

René Dietrich

Revising and Remembering (after) the End

American Post-Apocalyptic Poetry since 1945  
from Ginsberg to Forché

Bernd Engler, Michael Hochgeschwender, Günter Leypoldt,  
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## Preface and Acknowledgments

The cover of this book displays Paul Klee's drawing "Angelus Novus," the point of reference for Walter Benjamin's thoughts on the "angel of history" in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History." The angel's gaze in the drawing (in Benjamin's view) which is fixed on a destructive past while he is being propelled into an uncertain future represents very aptly the perspective expressed by the post-apocalyptic poets who are in the focus of this study. At the same time, it is important to note that the angel also looks at us, the viewers looking at this drawing. And when we see in his gaze fixed on us a "pile of debris" as the result of the "single catastrophe" of progress growing "skyward," we are implicated both in what he sees and in the position from which he sees it. The resulting question is what kind of responsibility we assume in this scenario and, accordingly, how we respond to such a gaze that is locked onto us, that locks us in it and from which we are not released, unless we turn away.

This question of responsibility is at the core of this book. Its central objective, then, is to show how American poets since 1945 create post-apocalyptic scenarios that place themselves after and against the end and thus assume this particular kind of historical responsibility. They render the perspective of the angel in their work which thus does not turn away but finds a way of looking at and responding to historical catastrophe and lasting trauma. If this objective, no matter to how small a degree, is achieved, it is the accomplishment of many who devoted their support to this work. If this study in accord of its remaining flaws might falter on the way, its failure rests solely with me.

My first thanks I would like to extend to my first supervisor, Prof. Dr. Ansgar Nünning. Initially, his work on memory and literature has opened the field for me with an astounding clarity and was a point of departure for pursuing such an obscure notion as remembering (after) the end in poetry. He also had me think of the PhD thesis as a book which helped to sustain it in many moments when the work had the shape of anything but. Equally I would like to thank my second supervisor, Prof. Dr. Oliver Scheiding. In his work on contemporary poetry and on American millennialism as well as in discussions that simultaneously inspired me and challenged my way of thinking, he provided important insight for this project. I would also like to thank the members of the International PhD Program "Literary and Cultural Studies" at Giessen University for their advice, feedback and encouragement in various discussions, and the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture for enabling me to present my work on various conferences and summer schools.

This book has had support by various scholars working in the field of the (post-)apocalyptic. Dr. James Berger talked to me about my work and read through it, raising issues which would strengthen my resolve to fully pursue what finally turned out to be the core questions of my study. Similarly, I find a number of important points to be indebted to the conversation I had with Dr. Josef Pesch at an early stage. As part of a lecture by Prof. Dr. Joachim Jacob on the apocalyptic in German literature I was able to present some results to a student body, which helped me to better grasp the comparative as well as the didactic dimension of the topic.

This study also had the fortune of finding readers whose insight and precise commentary helped to tighten its argument and clarify its writing. Prof. Dr. Greta Olson encouraged me to push straight ahead, and reminded me that complex thought does not require complex syntax. Jutta Weingarten and Mirjam Horn have devoted much time to ensure clear argument and correct form, and raised important issues for incorporation, and Rose Lawson made sure that the language of this thesis is actually English. Before publication, Tim Lanzendörfer was a very severe and therefore very helpful reader. My gratitude and great appreciation goes out to all of them. I would also like to thank the editorial team at WVT and Mainz University for their support and shaping the book into its final form.

Friends and colleagues have offered me great support over the years that this book was in the making, either in conversation or writing, over phone or coffee, in Freiburg or Giessen, Luxemburg or Kassel, and I want to extend a thank you to all of them. I want to take special note of Simon Cooke, in this respect, whose work accompanies my own in striking ways; his original and generous thought has entered this book in ways that cannot be accounted for in detail, and many nights have been spent wondering at the strange correspondences between late twentieth-century writing about traveling the world and considering its end. I also want to express my thanks to my late father, my mother and my brother who have supported me on my way in every way and shown interest and pride in my obsession with writing on dark themes, of which the end of the world and its aftermath is only the most recent example.

The final words of thanks are always the most important ones, which is generally true and possibly especially so in a book about the end. For this reason I can devote them to nobody else but my wife Ute. Not only has she been a source of unwavering support, encouragement and inspiration for this project which sometimes seemed unable to find its own end. More importantly, she reminded me every day, even in the days when I could not see much else, that this book was not everything, and that there is a lot out there which this book is not about. This, again, might be the only way any book can be written, but maybe especially so concerning a book about overwhelming loss and its lasting remains. It is through her that I realize that there are things which simply begin again and again without ever ending.

This book is in memory of my father. It is dedicated to my wife and our daughter.



# Following the End: American Poetry and the Late Twentieth-Century Post-Apocalyptic

Tell me what you see vanishing and I  
Will tell you who you are

(W. S. Merwin, "For Now," *The Moving Target* 74)

Thinking the end of the world at the beginning of the twenty-first century inevitably entails processes of remembering and revising. Our imagination of such a final event induces us to remember past catastrophes whose impacts have been regarded as world shattering and, subsequently, force us to revise the notion of 'The End' as being final and giving way to something absolutely new. Remembering and revising the end in that way, however, does not mean belittling its meaning. Instead, the end still figures as a powerful concept for making sense of the world, and on a personal level our relation to the end defines us throughout our lives in many ways. The experience of endings – the death of close relatives, the end of relationships, the departure from one's home – become markers of importance in our continuous time line, at the same time moments of loss as well as initiation.

Beyond that personal dimension, acts of periodization on a larger scale let us conceive of history in terms of endings and beginnings. In most historical accounts the first and the second half of the twentieth century are divided by World War II, and narratives of more recent history see the initial event of the twenty-first century as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. While keeping in mind their differences, these two historical catastrophes act as cultural caesuras that shape our understanding of the end. They belong to the order of events that have the power to shatter old structures and ways of understanding, form new structures in their wake and raise new issues. As a result of the upheaval they cause, the world afterwards seems no longer to be the same as before.

Whether we have lived through them or were born after them, world-altering events and their repercussions contribute to our self-perception and positions as subjects in history. Faced with their consequences, and part of the cultures of remembering (or forgetting) that follow in their wake, we are characterized by the catastrophes that have occurred in our lifetime and also those that have preceded us. In that sense, these processes of destruction, even though they might not happen to us, still implicate us: We are connected to what is already gone, or to what is vanishing before our eyes.

American poets from the mid-twentieth century to the beginning of the twenty-first have responded in varying ways to what they saw vanishing, responses that tell us a lot about how American poetry engages traumatic histories, catastrophic ruptures as well as their lasting reverberations in the late twentieth century. One example for this poetic engagement with history is W. S. Merwin's

“For Now,” whose title refers to a feeling of uncertainty as to whether another moment will follow the current one while also gesturing toward its own historical moment, characterized by loss and its aftermath. Written twenty years after the end of the Second World War, the poem belongs to a time of rising Holocaust awareness, partly due to the Eichmann trial, and to a period in which the threat of nuclear annihilation was brought to a head by the Cuban Missile Crisis. The 1960s, then, were still very much overshadowed by the violent ‘vanishings’ of Auschwitz and Hiroshima. Additionally, “For Now” stands at the beginning of a decade that brought the United States much trauma and turbulence: the assassinations of J. F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the Vietnam War, the ‘Bay of Pigs,’ the social upheavals of the civil rights movement, the fear of the nation’s collapse under internal tensions, and, carrying over from the 1950s, Cold-War anxiety. With the formation of a New Left, and a strongly pronounced cultural conflict between the generations, the decade was charged with apocalyptic portent. It was imagined by Barry McGuire as “The Eve of Destruction” (1965) and alternatively in socio-political visions as a utopia of new freedoms.

With visions of the end assuming cultural prominence, the 1960s also mark a time in which a post-apocalyptic imagination, already emerging after 1945, began to develop more fully in the United States. Among the first to notice this development in American poetry, Harvey Gross wrote on Merwin’s poems of the time that they “delineate the eerie quality of behavior and feeling in a post-apocalyptic world: after the end but before another beginning” (Gross 101). He goes on to state: “The world at the end of history is a dead world” (101-102). A quarter of a century later, Nora Mitchell and Emily Skoler make a similar statement on the nature of the worldview expressed in poetry as they comment on the late-twentieth century elegiac mode in the poetry of Carolyn Forché and others: “They are writing as if they were already dead, riding a dead planet, occupying a dead place” (69). While historical circumstances and formal characteristics place them far apart, Merwin’s picturing a “dead world” in the socially turbulent 1960s and Carolyn Forché’s living on a “dead planet” in the post-Cold-War 1990s go to demonstrate how these poets share a preoccupation with disturbing and destructive histories by imagining the world as if already destroyed by these histories, carrying their traces, hovering on after the end.

Spanning in their respective oeuvres over 50 years, W. S. Merwin and Carolyn Forché open up the perspective on a number of poets since the 1950s who have imagined scenarios after the end as an expression of a post-apocalyptic sensibility regarding their present historical moment. Their post-apocalyptic poetry represents as well as contributes to an image of the late twentieth century as being characterized by a sense of the aftermath and lasting traces of historical violence.<sup>1</sup> Bracketing the second half of the twentieth century by the histori-

<sup>1</sup> Poetry written after 9/11 is not included in this discussion, as an event bearing characteristics of a national trauma with major consequences worldwide has an impact on the post-apocalyptic imagination asking for a consideration in its own right.