox solution, bound as it is to linear time, does not tolerate the repetition of the entire course of events but only of a part. Cyclical systems render that partial recurrence recognizable and prevent its appearance from being wholly idiosyncratic. The spiritual biography of the heroes and prophets provides a closer analogue. The hero undergoes a "death" to his previous secular life but returns to the world transfigured. These two events parallel the catastrophic purging of present evil and the subsequent paradise on earth. If one appends to the life of the hero the catastrophe of bodily death and presumes an other-than-corporeal afterlife, as many cultures do, then one has the recurrence of the sequence, catastrophe-bliss, concluding once in the mundane, once in the transcendental, very much as the sequence appears in orthodox Christian eschatology. The Christian solution, while nonconformist, does conform with other structures in religious experience and so can be considered mythically sound, only not especially a conventional expression of the rhetoric of Doomsday. Not all eschatologies are apocalyptic, or, some are less apocalyptic than others.

Resurrection

Christian orthodoxy has postponed and spiritualized literalist Doomsday into harmlessness, but it made one virtually universal feature

³⁶ Schmidhals, *Die Apokalyptik*, pp. 135-36.

of Doomsday speculation the centerpiece of the new religion: resurrection. In the face of resurrection all other events are shorn of their finality. Christian eschatology and literalist Doomsday speculation look very much alike in this respect. The Fall, the wretched present, the catastrophes of the End of the World, the entire course of history become much less important. If death itself is reversible, what happens to the apparent irreversibility of history? The very magnitude of such a wonder makes all present misery negligible. When Doomsday outbreaks occur in circumstances of very considerable present misery, say, during the colonialization of the Americas, then the promise of resurrection is surely one of the most direct and powerful means of neutralizing that misery. What resurrection means varies from time to time and place to place even within a single tradition, and all the more so from one tradition to the other. One thing it does *not* mean is mere resuscitation into this world as it is. Resurrection refers always to some sort of transformation and generally to some sort of renewal.

Take, for example, a nineteenth-century report from the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal, a report that tries to stress the this-worldly character of the post-catastrophic condition. A great earthquake is going to shatter the bridge between earth and paradise. The Creator will turn over the disk of the earth. All the living will thereby be killed and the dead now be on top. It is at this point that the future life begins, a repetition of the present one. All the animals, birds, and fish will return in their present state. But human beings will return in the full flower of their youth and so remain. Sickness and death will be unknown, and there will be no marriage.³⁷

³⁷ F. Rudolf Lehmann, "Weltuntergang und Welterneuerung im Glauben Schriftloser Völker," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 71 (1939): 103-15.

The myth-makers of Andaman had a clear sense of what was good and what ill and organized their eschatology accordingly. They obviously had very little to censure in the world-as-it-is. They found the normal and everyday, in the main, acceptable, and they purged only the troublesome, so the dead return youthful, they will never age, get ill, marry, or die again. Altogether normal. This report was challenged by a twentieth-century revisionist, in part on the grounds that the Andamese language in question lacked a future tense, that the descriptions referred to primordial, not to forthcoming events.³⁸ Had the revisionist thought in terms of the rhetoric of Doomsday, he would have found such distinctions largely irrelevant, that cosmogonies and eschatologies incline to imply one another.

Brazil

The Brazilian tribes in search of the “Land without Evil” tell how the Creator, at the beginning, laid down the great wooden cross and built the world over it. At the center of the world, where the beams intersect, he constructed his house. As he left his house to clear the surrounding forests, the fields planted themselves and, as he returned, they already bore the harvest. His wife was incredulous at this, and he left the house, planted the great cross in the path of the Eternal Tiger, and led his wife astray. She was killed by wild animals, but he rescued her spirit, made her strong again, and brought her back to the “Land without Evil.” After this the Creator withdrew from human affairs. He returns only now, at the end, when he withdraws the east-west beam of the great cross eastward, causing the world to perish from the west. The bat demons are going to consume the sun and the moon, and the Eternal Tiger will

³⁸ Reported by Lehmann, “Weltuntergang,” p. 112.

descend from heaven and devour mankind. That is why the people go on the great migrations eastward to find the “Land without Evil,” where there is a great superfluity of all things, no death, and “where the ancestors persist in the old way of life.”³⁹ Cognate Brazilian myths tell of soil tilled by magic sticks and arrows that kill game by themselves.⁴⁰ The medicine men tell the people to dance and fast in order to lighten the body, so they will be able to fly over the ocean.⁴¹ Some thought it simpler to die at once and so to reach paradise in which there is no more death.⁴²

The revival of the Creator's wife and the eternal life of the ancestors make it plain that resurrection, though it is never named, plays a role in both the cosmogony and the eschatology of these peoples. The myth-makers identify resurrection with the paradise where the crops plant themselves without the intervention of labor, where the ancestors live in the old manner, as things were before. Before what? Before inner-tribal squabbling, before the Europeans, before the Fall, whatever it may have been. These are one of the peoples who suspect their own unsatisfactory behavior of complicity both in the present dreadful condition and the threat of impending doom. They also think that by fasting and dancing they can do something about it, at least for themselves. Their “Land without Evil”—as frank a name for paradise as

³⁹ Nimuendajú Unkel, “Die Sagen,” translated “jaguar” throughout as “Tiger” (e.g., p. 399), and so it has entered the tradition, even though the tiger is not a New World animal.

⁴⁰ See Wilson, *Magic*, pp. 208, 211; Wolfgang H. Lindig, “Wanderungen der Tupí-Guaraní und Eschatologie der Apapocúva-Guaraní,” in Mühlmann, pp. 29 and 33.

⁴¹ Their failure actually to fly was eventually ascribed to eating European food and wearing heavy European clothes, with which the ancestors were, of course, unburdened: Lindig, “Wanderungen,” p. 23.

⁴² Lindig, “Wanderungen,” p. 39.

any—is, incidentally, only for themselves. All others, Europeans and alien tribes alike, are doomed to inevitable and irreversible destruction.

North America

The North American parallels are remarkable and include complicity, ritual repentance, resurrection, and an exclusive paradise. The Code of Handsome Lake recognizes the reason for the present misery as the fallibility and weakness of the Indians themselves, quite apart from the evils introduced by the stranger; but “if all the world were to repent, the earth would become as new again.”⁴³ Tenskwatawa likewise blamed his followers themselves for abandoning the primordial ways when the white man came. As a punishment the “first Doer” shut up their game under the earth. But if the Indians repent and return to the old customs, then, after four years (1811), a great catastrophe will come upon the earth in the form of two days of darkness or a terrible hailstorm “which would overwhelm with destruction both the whites and the unbelievers of the red race, while the elect would be warned in time to save themselves by fleeing to the high mountain tops.” In the period of darkness the “First Doer” would range throughout the world and release the animals from beneath the earth. Tenskwatawa promised his followers also “that their dead friends would be restored to them.”⁴⁴

Tavibo, Paiute prophet and supposed father of Wovoka, announced (ca. 1870) that, within a few months, a great earthquake would swallow up all the whites leaving behind their goods, and the Indians would survive “to enjoy the earth and all the fullness thereof, including anything left by the wicked whites.” Upon challenge by unbelievers—how

⁴³ Parker, “Code,” p. 43.

⁴⁴ Mooney, *The Ghost Dance Religion*, p. 676. Subsequent references also to Mooney.

would the earthquake distinguish between Indians and white men?—Tavibo had a revised forecast: “when the great disaster came, all, both Indians and whites, would be swallowed up or overwhelmed, but . . . the Indians would be resurrected in the flesh, and would live forever to enjoy the earth, with plenty of game, fish and pine nuts, while their enemies, the whites . . . and those [Indians] who did not believe . . . would stay in the ground and be damned forever” (p. 702). Within just a few years (1875) another similar excitement spread among the Paiute, promising “a speedy resurrection of all dead Indians, the restoration of the game, and the return of the old-time primitive life” (p. 703).

Smohalla, the “Dreamer” and prophet of the Columbia river Indians in the 1870s, rearranged the usual sequence of events and made the resurrection an instrument of vengeance. The resurrection precedes and helps to bring about the Golden Age: “All the Indians who have died heretofore, and who shall die hereafter, are to be resurrected . . . as they will then be very numerous and powerful, they will be able to conquer the whites, recover their lands, and live as free and unrestrained as their fathers lived in olden times” (p. 711). Reports from farther north, but still in or near the volcanic Cascade mountains, tell of a “final cataclysm which is to overturn the mountains and bring back the halcyon days of the long past.” Whites and other recent arrivals “are not to be included in the benefits of the resurrection, but are to be turned over with all that the white man's civilization has put upon the present surface of the land” (p. 723). The extraordinary repositioning of the resurrection in time, as Smohalla had preached it in the 1870s, became the doctrine of the 1890 Ghost Dance.

The famous “Messiah Letter,” brought by Wovoka's disciples to the ethnologist Mooney after he had personally interviewed the prophet, proclaimed that the resurrection had already taken place and that the

ancestors were soon to arrive, “maybe this fall or in the spring.” An earthquake was due, but the faithful were not to be afraid for it would not hurt them. “When the time comes there will be no more sickness and everyone will be young again” (p. 781). According to another report from a Paiute, the first of the 1890 Ghost Dancers, “all Indians must dance, everywhere, keep on dancing.” The game would then return, dead Indians arise, and living Indians grow healthy and young: “Old blind Indian see again and get young and have fine time.” All the Indians will go to the mountaintops far away from the whites. Then a great flood would arise to destroy the whites. Unbelieving Indians would be shrunk to about one foot high, and some would be turned into wood and burned in fires (p. 784).

As the doctrine moved eastward across the Rockies it developed variously. Some believed that the faithful would fall into a deep sleep for four days and then, endowed with immortality, would awake into a post-catastrophic world. Others believed that the new world bearing all the resurrected ancestors, the buffalo and elk, and all the other game would slide over the old. The sacred dance would raise the Indians from the old and set them down onto the new world: “they would be unconscious for four days, and on awakening from the trance will find themselves with the former friends in the midst of all the oldtime surroundings” (p. 786). The songs composed for the Ghost Dance are replete with references to resurrection: “You shall see your grandfather . . . you shall see your kindred . . . the father says so” (p. 1061). “You shall live . . . I bring you a pipe . . . by means of it you shall live, says the father” (p. 1062). “There is the father coming . . . the father says this as he comes. . . ‘you shall live,’ he says as he comes” (p. 1069).

When the Ghost Dance reached the warlike Sioux of the Dakotas its doctrine had become one of retribution pure and simple. The Great

Spirit had sent the whites to punish the Indians for their sins, which had now, however, been expiated. All the Indians who had ever died were on their way to reinhabit the earth, which the Great Spirit had, in the first place, meant only for them. The ancestors would be “driving before them, as they advanced, immense herds of buffalo and fine ponies.” The whites would be smothered under a deep landslide, and those who might escape would be transformed into small fish in the rivers. “In order to bring about this happy result, the Indians must organize the Ghost dance.” When the faithful, lifted by the dance itself and the eagle feathers of its distinctive costume, descended upon the surface of the new earth, they “would behold boundless prairies covered with long grass and filled with great herds of buffalo and other game” (pp. 787-88).

As neatly as this may seem to agree with the other Doomsday aspirations previously described here, certain distinctions need to be made, for the North American Indians represent a special though not a unique case. One cannot speak of offended national honor or chafing under the yoke of a conqueror or of a spiritual crisis or world-weariness or of any of the other antecedents, obvious and obscure, of any given Doomsday outbreak. These peoples had faced and were facing in day-to-day reality a disaster of unimaginable proportions, a loss of life and territory comparable to nothing in their experience or even in the previous experience of bellicose Europe, at least not since late antiquity. Their longing for the world-as-it-was had nothing to do with nostalgia. Their acceptance of the prophet's message was not senseless, their flight into ecstasy not an overreaction. Their form of the rhetoric of Doomsday corresponded reasonably to the circumstances.

The End and the Beginnings

The cosmogonic and, with it, the mythological element apparent, say, in the “Land without Evil” seems to be muted in the Ghost Dance documents. The element is, however, not absent. The Ghost Dance prophecies do refer to a primordial Golden Age at or near the moment of creation. The Paiute “Genesis” stories tell of the emergence of earth out of a great flood. First Father and First Mother dressed in skins and lived on the meat of deer and sheep, “for there was plenty of game in those days” (pp. 1050-51). The Caddo believed that at the origin of the world, their tribe “came up from under the ground” (p. 1093). The crow was a sacred bird among many Indians including those who took up the Ghost Dance, and he appears in the songs sung for the Ghost Dance. Back, before there was a world, Crow had, by dropping a pebble in the primordial sea, made mountains, by dropping dust, built a bridge from the spirit world to earth, and, by dropping twigs and leaves of grass, made forests and prairies. At the end of things. Crow conducts the spirits across the bridge back to earth (p. 983). The sacred pipe used in the Ghost Dance had been given to the ancestors when “Turtle had brought the earth up from the water” (p. 959). The Ghost Dance's catastrophic renewal of the world by flood or burial clearly had an anastrophic counterpart at the beginning of things.

The images of abundance, both in the cosmogonies and the prophecies, are quite modest, almost plausible by contrast to the luxuriant Levantine fantasies of literalist Judaeo-Christian eschatology. This modesty points to another dimension of the Ghost Dance and similar outbreaks. The imminent Golden Age envisioned by the prophets was, to be sure, modeled on the primordial condition but might just as well have referred to the “good old days” as they were available to collective memory. When the Plains Indians took up the Ghost Dance, the great

herds of buffalo had in fact been very recent living experience. The call for the return of the buffalo and the concurrent return of the ancestors certainly had a large supernatural component. But that component was accompanied by unusual practicality. The buffalo was the economic base of the culture for many of these tribes. The loss of the great herds, partly through the Indian's own doing, that is, by their conversion to firearms, meant the destruction of the whole system. And they had no culturally acceptable alternative. They had been pushed to the edge of the abyss when they chose, one last time, to turn their back on it and to force the Great Spirit, by massive ritual magic, to bring back the buffalo. The resurrection of the ancestors was a similar practical necessity. Tribal populations had been reduced by war and disease to a small fraction of their old strength. What hope could there be for defeating the numerically superior whites without some miraculous reinforcements? It was these desperate needs that the Ghost Dance addressed:

Over the whole earth they are coming.
 The buffalo are coming, the buffalo are coming,
 The Crow has brought the message to the tribe,
 The father says so, the father says so.⁴⁵

The spirit host is advancing they say
 The spirit host is advancing they say
 They are coming with the buffalo they say
 They are coming with the buffalo they say
 They are coming with the (new) earth, they say
 They are coming with the (new) earth, they say.⁴⁶

Analogues Worldwide

It is chiefly the scale of the North American Indian disaster that sets it apart. Worldwide, colonialization and Europeanization were

⁴⁵ Sioux Ghost Dance song: Mooney, p. 1072.

⁴⁶ Ghost Dance song of the so-called Kiowa Apache: Mooney, p. 1086.

pressing other peoples into similar dire straits. And similar circumstances produced similar, sometimes virtually identical expressions of Doomsday aspirations. A series of uprisings led to the Xhosa catastrophe of 1857, in which tens of thousands of southern African tribesmen starved to death. Back around 1817, a prophet arose among the Xhosa named Makanna. He promised them that the Creator would send back the ancestors to aid them in battle. If they danced, the ancestors would return armed and with herds of cattle. When the prophet died a few years later, after the failure of the uprising, his people refused to believe it and awaited his return to come to their aid.⁴⁷ The 1857 catastrophe itself was heralded by a prophetess who similarly promised the return of the ancestors with great herds of cattle.⁴⁸ The millet fields would spring up ready for harvest. Illness and all troubles would be banished. The aged would become young and beautiful again.⁴⁹

Within a decade (1864) and around the globe in New Zealand, the Hau Hau rebellion among the Maoris proclaimed the ruin of the unbelievers and the destruction of the white man in the sea. Then, "all the Maoris who had perished since the beginning of the world would leap from their graves . . . the deaf would hear, the blind see, the lame walk; every species of disease would disappear; all would become perfect."⁵⁰ The Tuka cult on Fiji (1870s) had a doctrine of the imminent reversal of the world order, the return of the ancestors, and the establishment of a glorious paradise where the old would become young and beautiful again and everyone would be immortal.⁵¹ The Koreri cult of New Guinea

⁴⁷ Wilson, *Magic*, p. 237.

⁴⁸ Wilson, *Magic*, p. 239.

⁴⁹ LaBarre, *Ghost Dance*, p. 233.

⁵⁰ Wilson, *Magic*, p. 249.

⁵¹ LaBarre, *Ghost Dance*, p. 356.

likewise announced that, with the return of the culture hero Manseren, the old would become young, the sick well, and the dead return with great quantities of food, women, and ornaments.⁵²

These examples—and many more could be cited—come from cultures gravely threatened or on the verge of extinction. To predict the cancellation of the present condition makes good sense when the present condition is intolerable, when the world-as-it-is means only humiliation and destruction. When extraordinary loss of life, drastic increase in disease, and grand-scale disruption of social order are absent, when the present condition appears on the surface quite normal, then the occurrence of apocalypticism makes a great deal less sense. The Flying Saucer cult of the midwestern United States in the early 1950s is a clear instance of a Doomsday outbreak in such an apparently calm environment. Extraterrestrials communicated with a housewife by means of automatic writing. Sananda, spokesman of the extraterrestrials, predicted great destruction for the world, the inversion of continents, the confusion of the wicked; but then, “when the resurrected have been resurrected or taken up—it will be as a great burst of light . . . the ground in the earth to a depth of thirty feet will be bright . . . for the earth will be purified . . . for all things must first be likened to a housecleaning, in which chaos reigns first, second the order.”⁵³ The homey imagery recurs in the communication of one “Dr. Browning, from the seventeenth chair of the seventh density” of the spirit world, received at a seance: “Most of the earth will be uninhabitable, being turned upside down and exposed to the cleansing power of water, coming up shining and clean. It's almost like the agitator in your washing machine. Very

⁵² LaBarre, p. 246; and Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, p. 130.

⁵³ Festinger, *When Prophecy Fails*, p. 56; subsequent page references are from this work.

simple” (p. 104). Dr. Browning explained how the chosen will escape the cataclysm: “We'll put you to sleep and reborn you.... You and your immediate ones will be saved” (p. 115). On the eve of the expected cataclysm, Dr. Browning's medium explained “in her `own' voice . . . how the future would be glorious and the chosen would be engaged in happy, important work . . . how this would be a new age, and a better earth” (pp. 122-23).

These prophetic utterances had, incidentally, a Janus face. The cult's Doomsday visions corresponded to their own distinctly Manichaeian theory of origins, a theory with little visible connection to ambient mainstream Christianity. On another planet, aeons ago, the people separated themselves into two opposing groups: “`the scientists' led by Lucifer, and `the people who followed the Light,' under the banner of God and the command of Christ.” The “scientists” harnessed a power like that of the atomic bomb and blew their planet to pieces. In this cosmic disaster the Followers of the Light fled to other planets. “Lucifer led his troops, their minds obliterated of cosmic knowledge, to earth.” Jesus had begun the process of reclaiming the earthlings, so there are some “who are open and receptive to `the Light'. . . But the forces of evil (and science) are extremely powerful, and the followers of Light may not be able to conquer in time to escape another explosion” (pp. 52-53). The cult thus had an elaborate mythological explanation for the condition of the world and a double certainty of imminent disaster.

The Korean “Doomsday Cult” took firm root in the United States in and after the same period as the Flying Saucer cult. Its prophet announced for the imminent future “cosmic tribulation and judgment,” at the conclusion of which “the world would undergo a dramatic, supernaturally caused transformation through which his faithful followers would become rulers of a restored, eternal, and perfect Garden

of Eden.”⁵⁴ This transformation is variously described as a resurrection, “the process of restoring man's original nature,” an attainment of perfection, a fully restored world, a new social order (pp. 18, 25-26). In this restored world the necessity of labor would be overcome, for one would merely will that matter act in a certain way “and it would be done” (p. 28). The perfection of the world would include elimination of all the plagues of mankind, poverty, ignorance, and disease. “The New Age will bring one world, one religion, one language, and other unities, as well as perfect harmony of spirit and body” (p. 72).

A long period of very considerable hardship in the Korean prophet's homeland justifies a Doomsday outbreak there or at least renders it comprehensible. Extreme conditions were, however, not evident at the reception of his doctrine in the United States nor during the short life of the Flying Saucer cult. The cultists in these examples—and again, many more could be cited—do not shout out their justification in a clear voice, like the Xhosa or the Plains Indians, whose very existence was endangered. The activities of the Ghost Dancers, while not rational, were appropriate to the external conditions. That can hardly be claimed for the Flying Saucer cultists. No obvious enemy, no easily identifiable political, military, or economic force had, in any objective sense, driven the rather ordinary middle-class adherents of these cults to the brink. Yet their behavior—quitting jobs, cutting off unbelieving friends and family, tearing out zippers—shows that they were no less earnest than their African or native American counterparts. And the various doctrines of imminent destruction, restoration, and exclusivity conform precisely to one another regardless of source circumstance. This leaves a mystery:

⁵⁴ Lofland, *Doomsday Cult*, p. 3 (see above p. 87, note 29); subsequent references are from this work.

how can such similar consequences follow upon such dissimilar antecedents?

To complicate matters further, one set of antecedents—extreme cultural disruptions—does not necessarily lead to a Doomsday outbreak. Not all southern African tribes sold their cattle and refused to plant crops. Not all Indians joined the Ghost Dance. Some turned inward, others went along with the changes as well as they could or as much as they were allowed to. The appeal of the rhetoric of Doomsday was widespread but not universal. The response to that appeal still involved choice and consent. Some people found Doomsday behavior suitable to the crisis. Others did not. Without the subjective component, there is no Doomsday, however bad the objective condition. The less objectively bad the condition, the more clearly the subjective component stands out. Whatever stress the midwestern housewife may have suffered in the early 1950s, her life and property were more or less secure, and very secure indeed by comparison to the life of a Sioux in 1890. It may, of course, have been this very security that led “Mrs. Keech” into all manner of occultism before the extraterrestrials contacted her with their Doomsday message. The medium for Dr. Browning revealed more than she had meant to when her prediction about the new Golden Age included “happy, important work” for the chosen. It suggests that, in their present condition, the work of the chosen was joyless and insignificant. If this utterance implies a general evaluation of their lives, then it is small wonder that they sought relief in the lush symbolism of the occult and, when they finally reconstructed the rhetoric of Doomsday for themselves, succumbed totally to its powerful and comprehensive devaluation of the world and present time.

Summation

There is always some evil worth rejecting in the present world. An enemy or flaw can always be found to account for it. Catastrophe is always possible, indeed likely, and it is always possible, though less likely, that the catastrophe will eliminate the flaw or the enemy and, so, the evil. In the absence of the evil, the world might be worth accepting. To this extent The rhetoric of Doomsday remains in the realm of the plausible and reasonable. But it does not always stay in that realm. More often the evil, whatever it may be, so poisons the present world, so pervades it, that plucking out the evil itself is no longer sufficient; the whole world has to be purged, turned upside down and thrown into the washing machine. What comes out after this thorough cleansing is the perfect world. The notion of the pervasiveness of evil, this soiling of the whole world, helps explain the similar reactions of such dissimilar groups as the Ghost Dancers and the Flying Saucer cultists. For both, the world has become so unsatisfactory that they decided it must be changed in its totality. The blanket perception of the world as drab and hopeless in its present condition obviously does not presuppose only a large-scale cultural disaster. A rather small-scale personal disappointment, or less, is altogether sufficient to trigger the same perception. As enthusiastically as the doom-sayers may affirm the Golden Age to come, as positively as they may picture it, negation is at the core of their convictions. The pseudo-positive Golden Age is the embodiment of that negation.

To be fair, not all the Golden Ages are identical or interchangeable. Among the Gnostics, the absolute divine unity occupies the place of the Golden Age in other systems. The gnostic-dualistic termination of the cosmos quite transcends any Eden and most frankly admits just how negative a rhetoric of Doomsday can be. The eternity of Christian

orthodoxy likewise goes far beyond any routine notion of a Golden Age; but the doctrine was historically non- or anti-Doomsday. To that extent Christian eternity and gnostic unity oppose one another. But insofar as they express the ultimate alternatives to the diverse and temporal present, they both hover behind all other Golden Ages. The villain, Diversity, is defeated by the establishment of God's kingdom, be it messianic world government or the victory of us over the other, whoever we or the other may be. The villain, Time, is defeated by rejuvenation and resurrection, the leveling of the seasons and the elimination of night, or simply by turning the clock back to the beginnings, as in primitivism.

The lofty abstractions, divine unity and spiritual eternity, may seem to have little to do with the crudely materialistic Golden Ages generally proposed by doom-sayers. But in fact, the relationship is more than vaguely symbolic. Without some version of the Holy, the Golden Ages degenerate into caricature and become veritable Big Rock Candy Mountains. However blissful physical life may be in the Golden Age, it ends up as silly without a restoration of easy concourse with the deity, a return of the divine or semi-divine culture hero, a resurrection of venerated ancestors, or, at the very least, a preternaturally ennobled, virtuous humanity. Without the Lord God walking there in the cool of the day, the Garden of Eden is merely Cockaigne. Even Virgil, whose poetic Golden Age is distinctly secular and political, has the Virgin (Astraea, Dike, Justice herself) returning to earth, Saturn resuming his benevolent supervision of world affairs, and the human race itself restored to gold.

The return to origins or to a prior state of affairs ties the rhetoric of Doomsday into a tight circle, excluding finally all other realities as no more than intermediate. What some might perceive as normal development or even progress, the doom-sayer recognizes as a divergence

from the sacred norm laid down in the rosy dawn of mankind. In this respect primitivism inheres in the rhetoric of Doomsday. To be sure, the degree of primitivism varies from one manifestation of the Golden Age to the other. Those who depend on Virgil, like Lactantius, take the radical primitivist stance on technology when they find even farming too far removed from the “natural” condition of humanity. This is complicated in the rhetoric of Doomsday by the widespread conviction that labor is a punishment for departure from the primordial good. When the primordial good is restored, labor of all kinds, including agriculture, will no longer be necessary. The non-doom-saying primitivist, if such is possible, opposes agriculture as a special kind of labor involving tools and intervention in “nature.” He would find other kinds of labor—picking berries, lifting and cracking acorns—quite “natural” and acceptable. Other doom-sayers (and primitivists), not quite so extreme in their views, allow for agriculture but not private property, others for property (everyone will be rich) but not trade, others for trade but not taxes or tariffs. Primitivism also occurs among “primitives.” Certain native Americans repudiated all the new technology brought by the Europeans; the Golden Age to come would have only the old-time technology. But others, certain Cargo cultists, for example, envisioned the destruction of the intruder but left his goods intact, to be enjoyed by the rescued or resurrected after the catastrophe. The goods did not truly belong to the intruder in the first place but were usurped by him, so that the Golden Age simply restores the proper order of things.

At this, as at every other point of the rhetoric of Doomsday, the prevailing disorder is at the heart of the matter. The Golden Ages take every moment of time from the introduction of error to its cataclysmic exit and expose it for its inadequacies. Nothing can measure up to the Golden Age. Over against the present, the dual Golden Ages are largely

indistinguishable, just as the whole dreary course of history is also basically one. The system becomes binary, then and now. "Then" may mean either the past or the future ideal, according to the emphasis, but both are a way of saying, "that other time," the alternative to here and now. This suggests that the *laudator temporis acti* in his nostalgia for lost glories is no less doom-saying than the revolutionary ready to take all necessary action to overthrow the present system and introduce his own Golden Age. They may indeed be one and the same person. This equation is the part of the system perhaps hardest to accept. The evidence demonstrates overwhelmingly that the Golden Age to come has a past model. Whether the past model in and of itself implies a future Golden Age is less certain, though a case can be made for it. The past and future orientations of nostalgia and revolutionary fervor appear so polarized that any suggestion of identity between the two must seem defiant of common sense. Only the perspective of the present makes that identity obvious. To see how similarly a nostalgiac and a revolutionary react, one need only tell them that the Golden Age is here and now or never and nowhere.

CHAPTER VII

Some of the Hard Questions

“Stress” as the Source?

The settings described or implied in these pages, however varied they may be, make a forceful argument for unusual stress as a prerequisite to any given Doomsday outbreak. This attempt to seek out a cause does not necessarily reveal very much, especially when one looks closely into the meaning of stress. Stress in this context is an attempt to give a name to the relationship between objective circumstance (which alone is susceptible to observation) and the subjective capacity to deal with that circumstance (which capacity cannot be observed directly but only inferred). The spectrum of possibilities on both sides of the relationship is very broad indeed. On the side of the circumstances, the spectrum may range from modern middle-class security to large-scale cultural disruption and the likelihood of imminent physical destruction.¹

¹ Michael Barkun, *Disaster and the Millennium* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), admits (p. 63), “we have millenarianism without disaster and disaster

On the subjective side, the spectrum may range, by inference, from acute hypersensitivity to broad tolerance. The case of the American Indians illustrates the latter: many decades of grave circumstantial deterioration separate the Doomsday outbreaks of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries from those of the 1870s and 1890s. In the meantime virtually every reasonable measure from compliance to belligerency had been tried and had failed to bring about a *modus vivendi*. The study of the Flying Saucer cult did not present directly what "Mrs. Keech" and her followers found intolerable in American life in the early 1950s, and what it might have been does not leap from the pages of history. In the absence of contradictory evidence one infers that hypersensitivity made the normal processes of history in a relatively quiet period simply too trying. Common experience *in* the world cannot possibly provide an explanation for the similarity of behavior prevailing between Ghost Dancers and Flying Saucer cultists. Common experience *of* the world, on the other hand, might.

The Collapse of the Sacred

The secular world obviously provides mechanisms for endowing life with meaning and importance: rites of passage; festivities in which the community celebrates itself; that art that dramatizes life through picture, song, or some form of theater; rewards of various kinds, generally of status, pleasure, wealth, fame, and power. If, however, the world offers chiefly pain, poverty, oblivion, and impotence, if its rewards are inadequate or not forthcoming, and its ceremonies are withheld, are in confusion, or prove useless, then a person or a people in that world

without millenarianism," but generally argues for an intimate connection between the two.

may be called, to put it mildly, troubled or under “stress.” They will know what the religious person has known all along, that the world is seriously imperfect or worse, that it is utterly, entirely, hopelessly fallen. To be sure, doctrines and mythologies explain the state of affairs to the religious all over the world without driving them into desperation. But the very religions that teach the Fall promptly counteract its worst effects: they provide a moral code or ritual system, or both, that can apply to the everyday and so can transform the fallen world into something less unacceptable. They restore to the world some sense of the sacred and redeemable, felt to have been lost in the Fall. When Doomsday erupts in a religious setting, the eruption indicates that the usual religious mechanisms have failed, that the moral code is not working, that it is not making people “good” or life in this world tolerable, that the ritual system no longer protects against evil or brings the sacred back into the world. The results are paradoxical. Doomsday appears to repudiate religion both for trying and for failing to ameliorate a hopeless world. It is, in this respect, an enemy of religion. At the same time Doomsday seeks to supplant a thoroughly profaned world with a sacred world, and it is thus deeply religious in motive. Doomsday does and is both. The sacred component in Doomsday is present in all its manifestations without exception, even those manifestations that pose as atheistic.

The notion that the recovery of the sacred may be a constant factor in Doomsday needs some testing across the evidence. In an intact sacred system all activities are holy. Planting is not merely planting but rather a ritual recapitulation of the instruction of the gods or the culture hero.² Can anyone claim that the Cargo cultists of the South Pacific had lost the

² Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, Willard R. Trask, trans. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1959), pp. 96-99.

sacred when they resorted to Doomsday? By all appearances their lives were and, in some cases, still are regulated by ritual and tradition. They had a functioning clergy and continued to behave magically, for example, by building runways in order to induce the return of the airplanes.³ Much the same could be said of the Ghost Dancers who had holy men with ready ecstatic access to the other (the sacred) world, belief in powerful sacred objects (pipe, eagle feather, shirt), and ritual dance presumably capable of bringing about remarkable events.

In both cases, however, the traditional manifestations of the sacred were no longer adequate to the world as it was changing about them. The amazing pale-skinned analogues to the ancestors had indeed taught the Cargo cultists to build landing strips but failed to provide similar instruction in manufacture, marketing, and aeronautical engineering. The sacred had been taken as far as it could be taken. It usually had worked before, in planting or in raising pigs. But somehow it was not working now for these other technologies. They were not responding to the sacred. Well, one would just have to make them respond. The real ancestors would really have to return. In this case the rhetoric of Doomsday is the most powerful of magics, summoned only upon failure of all other magics.

For the Ghost Dancers, if the condition of the world had been “normal,” the rituals themselves would have been identical to the restoration of the sacred. When a participant tipped over into the ecstatic by means of song and dance, the experience should have provided adequate relief from the evils of the world and should have been a wholly sufficient source of spiritual refreshment. Instead, when the outbreaks occurred, ritual ceased to be an end and became a means of converting

³ Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, pp. 158-61 and 207.

the religious experience into a physical reality. It was no longer enough to go forth to meet the ancestors in ecstasy. The ancestors had to be made to come and meet the believer in the here and now. That which had been adequate to most other activities, normal and critical, now failed, and this time the sacred would have to manifest itself in its most physical, powerful, and unquestionably recognizable form. It would have to demolish the non-sacred world. No one would claim that these peoples had lost the sense of the sacred like modern Western cultures (most of the time), but it does appear that the sacred as it ordinarily applied to their lives no longer sufficed, and extraordinary measures were required to restore its firm grip on the world.

Secular manifestations of the rhetoric of Doomsday, from the mildest nostalgia to the most radical demand for revolutionary change, behave similarly, though, of course, the term “sacred” rarely enters the discussion. In nostalgia some period or event is lifted from the ordinary and given privileged stature in the mind of the nostalgiac. The period or event is not just any given past moment, past for the sake of past, but rather a moment that is imagined as special, such as the beginning, the youth of a person or institution. Things were not merely “better” then, they were altogether extraordinary, set apart, because they were primal, closer to genesis,⁴ or because they were enhanced by a sense of mission, or because they were radically different from today. The radical difference alone pushes the object of nostalgia toward the sacred, if the world in which one lives in the day-to-day is largely or wholly profane. Beginnings or a sense of mission push it farther, if to set something apart from the ordinary is to approach the sacred. “Otherness,” negatively

⁴ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p. 92.

valued, makes the alien uncanny or demonic; positively valued, as in the object of nostalgia, otherness is or inclines toward the sacred.

Likewise, the modern revolutionary raises a vision, after the necessary and inevitable bloodbath to come, of a radically “other” world. The purpose of all that bloodshed vastly transcends a simple amelioration of things as they are. The revolution does not tamper with the present mechanisms to get them to work right; it tears them out altogether, root and branch, and introduces something “entirely” new (or other). In this new (or other) circumstance, when the material basics are changed utterly and made wholly just and equitable, mankind will behave accordingly. The notion of wholly just and equitable economic relations is itself so far beyond real experience in the world that it approximates the Big Rock Candy Mountain. Nonetheless, the revolution is meant finally to bring about such just a result, but it must, in the same action, bring about a thorough transformation of the human race. Economic justice then will not seem a childish fantasy when it acts as sponsor of a wholly moral humanity. This morality may be called “superstructural” and may be relegated to second place, logically and chronologically, in the system, but it alone rescues the vision of economic equality from absurdity.

The Uses of Magic

The relationship between matter and behavior in this system would be recognizable to any magician and maker of amulets: dispose matter in certain correct relationships and people will behave as you wish; build a runway and planes will return bearing Cargo and the ancestors; correct the economic relations and humanity will be free of evil and in harmony with itself and the world. The integration of humanity and the world is the polar opposite of the alienation prevailing in the

present circumstance, the divisions between classes, between nations, the appalling diversity that so dismayed Judah and the Sibyls. Judah and the Sibyls would have recognized the community of goods, the erasing of social and political distinctions, and the establishment of a unified and harmonious world as their own vision of the Golden Age to come. But they also would have understood that the divine presence alone renders all that ease and gratification serious. Materialism disguises the sacred in the Marxist rhetoric of Doomsday but cannot conceal it altogether. The “otherness” of the post-revolutionary condition, the transmutation of the human race, the resolution of history in communism all point to a preternatural experience at the very least. The Marxist might say that the purpose of this quantum leap in human behavior and the human condition lies within itself; *homo religiosus* would say that its purpose is to bring the deity back into human affairs, to restore Eden, so that the Lord God may again walk in the Garden in the cool of the day.

The Worldwide Distribution

By far the most disturbing fact about the rhetoric of Doomsday and the most difficult to explain satisfactorily is the breadth of its distribution in time and place coupled with its durability in the face of default. The reader must first agree that the rhetoric of Doomsday is what the pages of this book suggest it is: a scheme for organizing time, one that sets out from the conviction that the world-as-it-is is hopelessly corrupt and worthy of nothing but rejection, that the rhetoric of Doomsday sets out from this point but does not go the way of mysticism or transcendental religion, that it stays on the level of history and, on that level, seeks to explain how history came about, seeks its destruction, and postulates the existence of an alternative at the beginning and end of things. If this description is agreeable then one must wonder, reader and author alike,

how it is possible for this scheme to occur throughout the regions dominated by the monotheistic religions, and additionally in the native Americas, Oceania, and Africa, and then recur there and elsewhere despite the persistent failure of the scheme to realize itself.

Diffusion

Explanations in the category of “contamination” and “cultural diffusion” first leap to mind. Someone may argue that practically all the evidence comes from cultures touched by the mighty poetic imagery of Judaeo-Christian eschatology and that furthermore, the ardent missionaries who spread the word inclined toward eschatological interpretations of the world in the first place.⁵ There are, however, two cases where the probability of “contamination” is quite slight, the Aztecs, who seem to have developed a messianic form of Doomsday speculation in pre-Columbian times,⁶ and the Tupí-Guaraní tribes of Brazil, whose millennial outbreaks reach too far back into the sixteenth century to permit persuasive argument for missionary responsibility.⁷ Even in these cases, some would argue for prehistoric cultural diffusion, such as brought the cultivation of cotton from one continent to the other. To make matters worse, all the evidence without exception passes through the filter of Western languages (broadly understood) and reporters steeped in the traditions of those languages.

⁵ Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, p. 245.

⁶ Burr Cartwright Brundage, *The Fifth Sun: Aztec Gods, Aztec Worlds* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), pp. 117-19, and *The Phoenix of the Western World: Quetzalcoatl and the Sky Religion*, The Civilization of the American Indian series, 160 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982).

⁷ LaBarre, *Ghost Dance*, p. 202.

The Filter of Language

Evidence thus filtered could possibly represent an object that is *not* events and texts as they occurred and were composed, but rather only the observer observing. This insecurity about the reliability of reportage accompanies all language. No study whatsoever could survive that insecurity if one allowed it to overwhelm the possibility of reading through and between the cultural assumptions to some approximation of the facts. But the uncertainties of language demand a certain humility of the investigator, and if the investigator does not have it, the uncertainties of language will win out in the end.

On the other hand, not all parts of all reports lend themselves equally to subjective and cultural coloration. The death by starvation of many tens of thousands of Xhosa is an event, the factuality of which can hardly be distorted. The cultural information that accompanies the report of that event is, of course, shaped by the Western witness. Such shaping, however, is subject to the rigorous discipline of a real event, the occurrence of which no one will dispute. The shaping can always be disputed, but as long as it can be tested against an event, it is probably reliable. The same holds for reports of any Doomsday outbreak that brings with it some indisputable action, such as the disposing of property, migrating to a safe place, or engaging in some observable ritual activity like ghost dancing. For the purposes of the study of the rhetoric of Doomsday, the probable reliability of a report is much enhanced and the possibility of distortion much reduced when the object of observation is something other than Doomsday itself, say, the behavior of people “when prophecy fails.” Then, if the rhetoric of Doomsday reveals itself nonetheless either as an undercurrent or a central component of the event, one can hope for a reliable account.

Recurrence in View of Failure

Even when subjectivity, contamination, and cultural diffusion are brought into the equation and not discounted, the questions remain: why this pattern repeatedly compels the subjectivity of a reporter, why this pattern contaminates native cultures, why this pattern spreads around the world by cultural diffusion, and why this pattern—necessarily tested against experience and, against that norm, necessarily proven false—survives intact. What is it in human beings and the situation they encounter that leads them again and again to employ the rhetoric of Doomsday? What is it in the rhetoric that they find so satisfying? Of all these questions the last admits of an approximate answer, the others only of conjecture.

The System

Certain properties inhere in the rhetoric of Doomsday, properties that seem to appeal to the sense of system in human beings. Like all systems, the rhetoric of Doomsday is cohesive and orderly; like few others, it is also comprehensive. As to cohesiveness, every point in the rhetoric of Doomsday refers to every other. The Golden Ages that enclose the system are basically changeless and alike and so refer to one another by similarity. As ideals, they refer to the changeful intervening realities that cannot measure up to them and are, by contrast, deprived of lasting or independent value. Whatever significance the intervening realities have comes from their relationship to the Golden Ages, the Fall having initiated the catastrophic departure from the first Golden Age, and the imminent cataclysm about to introduce the concluding Golden Age. In addition to referring to the adjacent Golden Ages, the two catastrophes refer to one another as events of comparable magnitude but contrasting

result. The first catastrophe makes the second catastrophe necessary; the second undoes the malicious work of the first. The wretched present is sandwiched between the catastrophes or, depending on viewpoint, occupies the vast, bleak stretch between them. The wretched present represents the point farthest away from the Golden Age, if not in time then in quality, being all the things the Golden Age is not and vice versa.

Cohesion

To test the cohesiveness of the system, one could try to remove the wretched present from the Doomsday context and make it the setting for something else, say, transcendence. The world may be quite as wretched as the doom-sayer proposes, but one does not have to await a great purging catastrophe to overcome the wretchedness. One can, right now, lead the holy life and so transform the wretchedness for oneself or others or both and so rise above it. In practice this makes the wretched present the arena of salvation and so gives it meaning and purpose. It permits the deity to work in the here and now and assumes that the here and now is redeemable. In that case, the here and now is no longer the wretched present of the rhetoric of Doomsday but another entity altogether. The wretched present of the rhetoric of Doomsday is wholly unredeemable. No amount of virtue can correct it, though virtue may help to bring about its destruction. The rhetoric of Doomsday demands that destruction. Outside of the rhetoric of Doomsday, the wretched present has every right to proceed, to let the deity and the human race work out the plan of salvation. The wretched present can, then, *not* be removed from the Doomsday pattern and still retain its character. It coheres too intimately. Outside the pattern it becomes something else.

The order of the Doomsday system depends in large part on a sense of process, not progress but change, not cyclical, random, or irregular change but remorselessly degenerative change. Once the process of change is set in motion it leads inevitably to the worse until it cannot worsen any longer and, in ultimate degeneration, destroys itself. With change out of the way, the changeless again takes over. This is stated radically, the way a Gnostic might put it, but in lesser intensities it holds true for all doomsayers. The mutability of the world might produce a particular and short-term good, but in general and in the long term it always leads to misery.

Comprehensiveness

The law of change is obvious to all observers. In other than Doomsday systems it may be valued positively or neutrally. But these systems allow for the autonomy of history, change occurring in accord with its own dynamics or fulfilling an unknowable plan in the mind of God. Whichever the assumption, knowledge of history is never complete though worth pursuing for its own sake or some good or useful purpose, like helping to plan intelligently for the future or trying to fathom the divine wisdom. The rhetoric of Doomsday by contrast sees history in its totality, understands its rules beyond doubt, and has certain knowledge of its outcome. History began in error, deteriorates in continuous, headlong flight from the good, and will conclude in disaster. Its course has no value in and of itself and is in defiance of divine intentions. Only the Golden Ages at or outside the limits of history count, and only they represent the divine will.

The encompassing function of the Golden Ages limits history absolutely, that is, encloses it and makes it finite and thus comprehensible. It does even more, it makes history rather simple. The

similarity or identity of the Golden Ages establishes the principle of symmetry, “that the end may be like the beginning.” The chief intervening realities follow suit. The Fall and the forthcoming catastrophe correspond to one another and further enclose history, leaving it, to be sure, at the center of things but, for that, dwarfed by the towering events around it. That is basically all one has to know about history, and the common experience of symmetry in objects—or human beings—makes it very easy to remember and apply to time. Symmetry and the law of deterioration make the system orderly, and they help to make it comprehensive. There is no moment in history, or outside it for that matter, that the rhetoric of Doomsday cannot fully explain. This holds for events in general and in particular. Not just the overall course of history but any given moment means something, invariably something terrible by normal standards, and never anything random or arbitrary. In the same action, the rhetoric of Doomsday deprives history of autonomous value and elevates countless ordinary and extraordinary events to cosmic importance: those that recall the Fall, that denote further deterioration, and that announce the imminent catastrophe. The news of the day is of no interest on its own terms but of great significance for what it tells of Doomsday; human disruptions of nature, the rise of evil and the decay of society, natural disasters, discord among the mighty, war and rumors of war, all portend the coming end of things and the subsequent restoration. *We* know what they really mean. And we must stay alert to them, so that we will know when the catastrophe actually occurs. The exclusiveness of the knowledge of the truth is an added attraction to its possessors; like having insight into the “real,” the other-than-apparent nature of events, it enhances the status both of the knowledge and the knowers, at least in their own minds.

Exclusivity and Community

The principle of exclusivity can be variously applied, depending on the breadth of the understanding of “us.” When the understanding is broad and starts to become inclusive, referring to humanity in general terms, then the rhetoric of Doomsday fades. When the understanding is narrow and selective, the rhetoric of Doomsday becomes more urgent. And when the two clash, there are liable to be doctrinal fireworks. Only a relatively narrow understanding of “us” results in a visible Doomsday outbreak. This understanding excludes the greater part of the human race, perhaps even the greater part of one's own group (nation, tribe, church), and reserves both knowledge of the events and the profit from them to the select. Curiously, those who espouse this selectivity are rarely content to rest in their privileged knowledge and with it quietly to await the inevitable. They feel compelled to preach their doctrines abroad (and here again, the rhetoric of Doomsday does not necessarily conform with other esoteric practices), to make converts, and to include as many people as possible in their own choice company.

There appears to be some magic involved in this practice. Although the doctrine usually teaches the inevitability of the predicted events regardless of human behavior, the doomsayers seem, by their actions, to think that the likelihood of the fulfillment is enhanced by their expectation; and the larger the number of people involved, the better. The intensity of the belief and the number of adherents are not merely signs of the event but means of bringing it about. The Ghost Dances, for example, were rituals meant to bring the elect together, to help the elect to recognize one another, and to identify the elect for the benefit of the Great Spirit and the ancestors. But the rituals were, in addition, positive, coercive magical actions meant to attract the ancestors and to make the Great Spirit renew creation.

In other cases the general acceptance of Doomsday doctrine can become a self-fulfilling prophecy when, for example, disaster struck the Xhosa for disposing of their cattle and failing to plant crops, though the disaster was supposed to befall not them but the English. It seems that the rhetoric of Doomsday requires confirmation from fellow believers as much as or more than from objective reality, that some important part of its validity depends heavily on a community of opinion. At the same time the doom-sayers insist on being selective, esoteric, in the minority, and despised in the eyes of the world. The principle of exclusivity is maintained through this paradox in that, however widely the doctrine is preached, it is still intended only for "us"; they, the world, are not meant to have it, and if to know of it, then certainly not to reap its rewards.

Community of opinion and the principle of exclusivity are, in fact, not contradictory but complementary. Without exclusivity, community of opinion would be hard put to distinguish between "us" and "them." If everyone were "we," who would be left to punish or to lord it over? Without community of opinion, exclusivity would become mere individual psychopathy and lose general interest altogether. The two together have an important task to perform at the moment when the rhetoric of Doomsday leaves its rational base in experience. Because the rhetoric of Doomsday in its totality makes such extravagant claims, some part of the system must appeal to the reasonable. This it does in its evaluation of the present circumstance as terrible and threatening. Its gesture of pointing back to the pristine beginnings and the subsequent Fall speaks a symbolic language everyone seems to understand, whether or not one agrees with its purport. The notion of imminent catastrophe has a certain intrinsic plausibility, given the suddenness of most natural disasters and the fundamentally abrupt nature of death. It is only when the rhetoric of Doomsday makes the imminent catastrophe worldwide

and promises some form of paradise on the other side of it that implausibility begins to reign.

At this point, community of opinion and the principle of exclusivity enter to help override or rationalize the implausibility. If the special people who had the good sense to include me in their select circle think that something unlikely is true, should I be so churlish as to question them? Does not their good judgment in electing me indicate something about their wisdom in general (*pace* Groucho Marx)? Given the uncertainty of events in general and of future events in particular, are they not as trustworthy as anyone, indeed more trustworthy, since everything else they say conforms with my experience, especially their opinion about the wretched state of things-as-they-are? Faced with a choice between an implausible certainty and certain doubt, some people will prefer to affirm the implausible as certain. And if they find others to reinforce their convictions, all the better.

Pascal's Bet

For some adherents, not the most ardent, or at various levels of conversion, not the most convinced, it is also possible that Pascal's bet comes into play: if I stay outside the circle, how little do I gain and how much might I lose! If I join them, how little do I lose and how much might I gain! This assumes, however, that the proselyte has indeed little to lose in the world-as-it-is. The more at risk, the less likely it is that such reasoning will prevail, however opulent the promised rewards might be, dwarfing present prosperity by contrast. Of course, the prosperous may regard the world-as-it-is with quite as much loathing as those on the brink of destruction. The both of them can find in Doomsday a dramatic alternative, one that has the added advantage of revenge on the world.

The Theater of Doomsday

The drama of the rhetoric of Doomsday, or, to be more precise, its theatricality is one of its most attractive, not to say seductive features. Like all other systematic views of the world, it protects against the arbitrary and meaningless. But beyond that, the rhetoric of Doomsday makes life in the world, or what is left of it, highly interesting. This may seem less to apply to a Paiute of 1890 about to become a Ghost Dancer than to “Mrs. Keech” about to become a Flying Saucer cultist. After all, the one is experiencing rapid, drastic cultural change, and the other is living in rather ordinary secure circumstances. But both, we may assume, are plagued with ineffectiveness. What they do either does not achieve what it is supposed to or it makes no difference at all. The rhetoric of Doomsday reverses that or promises to. The roles played in the world by the adherents cease to be insignificant in themselves, or the adherents abandon the old roles and take on new ones altogether. What may appear to the uninitiated to be quite ordinary, or, on the other hand, sheer lunacy, the initiated know to be a preparation for the Last Things. The world has not given us what we expect of it. The world has gone its own way without taking us into account. The world has rewarded our neighbors and our enemies and left us with nothing worth having. The world has handed us defeat and humiliation, taken away our liberty and goods, leaving us in ruin or on the brink. History, which previously has been able only to disappoint, ignore, despise, or abuse us, is now in our hands. Our knowledge and action are the only things that count. We are in the process of turning history to our advantage. We are at the center of events. Everything leads up to us and proceeds from us to its culmination. The ignorant around us are mere extras, faceless creatures, lacking individuality, as the general and anonymous nature of their

coming destruction is about to demonstrate. And the whole cosmos is watching.

The Audiences

The theatricality of the rhetoric of Doomsday consists largely of this watching. But the cosmos does not watch alone. It is joined by the doom-sayer whose privileged knowledge grants the boon of perspective. It is as though history had suddenly been organized into a comprehensible, observable unit and reduced in scope, so that the doom-sayer can see its entirety, even while participating in its denouement. If the doom-sayers have a safe place, a mountaintop or a Flying Saucer, they cease even to participate and become pure observers of a great spectacle, of which they are beneficiaries. The drama of Doomsday consists of the collision between us and them, the struggle that we appear to be losing but, with dramatic irony, we know we are actually winning. We are suffering reversal, and reversals are the stuff of drama. Furthermore, the reversal of all reversals is coming. At the moment our fortunes are or appear to be at an ebb, but we shall be vindicated in the next moment, the final, permanent moment, the moment free of all other possible reversals, the moment from the perspective of which all other moments are judged.

The Advantages of Doomsday

Insofar as the rhetoric of Doomsday is theatrical and dramatic, it is thoroughly bound up with revenge. But at a certain point it moves on to other preoccupations. The immediate object of vengeance may appear to be a victorious enemy or a flourishing alien, but the momentum of Doomsday rage is such that it cannot be halted by the elimination of any

identifiable individual villain or group of villains. It is, after all, not just an adversary who will perish in the coming catastrophe; the whole order of things is to be overturned. If a villain is specified (the invader, the mighty, Antichrist), he ends up being merely a personification of a more general state of affairs. It is not sufficient to destroy him alone. It may be that he has ruined the whole world, or that he only represents the ruin of the world. In either case, the world in its entirety must and will be destroyed and reshaped. The clear, compelling recognition of this situation resolves a great many, indeed, all doubts about the world, and does so simply by overruling them. Crises in general reveal as petty and inconsequential one's own ordinary concerns (and, even more, the ordinary concerns of others). And Doomsday is the ultimate crisis. All other realities, from the unacceptably boring to the unacceptably turbulent, have to yield to its special urgency. Like most emergencies, the threat of Doomsday greatly simplifies the problem of living in the day-to-day. It reduces the panoply of choices that prevails in the ordinary world and, thereby, the need for decision. It frees one of countless major and minor responsibilities and concentrates all energies on an other-than-quotidian enterprise. And there is something quite invigorating about liberation from routine, particularly when the routine has become, for whatever reason, exceptionally burdensome. This the rhetoric of Doomsday has in common with other crises. What raises Doomsday beyond them is, of course, its promise of being the last crisis of all.

When all these benefits are added up—in aggregate they are quite impressive—the question remains: do the prospective returns outweigh the historic failure of Doomsday ever to realize itself? Well, maybe this time. Sooner or later it has to come to pass. Everything comes to an end. Given thorough disgust with the world-as-it-is, and given the

impressive advantages described here, the rhetoric of Doomsday proves to be perhaps not a rational but still a completely understandable outlook on the world and its prospects. The rhetoric of Doomsday provides a total explanation for the world, it promises an imminent recovery of the sacred, it puts power in the hands of the powerless and promises vengeance, and, finally, it entirely transforms an unbearable present and turns it into something replete with wonder and importance.

In each of these respects the rhetoric of Doomsday is virtually indistinguishable from magic, which represents a genuine alternative to Doomsday and is a serious competitor. Certain forms of religion and political ideology also fit this description, but that is because they are fundamentally Doomsday systems and not true alternatives. Magic, however, as it was studied in the Renaissance or is practiced on the periphery of modern societies, performs all the above functions: it explains the world, puts limits on the profane, endows the initiate with power, and fills the world with miracles. The rhetoric of Doomsday has, to be sure, certain magical features chiefly attached to the Fall and the coming catastrophe, where minor and major material occurrences can have wildly disproportionate consequences on cosmic and metaphysical levels. The cause-effect relationship between matter and the metaphysical is at the essence of magic. The relationship between desire and gratification, or will and realization, for example in the Golden Age, also has magical properties, but in all these instances magic is only an instrument and not the prevailing system. When magic is the prevailing system, it precludes the need for the rhetoric of Doomsday, at least as long as the magic works. When the magic fails, the rhetoric of Doomsday is ready and waiting to fill the void.

The principal advantage that the rhetoric of Doomsday has over magic is accountability. Magic must always prove itself more or less

instantaneously with a cure, a windfall, a restored lover, or the ruin of an enemy. The rhetoric of Doomsday, on the other hand, needs only the inevitable calamities of nature, politics, and society to support its interpretation of the world; and its ultimate test can usually be postponed.

Plausibility by Virtue of Decay

This *prima facie* plausibility is one of the greatest strengths of the rhetoric of Doomsday. It leads the way into the system. Whenever calamities occur, some human beings seem reluctant to grant them autonomy. People seem to want to know whether the calamity *means* something, anything at all, and if so, what. The rhetoric of Doomsday has all the answers ready and indubitable. The reason why these calamities should be any more significant than past calamities does not, however, leap out of the argument. Somehow it seems that past calamities, simply by virtue of being past, cannot possibly be as portentous as present and impending ones.

An exception has to be made for the calamity of the Fall. It and it alone of all the wretched occurrences of life in the world approaches or equals the importance of these present or imminent events. All intervening calamities were, after all, withstood. They, therefore, cannot be in the same category as those that have transformed or will transform the human condition utterly. A certain chronological egocentrism goes along with this view. The long string of past disasters cannot be all that important, if only because I was not there to witness the calamities. Now these present or imminent events, ah well, they are something else again.

Nostalgia could, conceivably, knock this conviction somewhat awry: You think this is a calamity? Well, you should have been there when. . . . But this, however perversely, presents a degenerative

worldview that the rhetoric of Doomsday can basically accommodate and shape to its needs: even calamities are not as wonderful as they used to be. The degeneration of life in the world can even be made to apply to the terrible, as long as no one claims that this negation of a negation implies anything good or desirable.

Just as the degenerative bias of the rhetoric of Doomsday leads forward to a catastrophe, it also, when retraced through time, of necessity leads back to a Golden Age of some sort. The logic inheres in the rhetoric of Doomsday and cannot be extricated without doing violence to the system. The degenerative bias evaluates the present in its totality and applies most directly to the phenomenon of change. The rhetoric of Doomsday defines all change in the present circumstance to be change for the worse. With such a definition, technological, political, and social change must point back to preferable conditions, less degenerate, the farther removed from the present the better. And that leads to primitivism.

Primitivism

Whatever the technological, political, or social development, its predecessors will seem the more desirable. Progress is entirely out of the question, as is value-free or self-valuing change, that is, process for its own sake as normal and the way of the world. The simpler tool, the memory of the past ruler, or an older way of life invariably must put the innovations to shame. The rationalization required to overrule an obvious present good can, in some cases, be quite complex and imaginative, turning ordinary reality upside-down to justify repudiating it. But that makes no difference to the doom-sayer. The prime task is the devaluation of the present, and all means to that end are legitimate.

The retrospective function of the rhetoric of Doomsday is, by its very nature, not susceptible to testing; the predictive function avoids testing by postponement. But wherever one looks, nostalgia is available. The inability to prove that the past in general or some particular past was “better” has no influence whatsoever on its plausibility. Indeed, it seems to be an advantage. The validity of nostalgia rests elsewhere, first of all in the authority and expressive skill of the nostalgiacs. If their utterances are otherwise reliable, for example, concerning the present which can be tested against experience, then there is little reason to doubt their utterances concerning the past. If one shares a generally or even intermittently negative disposition toward the present—ain't it awful?—then, the notion that the past was better—it didn't used to be like that—seems to follow naturally. So, the authority and expressive skill of the nostalgiac combine with a receptive ear to make for conviction.

Mythical Biography

The main unanswerable question is *why* the ear is receptive to such appeals, many or most of which run counter to reason. What is it that is so recognizable in nostalgia, or, for that matter, in its prospective counterpart, the anticipated disaster? How can any worldview as fundamentally irrational as the rhetoric of Doomsday be so persuasive? There must be something beyond selfish gratification to account for its success. What makes it so familiar, so perversely plausible?

The closest analogue to the rhetoric of Doomsday—but it is only an analogue—seems to be the imaginary biography of the hero or the spiritual biography of the prophet. The elements of innocence and error, trial, crisis, and regeneration shape these biographies as they do the rhetoric of Doomsday. Myth and fairy tale, epic and romance, story and

confession broadcast this information throughout the world to people of all ages and all cultures. Naive Parsifal, at home in a primitive forest, leaves it for the world of adventure, falls in error, and thence into humiliation and madness, out of which he emerges into regeneration and glory. Handsome Lake said nothing directly of his innocent childhood but observed that wickedness appeared in him only “since he had strength in the world,” that he has “done evil, ever since he had been able to work.” After such a life, he fell ill, “died,” and revived, a new man with an important and lasting message for his people.⁸

The story of the rhetoric of Doomsday projects onto the world and history a plot that is known to the hearer of any fable that begins in innocence, passes through the trials and tribulations of the world and through a terrible crisis, to conclude with a successful resolution, the hero living happily ever after. It is the monomyth of Joseph Campbell,⁹ and recurs in the unlikeliest places, such as the autobiographical assessment by independent entrepreneurs of the adventure of founding their own companies.¹⁰ It appears to be the ultimate biography.

In practice, that is, in the literature and folklore of the world, the story is vastly more complex, often fragmentary, allowing for countless variations, including the possibility of failure, and conforming closely to the values of the time and place in which the story is told. When the rhetoric of Doomsday comes on the scene and proclaims its doctrines of primordial innocence lost, ordeals undergone, and crises to withstand, promising a satisfactory conclusion to the whole action, it greatly simplifies the plot, though it still has more in common with mythical

⁸ Parker, “Code,” pp. 21-24.

⁹ *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p. 38.

¹⁰ Oris Collins and David G. Moore, *The Organization Makers: A Behavioral Study of Independent Entrepreneurs* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970), p. 20 and *passim*.

biography than with any other single form of human expression. It is also far less bound to time and place, all appearances to the contrary. The rhetoric of Doomsday has no room for such tender sentiments as led the late seventeenth-century French Cinderella to forgive her stepsisters; in Grimm, a dove pecks out their eyes.¹¹

The rhetoric of Doomsday in all times and places visits doom upon the wicked without exception or forgiveness. The rhetoric of Doomsday always deplores the new. Beginnings are always better, not, as in folktale, sometimes ideal, sometimes dreadful. These significant differences—and many others—merely say that the rhetoric of Doomsday and folktale are not identical. But every element of the rhetoric of Doomsday has counterparts in folk wisdom, and the order of these elements has a counterpart in one kind of folktale: biography.

Mythical biography, if we may so name this polymorphous phenomenon, tells the story both of the natural, normal development of the individual and the extraordinary development of the saint or hero. The two are, in fact, so intertwined as to be indistinguishable. And whenever they are told, they are understood, because they are stories about the listener. One may wish to argue that all or most narrative assumes and so treats the listener in some way or other, but there is clearly a privileged sense in which this is true of mythical biography. The special circumstances of “realistic” narrative are either lacking altogether or are presented in such a way as to transcend the particular life being described. This is most evident in fairy tale, where individualizing features are, in general, forbidden and a condition, say, of being a child or a sibling, is declared without being specified or elaborated into characterization. The listener never begins to grasp another person in that

¹¹ Max Lüthi, *Once Upon a Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales*, trans. Francis Lee Utley (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 62.

person's difference or uniqueness. Rather, the listener (or reader) confronts in these tales the self, not, to be sure, in any literal sense, but in a more troublesome figurative, imaginative, and prerational sense.

The wonders of mythical biography are too rich and mysterious to pursue further at this late point in a study on another subject altogether. But if mythical biography bears the structural resemblance to the rhetoric of Doomsday observed in these pages, then we may be approaching the level on which the rhetoric of Doomsday reaches its adherents. The sense of plausibility, defiant of reason and experience, the (as it seems) instinctively favorable response the rhetoric of Doomsday can assume in almost any audience may then be traceable not to the collective memory of natural disaster or the individual dread of death or even to outrage at the thought that the world may outlast the individual, but rather, on the most basic level, to the plot of some of the best stories ever told.

If it is true to say that these stories are about the listener, then the rhetoric of Doomsday, as it transfers the plot to history, goes about the business of reshaping the bewildering complexity of the world into the familiar image of human beings—not their disposition in space, like the representations of astrological man where the human microcosm corresponds in limb and organ to the orderly celestial macrocosm—but rather human disposition in time where history or the temporal universe is made, conversely, to conform to humanity, specifically to the rough course of its spiritual development. The rhetoric of Doomsday may then be said to turn history into a story and not just any story but a story everyone knows.

What makes this transference difficult to recognize—if indeed the rhetoric of Doomsday and mythical biography bear the suggested relationship—is the general absence of personality. We have the story of

the hero without the hero. There are hints of exceptions—the Brazilian lamentation of Mother Earth grown old (above p. 125),¹² the Okanagon conviction that “the whole world, just as men do, would die and be reborn” (above p. 128)¹³ and the richly peopled mythologies of the Gnostics—but by and large, the course of the heroic action applies to events and not to persons. This abstraction, this missing personality may be the very mechanism that makes the rhetoric of Doomsday plausible to cultures that have lost or misplaced the mythical. Even when the saints and heroes have been rationalized, psychologized, and explained away, the course of their development remains a familiar pattern. And when the stresses and confusions of the world outgrow the ability of the standard, secular patterns to organize and explain, then this basic plot is ready to do so.

It is not possible to prove this relationship. It is and must remain conjecture. But one is forced to resort to conjecture when faced with the persistence of the rhetoric of Doomsday, even literalist, radical doom-saying in the unlikely environment of late twentieth-century America, and, more commonly, the subtler, pervasive, subliminal rhetoric of Doomsday that accompanies so much political and social debate. The rhetoric of Doomsday is very hard to resist. On more than one occasion during the long years of the composition of these pages, in moments of great public anxiety, it occurred to the writer that, if he did not soon finish explaining the rhetoric of Doomsday or explaining it away, all his fine theorizing would be overtaken by events, the prophet vindicated, the observer shown up as a fool. The survival of the rhetoric of Doomsday into the world around us, in many varying intensities, most of them vigorous and influential, is as certain as the explanations are uncertain

¹² Mühlmann, p. 28.

¹³ LaBarre, p. 216.

and conjectural. Despite the difficulty of the task, a clear analytic understanding of the rhetoric of Doomsday and, frankly, its banishment to the realm of exhausted ideas may be a necessary measure to prevent its ever being translated into reality.

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