

## Maral Attar-Zadeh    Apocalypse When?

### Two Views from the End-Times<sup>1</sup>

Abstract: The end is already here; the end is yet to come: not a pair of contradictory statements but one statement made up of two parts, forming a temporal modality—already/not yet—which orders much of contemporary political, ecological, and philosophical discourse about the future. The present has already foreclosed on the future; the present is the crucial time to act to avoid this foreclosure. The grammatical tense of the Anthropocene is therefore the future perfect: we speak of human and nonhuman worlds as they *will have been*, of our sphere of action within the irreversible transformations of life and earth as they *will have occurred*.

This essay is an examination of already/not yet as the dominant temporal position in and of our contemporary crises. I offer a brief sketch of its recent historical development and attempt to draw out the affective and phenomenological tendencies which it contains, describes and performs—suggesting that this temporal positioning has contributed, over the past century, to the apocalypse becoming permanentized, rendering recuperative action difficult and mourning impossible. Finally, I ask whether an alternative temporal positioning to the already/not yet might be possible—a modality of no more/still, which orients the subject towards the future not through the imposition of a looming and latent eventuality but through a difficult, incomplete, and ultimately generative confrontation with what simultaneously *is* and *is no more/never was*.

Keywords: eschatology, Anthropocene, modernity, R. S. Thomas

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## The End

Apocalyptic

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Attar-Zadeh:

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The end is already here; the end is yet to come: not a pair of contradictory statements but one statement made up of two parts, forming a temporal modality—already/not yet—which orders much of contemporary political, ecological, and philosophical discourse about the future. “The greatest challenge we face,” writes Roy Scranton in his seminal *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, is “understanding that this civilization is already dead” even though the “zombie system” of petro-capitalism continues and accelerates for now, “voracious but sterile” (2015, 23). The already/not yet, as Rebecca Comay has shown, manifests itself in the familiar figure of the deadline—“due dates, expiration dates, environmental tipping points, pandemic turning points”—which is simultaneously looming and has already passed (2020, 5). The present has already foreclosed on the future; the present is the crucial time to act to avoid this foreclosure. This temporal positioning is most clearly present in discourses about the Anthropocene. The very definition, by the Anthropocene Working Group, of the term as a “stratigraphic ‘golden spike’” implies a future in which the present has ossified into permanent record (Zalasiewicz *et al.* 2017, 57). The broader narrative of the Anthropocene can similarly be seen as “an archaeology of the future,” the attempt to “transform our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come” (Jameson 1982, 152). The grammatical tense of the Anthropocene, then, is the future perfect: we speak of human and nonhuman worlds as they *will have been*; of our sphere of action within the irreversible transformations of life and earth as they *will have occurred*. Klaus Scherpe and Brent O. Peterson call this “a shift in the grammar of the end of the world” (1986, 97).

This is a recent shift, perhaps, but to an old grammar: that of Christian (specifically Pauline) eschatology, which describes the Kingdom of God as “both already here but not yet fulfilled” (Noortgaete 2015, 110).<sup>2</sup> The adoption of a biblical apocalyptic timeframe while dismissing, for the most part, the redemptive force is, at its core, part of what Celia Deane-Drummond calls the “secular attraction to [and] appropriation of apocalyptic” in Anthropocene studies and related contemporary discourses about the future of the planet (2008, 177). The already/not yet modality belongs to a larger body of biblical apocalyptic language and imagery which has survived “as a vehicle for visions of destruction and regeneration, of nihilistic despair and futuristic fantasy” while its original meaning, Apocalypse as divine revelation, “has been virtually extinguished” (Carey 1999, 9). Considering “already/not yet” as an expression of eschatological timing invites a closer examination of its structure and content, an examination which

<sup>2</sup> The already/not yet modality in Christian theology has been developed most fully by scholars of “inaugurated eschatology”; Oscar Cullmann, for example, calls it “the only dialectic and the only dualism that is found in the New Testament” (1951, 146). See also Ladd 1973 and Vos 1979.

would challenge its neutrality as a mere instrument of geological record-keeping and political projection: as Stefan Skrimshire notes, eschatology “is concerned not only with reasoning about the end, but also the psychological-phenomenological experiences and ethical orientation of believers towards it” (2014, 157). This essay is such an examination of already/not yet as the dominant temporal position in and of our contemporary crises. I offer a brief sketch of its recent historical development, and attempt to draw out the affective and phenomenological tendencies which it contains, describes, and performs. Finally, I ask whether an alternative temporal positioning to the already/not yet might be possible; suggesting that this alternative may be found in the later poetry of Welsh priest-poet R. S. Thomas—a modality of no more/still, which orients the subject towards the future not through the imposition of a looming and latent eventuality but through a difficult, incomplete, and ultimately generative confrontation with what simultaneously *is* and *is no more/never was*.

### **Time and Timing in the Eschatological Flood**

The ubiquity of the already/not yet modality—and of an apocalyptic imaginary more broadly—in contemporary discourse is part of a larger picture of the apocalyptic over the past century; one that includes the development, growth, and the eventual dominance of eschatology as a focus and mode of theological inquiry which, running parallel to secular discourses of the apocalyptic, has contributed to a shared cultural vocabulary of last-things. Theologian Christoph Schwöbel has called the twentieth century “the century of eschatology,” citing Carl Ratschow’s remark that the renewed awareness of the eschatological character of Christian theology has “almost flooded” the field in the period (Schwöbel 2000, 27; Ratschow 1982, 334). Gerhard Sauter also refers to this sudden surge in eschatological thinking in aptly climactic terms, referring to periods of upheaval and crisis as “storms” which disrupt the terrain of eschatological doctrine (1999, 25). The systematic study of the “apocalyptic corpus” began, Derrida remarks, “only in the nineteenth century”—the *OED* locates the first usage of “eschatology” in 1844 by American theologian George Bush—but by the late nineteenth century it was integrated into mainstream theology, and by the beginning of the twentieth it had already become “the crisis through which the eternal threatens every stability in time” (Derrida 1984, 14; *OED* 2021; Paipais 2018, 1027; Schwöbel 2000, 222). Rather than fixed, static, or closed dogma, the systematic study of eschatology was

a new and dynamic field which transformed the nature of theological inquiry over the course of the twentieth century. The common claim that the evolution of the apocalyptic imaginary since modernism has continued to “cast the idea of the end of the world in ancient, religious, biblical terms” is thus only partially true (Rudrum 2008, 58). The biblical language of the apocalypse, though “ancient,” was historically situated and in profound flux during the same period, in the process of transforming into “a substantially different eschatology [...] than what was widespread in the church for centuries” (McFague 1993, 261).

I emphasise the newness, dynamism, and historical contingency of modern eschatological theory even in its orthodox theological forms for two reasons. The first is that an awareness of the parallel development of a modern apocalyptic temporality in the field of theology belies the tempting but reductive narrative that current political, philosophical, or ecological iterations of the already/not yet modality are simply secularised and ‘disenchanted’ versions of a pre-modern, naïve, religious view of the end-times. As Charles Taylor has shown, the “subtraction story” of secularism—the claim that modern ways of being in and knowing the world have emerged from a “subtraction” of (liberation from, loss of) religiosity—accounts neither for the genuinely new possibilities of the secular nor for its latent dependence on, and referrals back to, religious systems and categories (2007, 22–29). The second, related, reason is that this awareness challenges the common approach to the theological as an inert resource from which myths and symbols may be extracted and instrumentalised; suggesting, instead, that inquiries into the temporal structure of contemporary crises would benefit from a more rigorous and two-sided conceptual traffic between secular and theological understandings of apocalyptic temporality.<sup>3</sup>

What kind of temporal and phenomenological shift, then, does the already/not yet modality of our contemporary crises signify? Not a simple movement from a naïve faith in, to a disenchanted cynicism about, the future, but rather the decoupling of eschatological temporality from one secular regime of thought (Enlightenment progressivism) and its tethering to others (modern, postmodern, Marxist, and posthumanist versions of futurity). The idea of a redemptive future with roots in the present was already “a secularised hope” in the eighteenth century, an “alignment with Enlightenment progressivism” which promised an “open future which is to be filled with content through the means of human self-actualisation” (Bauckham 2007, 674; Northcott 2015, 107; Schwöbel 2000, 220). “Staking everything on a better future as the modern West has done,” writes Richard Bauckham, “would probably never have been conceivable had Chris-

3 On disciplinary tensions around the adoption of Pauline eschatology by post-Marxist critics of historicism, see Paipais 2018.

tianity not taught people to place hope in the future on the basis of the promises of God” (2007, 674). This pairing of Christian eschatology and Enlightenment optimism, however, would soon begin to grow tenuous: already at the end of the eighteenth century, Malthus’s writings on planet scarcity and overpopulation complicated the relationship between human progress and future redemption—an early precursor, as Delf Rothe suggests, to the historical narratives to be found in works of “green eschatology” (2020, 148).

But it was not until the twentieth century, with its “man-made catastrophes...bound up with a deep propensity to apocalyptic thinking” that the already/not yet modality came to signify a foreclosed rather than a radically open future (Rabinbach 1997, 2). Of course, biblical apocalypse is already in a sense “closed”—its content divinely determined, always already inevitable in its presence outside, after, at the end of time. In invoking the contrast between opening and foreclosure here, however, I am concerned with the idea of temporal stance and positioning. For writers and thinkers of the redemptive apocalypse, the end-times may be closed but they are not foreclosed upon: the divinely-ordained apocalypse of Christian theology is radically open *for now* and *from here* because it holds the promise of regenerations, transfigurations, and newness which cannot be comprehended or fully known before they arrive. It is this time-bound and contingent promise-as-opening which, I argue, begins to close at the turn of the century. The traumatic experience of the First World War brought about for many, including W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot, what David Rudrum has called the modernist “apocalypse without salvation,” the end precisely of an end-times which would be capable of carrying redemptive or regenerative promise (Rudrum 2008, 61). What remained in the absence of this transformative end was the “pure and self-sufficient logic of catastrophe” which has become “permanentized” and “frees itself from the necessity of expecting an event that will alter or end history” (Rabinbach 1997, 12). The death-events of the Holocaust and the detonations of the atomic bombs during the Second World War poisoned not just the present but the future with their brutality and inhumanity—the world after Auschwitz and after the bombs would be one wherein the apocalypse was not only detemporalized but spatialized—threatening to repeat itself again elsewhere in an “unfolding of [...] a kind of negative *Ereignis*” (Rudrum 2008, 66).<sup>4</sup> “In some sense, we are already dead,” writes Slavoj Žižek in *God in Pain*, “since the catastrophe is already here [...] after Hiroshima, we cannot any longer play the simple humanist game of the choice we have (‘it depends on us whether we follow the path of self-destruction or the path of gradual healing’)” (2012, 55). The “nuclear event”

<sup>4</sup> See also Barton 2010.

became the ultimate symbol and shorthand, for postmodernists like Baudrillard, of the end which had already come, had not yet come, would never come, was always coming: “the actual nuclear event will not occur, because it already has occurred” (Baudrillard 1983, 104). Schwöbel claims that it was the dawn of “the global ecological crisis” in the last quarter of the twentieth century which “shattered the future-oriented visions of eschatologies for which the future was the screen on which the fulfilment of all human hopes was projected” (2000, 235); this shattering, in fact, had already been in motion since at least the beginning of the century, and was only reaching its fullness, its end, in the ecological crisis.

In the “will have been” of the Anthropocene; in its staging of the present as not only the ruins of the future but what will bring ruin upon it, the modality of already/not yet is not only fully untethered from redemptive visions of the future but reversed in its temporal orientation. In traditional eschatology as in revolutionary messianism, what is already/not yet is the Kingdom of God—or its utopian political equivalent—which breaks into the present from the future, its power and enormity so great that it engenders itself as potential and promise within the present. Through the course of the twentieth century, however, it was the past and present—traumatic events, destructive cycles, ruptures which had already happened or were already taking place—which started to cast their shadow into the future, transforming, limiting, or terminating it before it could arrive. The First World War left millions shellshocked and brought about discourses of trauma and its endless “afterwardness” (*Nachträglichkeit*), atomic bombs detonated into the future, planting the radioactive seeds for an indefinite future “nuclear event”; climate science began to prove that past and present generations have been flooding, burning, extracting from, and consuming the planet not just as they live but also irreversibly into the future. This is the distinguishing quality of our contemporary positioning of already/not yet; instead of the eschaton exploding into the present, instead of the possibility of things being otherwise hovering silently at the edge of every moment, our present leaks and burns and radiates into the future, rendering it a host for its half-life.

Hence the power of the deadline, both looming and past, to paralyse “with the certainty of failure” and lull “with the promise of reprieve” (Comay 2020, 14). A deadline set for us is closed, a deadline only we can meet; its structure already excludes any possibility for something which is new or other to break in from the outside. Warnings about the catastrophic future which we, in the present, have both already put into motion and must work to defer “can pivot [...] easily between rallying call and resignation,” writes Comay, not because “the doom-saying is disre-

garded or that it fails to stimulate,” but because “the excitement” it shores up “has a peculiar soporific impact”; in a reversal of traditional eschatological temporality, our past and present inaction gain the power to breach into the future and become the eschaton, the “last thing,” returning to us and retroactively imposing on us an inability to act before it is too late (Comay 2020, 14).

If, within the phenomenological structure of the already/not yet, we cannot save the world, we cannot mourn its loss either. “The work of mourning,” writes Martin Jay, “is conscious of the love-object it has lost, and it is able to learn from reality testing about the actual disappearance of the object and thus slowly and painfully withdraw its libido from it” (1993, 93). Neither is possible in the framework of the already/not yet and its enactment of “the petrifying mental gesture of *it will have been*.” Carrying the finalising power of the “already,” this gesture “is only able to provoke the hedonism of being able to forget—but scarcely the painful memory of what was lost” (Scherpe & Peterson 1986, 109). Even this forgetting, which hinders the ability to mourn, is itself foreclosed upon by the insistence of the “not yet”; “for the earth, however wounded by our depredations, is still around to nurture us” (Jay 1993, 97). In this iteration of apocalyptic thinking and feeling, Jay detects “the symptoms of melancholy as Freud describes them”: “deep and painful dejection, withdrawal of interest in the everyday world, diminished capacity to love, paralysis of the will, and, most important of all, radical lowering of self-esteem accompanied by fantasies of punishment for assumed moral transgressions” (1993, 92). The moods of the already/not yet of the Anthropocene are melancholy and mania, “objective irony” and “radical indifference,” as well as dread and stupor in the face of endless deferral and unavoidable immanence (Scherpe & Peterson 1986, 97).

### **No More/Still: Making Time for What Remains**

Perhaps this is an unfair assessment. The “will have been” of the Anthropocene, after all, serves as a reminder (paralysing as this reminder may be); speaks in a register of accountability (impossible as it might be to maintain). Any attempt to find an alternative to the temporal positioning dictated by the already/not yet should thus take seriously the temptations of willing evasion and unwarranted optimism, and remain grounded in the reality of the crisis even as it searches for different affective and ethical relations to it. We may not agree with the critical view of the already/not

yet positioning as potentially pathological, or be inclined to discard it completely; it would still be worthwhile to search for alternative ways of being and knowing in our iteration of end-times, to be creative and flexible in the face of so many foreclosures on intellectual, imaginative, and material possibility.

It might be apt to think here about R. S. Thomas, for whom reorientation—and particularly the specific gesture of “turning aside”—held the potential for encounter with the new and the other, for finding and stepping into imaginative and spiritual openings in the midst of the mundane and the bleak.<sup>5</sup> The Welsh priest-poet also lived through the twentieth century and engaged seriously and deeply, as a poet but also as a parish priest, theologian, and voice for the Welsh nationalist movement, with its eschatological character, crises, and upheavals (Davies 2001, 68). One of the central points of tension in Thomas’s work and thought was his relationship to science as language, as practice, and as cosmic ordering force. His earlier poetry most commonly allied the aesthetics of scientific advancement and inquiry with “the Machine”—the central figure and manifestation of evil in his poetry, a terrifying hybrid and faceless assemblage of “technological ability, science devoid of conscience, and logic devoid of the *logos*” (Davies 2001, 68). Around the time of the publication of *Laboratories of Spirit* (1975), however, Thomas’s stance towards science became less antagonistic and more exploratory and ambivalent. The problem of science is, in his later poetry, one mainly of language and orientation. It is treated as a way of seeing and being in the world which has the potential to profoundly unsettle and challenge the existing poetic and theological structures of his experience, but which is nevertheless impossible to ignore in its strange, cold, and inhuman complexity. Decoupled from the cannibalizing force of the Machine, the aesthetics and vocabulary of the “scientific” became increasingly associated with another one of the problems or questions at the core of Thomas’s thought and theology—that of silence, obscurity, inaccessibility, or (ultimately and disastrously) the absence of God (Pikoulis 2003). With its openness to an uncomfortable and potentially even incompatible hybridity, Thomas’s poetic and theological vision is a perfect example of the necessarily contingent and “profane” nature of religious experience, belief, and expression especially during *kairotic* times of crisis and upheaval, since these times “call for, indeed force upon us, changes in our religious symbolism and [...] frames of reference” (Kaufman 1983, 9). As a man of a fundamentally conservative temperament, Thomas was keenly and bitterly aware of the ways in which these pressures could deform and hinder the human relationship to nature and to the Divine. But with his later poetry, inflected with “scientific” language

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, “The Bright Field” and “Aside” in Thomas 1993.

and ways of seeing, he began to consider and elaborate on the ways in which these deformations might make room for abstract, even mystical access to the genuinely other, to be able to communicate something of the radical otherness of God.

“Emerging,” the opening poem of *Laboratories of Spirit*, begins with the following lines:

Not as in the old days I pray,  
God. My life is not what it was.  
Yours, too, accepts the presence of  
the machine? (1993, 290)

Already in these lines lies the central problem of the poem: the tension between a permanent and devastating loss and the hybrid newness and continuity of what remains in its wake. The speaker can no longer pray “as in the old days”; the speaker still prays, prays for the whole poem. The subject of this prayer is a strange God, one who has perhaps become strange or transformed in “the presence of the machine,” or one who has always been alien, unresponsive to the “old ways” of prayer, a God of ‘form and number’ (1993, 290). At the centre of the poem is a transformation, a coming into a new relation with God:

It is the annihilation of difference,  
the consciousness of myself in you,  
of you in me; the emerging  
from the adolescence of nature  
into the adult geometry  
of the mind (1993, 290).

It is difficult to overstate the stakes of this “emerging” out of nature for Thomas, whose poetic, political, and theological language had up to this point been organised primarily and profoundly around local landscape, nature imagery, and “green” religious symbolism like the tree and the burning bush.<sup>6</sup> It becomes clear that this poem-prayer is an attempt—a struggle—to redefine and perform a new relation between a believer and a deity who have both been revealed to be “not what they were” and have become, at least from the believer’s perspective, strange, deformed, new to each other. “There are questions we are the solution/to”, realises the speaker, “others whose echoes we must expand/to contain” (1993, 290). God and believer occupy a modality of no more/still; the poem balances

<sup>6</sup> See Morgan 2003; Perry 2008.

at the edge of, and pivots between, a devastating loss and a transformed, unfamiliar, expanded, othered continuity.

In “The Moon in Lleyn”, also in *Laboratories of Spirit*, Thomas characterises the modality of no more/still as explicitly eschatological. In the first half of the poem the speaker, kneeling by the sea, describes what he sees as the no-more, the loss of religion; not just in the present (“the bell fetches / no people to the brittle miracle / of the bread”) but also at the end of time, a modernist “end of the end”: “it is easy to believe / Yeats was right,” says the speaker, referencing the apocalypse without redemption of “The Second Coming” (1993, 311). The stunning turn in the second half of the poem is apocalyptic in the literal sense of the word, a revelation in time:

But a voice sounds  
in my ear: Why so fast,  
mortal? These very seas  
are baptised. The parish  
has a saint’s name time cannot  
unfrock. In cities that  
have outgrown their promise people  
are becoming pilgrims  
again, if not to this place,  
then to the recreation of it  
in their own spirits.

The voice offers to the narrator a vision of a saved world, but this redemption looks new, works in unfamiliar ways, requires an expansion of our categories in order to contain it. The image of the baptised seas is a perfect example of the concept of ‘deep incarnation’ an attempt in the field of ecotheology to “show the radical meaning of the incarnation for the whole of creaturely reality [...] an incarnation into the very tissue of biological existence and systems of nature” (Gregersen 2001, 205). This, according to Peter Scott, is the ecological task of eschatology in our times: “both the concept and task of eschatology must be expanded to encompass non-human nature” (2000, 92). The sense that the world is no longer saved and the reality that it is still redeemed can only be contained in a nonlinear understanding of time and of the world’s relationship to God which the believer must brave: “You must remain / kneeling...prayer, too, / has its phases” (1993, 311).

This extension and deformation of categories in order to make room—and time—for encountering the Divine is not always rewarded as

it is in this poem. Thomas's willingness to expand what constitutes continued existence (the "still" of his temporal modality) always risks a kind of transgression or mutation which annihilates what he is attempting to save, conjure up, and encounter (its 'no more'). But it is precisely the fact that this positioning sets up such high stakes that makes it valuable as a way of seeing and being in moments of transformation, crisis, and loss. When Thomas probes the silence, absence, and alienness of God he is opening up to the possibility of the destruction of what he knows in order to bear witness to the possibility of a God, and therefore a world, which is completely other, emerging like a lit bush from the fallen or foreclosed present. This risky and incomplete dialectic takes place at what Derrida calls a "point of infinite pivoting" (1981, 221); a kind of apocalyptic radically different from the already/not yet in "positively welcoming the intrusion of chaos into the existing cosmos" (Bull 1999, 78). In this pivoting, God and the possibility of eschatological redemption, of a future not already foreclosed upon, exist as an "absolute contradiction" which "may be repeatedly forgotten and rediscovered" (Bull 1999, 40). Regardless of whether its gambit pays off, the no more/still contemplates and acknowledges loss—of an old view, even if it might have been a misunderstanding, of the world and our relationship to it. Even as it searches and hopes for what "still" might be possible, it is willing "to tolerate [the] impossibility of" "complete dialectical sublation" and what Jay calls the work of mourning (1993, 98).

No more/still is the modality of "apocalyptic hope" which is "*hope in danger*, a hope that is capable of suffering" (Moltmann 2000, 137). The redemptive newness for which it hopes is not in a closed or determined future but in the present, in the recognition and acknowledgement of the altered and deformed 'still'. It is apocalyptic in the original sense of the word in its engagement with questions of presence and absence, *Mischung* and monstrosity, revelation and oblivion. Stepping aside from the melancholy and mania of the foreclosed already/not yet, it opens up "a third space" which is "alien to pessimism or optimism, of the luminous darkness"; making time for "amorous *chance*—future unknown—of some contagious conviviality" by breaking "apocalyptic closure into dis/closure" (Keller 2015, 311). No more/still is the modality of confronting ongoing extinction, in motion but incomplete; of simultaneously inhabiting and mourning the landscapes, timbre, habits, and rhythms of our lives as they bend and mutate and transform, imperceptibly and in their totality, in the end-times in which we live. It rejects the despair of the *will-have-been-anyway* by pursuing, with "a new kind of humility in the face of the ever-growing magnitude and power of our interventions" (Noortgaete 2015, 113), the still-important work of confronting, recognising, salvaging,

and mourning the mutations and deformations of the familiar: The world is no more; the world is still here.

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