



Peter  
Sloterdijk

After  
God

# AFTER GOD



# Peter Sloterdijk

## After God

Translated by Ian Alexander Moore

polity

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# Translator's Note

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# 1

## TWILIGHT OF THE GODS

“Every world of gods is followed by a  
twilight of the gods”\*

Rest now, rest, you god!

Richard Wagner, *Die Götterdämmerung*

### I

The intelligentsia of our culturally forgetful days still remembers, partially, that the Greeks of the classical era used the term “mortals” to refer to human beings. Human beings bore this name because they were conceived of as earthly counterparts of the gods, who were called immortals. Immortality was in fact the only eminent feature of the Greek gods. Their behavior hardly differed from that of humans, with their all-too-humanness.

A century ago, amid the convulsions of World War I, Paul Valéry extended the attribute of mortality to high cultures. We should now know, he assured us, that even the great collective constructs (*nous autres, civilisations*), those integrated by language, law, and the division of labor, are mortal. We should regard it as a happy accident if this immense statement has left behind a trace here and there, in the memory of a culture that bears the old European stamp. “We civilizations” are indeed mortal and, after everything that had happened, we should have taken note of this. No longer should mortality be predicated only of Socrates and his ilk. The term leaves the domain of syllogistic exercises and inundates a

\* Gotthard Günther, “Seele und Maschine,” in Gotthard Günther, *Beiträge zur Grundlegung einer operationsfähigen Dialektik*, vol. 1 (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1976), p. 79.

continent that does not grasp its Great War. Mortality acquires this new valence not only from the fact that, within four years, more than nine million men were sent to their deaths. What is decisive is that the countless fallen soldiers and civilian casualties seemed to result from the internal tensions of the cultural events themselves. What are cultural nations, and what do civilizations amount to, if they allow such an excess of casualties and self-sacrifices, indeed not only allow it but provoke it from their ownmost [*eigensten*] impulses? What does this mass consumption of life say about the spirit of the industrial age? What could this unparalleled recklessness toward individual existence possibly mean? When applied to civilizations, the word “mortality” also hints at the possibility of suicide.

The shock to which Valéry’s note bore witness reached deeper than his contemporaries could have known. For once, our insight that civilizations could fall was not relegated to distant worlds such as Nineveh, Babylon, or Carthage. It now applied to great civilizations close at hand: France, England, Russia ... These were names that, until yesterday, still resonated with us. They were spoken of as though they were metaphysical universals in the form of peoples. They stood for the supertemporal stability that used to be attributed to clans and to their associations into peoples. Since time immemorial, clans were ruled by the law of ancestry. They embodied the duration that flows through the generations, no matter how much individuals come and go. Valéry: “And now we see that the abyss of history is big enough for all.”<sup>1</sup>

The twilight of civilization begins at the moment when the inhabitants of the great cultural enclosures suspect that even the most established human systems of the present have not been built for all eternity. They are subject to a fragility that also goes by the name “historicity.” Historicity means for civilizations what mortality means for individuals. In the philosophy of the twentieth century, this idea was applied to individuals under the description of “being toward death.” When related to cultures, it is called historical consciousness.

As a rule, members of the historically affected nations have ignored the idea that their historians are at the same time their thanatologists. *Ex officio*, thanatologists make the better theologians. Relying on a local point of departure, they leap ahead and assume God’s standpoint at the end of the world and at the end of life. As a rule, historians don’t realize that they are indirectly practicing the perspective of the end when they recall early beginnings.

From a divine perspective, history means nothing but the process of converting what has not yet been into what has been. Only when all being has entered into a state of having been has the “omnipotent

god”<sup>2</sup> of classical metaphysics reached its goal. Only when it is certain that nothing new will happen any more may God discard the initially intoxicating, but later on compromising attribute of “omnipotence”; this attribute had indeed become increasingly embarrassing and superfluous. At the actual end of history there is neither anything to create nor anything to preserve. Everything that is there for the sake of what ultimately will be. The dossier of creation is closed. The end God drapes himself in the robe of omnipotence. As soon as knowledge that has become complete is no longer confronted with new tasks on behalf of creativity (or of the “event”), God surveys the universe in its totality. He serenely looks straight through everything that was the case.

In the old European tradition, “apocalypse” designates this moment of looking through things in a comprehensive retrospection. In the strict sense, this means: uncovering all things from the perspective of the end. If everything is complete, everything becomes transparent. The so-called revelations that were available to mortal observers in certain high cultures in the guise of “holy texts” are like vistas into the static beyond that have been fixed at the halfway point. They testify to the fact that higher religions don’t work without rushing things.<sup>3</sup> Such pre-haste [*Vor-Eile*] is subject to the temporal schema of impatient faith: already now, but then all the more! Yet, as a rule, religious apocalypses do not deal with real “ultimate concerns.” They wallow in the depiction of tumults before the advent of the great tranquility.

Whoever accepts such messages as truths is able to imagine leaping ahead and partaking of the total view from the end of time. The spheres of such representations are called “worlds of faith.” They are created in order to bridge the gap between *nowness* [*Jetztzeit*] and eternity. The believer nevertheless remains subject to the law of being on her way, in the realm of the temporary [*im Vorläufigen*]. She knows she can catch up with God only by attaining the same ontological rank in death. This is the case for the ancient Indians as well as for old Europe, and for the domains of Islam no less.

There was a name for those groups of believers who were convinced they could achieve the apparently impossible task of catching up with God *media in vita* [in the midst of life]. They were called mystics. Thanks to their efforts, transcendence has not remained a completely empty word. These virtuosi of self-renunciation attempted to eschew every sort of separate life outside of God. In this way they devoted themselves to the idea that they had already entered into the beyond here, in this life. Indeed, to die means to give back one’s soul – as the French idiom *rendre l’âme* expresses it in such a metaphysically fitting way. Yet only when everything has in

fact died – whether in advance, or whether at the proper or improper time – will everything that was destined to exist be freed from the compulsion of becoming and of innovation. If we had to say in one sentence what classical metaphysics had in mind, it would be this: it wanted to convert the “world” into participants in the stasis of God’s omniscience. This end was served, among others, by the Stoic and Christian doctrines of providence (Greek *pronoia*, Latin *providentia*), which were supposed to secure for the future God’s exposed flanks.

\*

The modern world exists because this attempt at conversion failed. Included in modernity is anyone who rejects the idea of a complete emptying of the future into the past and votes for the inexhaustibility of the future, even if this vote excludes the possibility of an omniscient god who, “after all time,” bends back, in a comprehensive retrospective on creation.

The “world” – a word that, as Nietzsche knew better than anyone, was for a long time a “Christian insult”<sup>4</sup> – resisted the invitation to empty the future into total pastness, because it renounced the ontological precedence of the past. It offered resistance because, in its struggle with itself and through an autodidactic exertion of remarkable coherence, it had learned to give time its due. Ironically, this new attempt at a deeper understanding of time was carried out on European soil, of all things, the homeland of resolute stasis metaphysics and convulsive apocalypticism. In the philosophical thought of modernity, the fundamental openness of the future was appropriately grasped for the first time. At the intersection of will and representation, the world assumed the form of a project and undertaking. It is not the merchants and seafarers who are responsible for reforming the world into an ensemble of projects, but rather the thinkers who undid the metaphysical paralysis of the future. Thus figures such as Schelling, Hegel, Bergson, Heidegger, Bloch, and Günther, perhaps even Cusa, too, all assume prominent positions in the pantheon of “contemporary” philosophy. Above all others, it was these authors who put an end to the eviction of time and novelty from being. They burst the dead enclosures of ontology by placing time and the new at the heart of being.

## II

Ancient Greek mythology had, from afar, anticipated the revenge of time against eternity. It did so when it took the liberty of suggesting

that even the immortal gods must reckon with a disaster of a higher order. The Greeks called this power of destiny *moira*. It embodied an unspecified variable in the background of structural being. Working from the invisible realm, it allotted to all variables what was proper to them. It possessed complete power over the arrangements, the portions, the lots, the destinies. It “prevailed” as a power prior to power, as justice prior to justice, as destiny prior to destinies. It allowed the regime of the Olympians to come into being by effecting a division of powers at the level of the absolute; it demarcated each of the jurisdictions of the chief gods from one another. Hades is appointed ruler of the underworld, Poseidon ruler of what is covered by water, and Zeus ruler of the visible realm under the heavens. When each is allotted his portion from the whole, a decisive step has been taken in the civilizing of the gods.

Look how far removed we are, already at this stage, from the crude power monsters of the pre-Olympian forces, which always wished to dominate everything en bloc! We are still just as far removed from the god of the philosophers and his cyclothymic, now merciful now wrathful doppelganger, the god of theologians! Little is known, even today, about the damage that theologians caused when they elevated “the One” at the expense of “the many.” With their disastrous distinction between God and idols they gave rise to a theodicean epidemic that has still not died away. Didn’t Isaiah already deal with the gods of other peoples by depicting them as painted pieces of wood?<sup>5</sup> Didn’t Nietzsche remark, still in the tonality of monotheistic religious satire, that “[t]he world has more idols than realities”?<sup>6</sup> After the One had pushed the others to the margins, the gods faded into the twilight of exile. The appointed theologians nevertheless continue to believe that they have done the world the greatest service by making a large portion of humanity dependent on an intrinsically riven god, whose uniqueness was paid for by the cleverly masked incompatibility of his highest attributes.

In their supremacist zeal, the religious theologians had insisted on garbing God with the most radiant attributes: omnipotence and omniscience.<sup>7</sup> They did not consider that their simultaneous proclamation of these attributes implanted a real and highly explosive contradiction into the Highest. Either God is omnipotent, in which case his creative will is always free to introduce novelty and can be mirrored by his knowledge only after the fact; or he is omniscient, in which case he must have used up all his creative power. Only in the latter case can he take an eternal holiday and look back on the universe of what has been.

Old European thought needed one and a half thousand years to detonate the contradiction concealed in the monotheistic concept of

God. The bursting of this contradiction, which had been disguised for so long, was for the most part misunderstood as the atheistic crisis of the modern age. In truth what happened was that power and knowledge, both the higher and the lower forms, were interwoven and reconfigured. However, while the younger theologians, the Protestants above all, embraced modernity's openness toward the future and, more or less tacitly, reconciled themselves to the loss of God's omnipotence,<sup>8</sup> contemporary Islam continues to make much ado about Allah's omnipotence. Yet, because even Allah has long since become incapable of novelty and remains fixed in his past as creator, he can allow his allegedly still virulent omnipotence to be proven exclusively through the will to obliterate unrighteous creatures.<sup>9</sup> The young murderers and suicides who break out into open jihad have grasped without any theology to what extent a god like Allah cuts an impossible figure as soon as he is observed against the backdrop of a modern world – that is, a world that has been rendered dynamic by *human* creativity. Nota bene: the fact that all human beings sooner or later die may be chalked up to nature or fatality, far from any idea of God. Yet the fact that individual mortals engage in premature obliteration and that the obliterators often sacrifice themselves in the process, in a dull and heroic sort of way, is now, in all seriousness, supposed to show evidence of the spirit and power of Allah. The young fanatics do not suspect how much they, through their actions, stand proof of the sterility of a decrepit theological culture. It will be a while before more people realize that the terror practiced by Islamists against the “unfaithful” within and outside the “house of Islam” is a demonstration of how the twilight of Allah is enacted. Assassinations are wayward proofs of a god who no longer understands the world.

The unresolved question of creativity stands at the center of the theological crisis of Islam. It is at once a question about technology and a question about the right to make images. The problem cannot be solved by means of the Qur'an. The Islamic nations, in total, do in fact take part in the creativity of modernity, especially in its advanced technological accomplishments, but so far only from the standpoint of the user. They have not proceeded to the level of “technological existence.”<sup>10</sup> They do not produce what they use; they do not generate what they take by the hand. They have neither accepted the principle of *translatio creativitatis* [transfer of creativity]<sup>11</sup> nor grasped it as the task of our times.

\*

It would be an exaggeration to say that, in the implicit theology of Greek mythology, there is an underlying premonition of what other

mythological traditions called a “twilight of the gods.” *Moirai*, after all, implies the thought of a regime that grants gods their “constitution.” (Rousseau’s claim that a nation of gods would inevitably govern itself democratically is metaphysically ignorant; for, to judge by everything we know about the gods, they tend to pick out a sovereign on the spur of the moment.) *Moirai* says nothing about a possible end of the immortals.

Nevertheless, in some of the dramas about the titan Prometheus attributed to the poet Aeschylus, we can glimpse the anticipation of a post-Olympian state of affairs. By virtue of his farsighted intelligence, Prometheus is thought to have looked beyond the regime of Zeus. Legend has it that he offered to share his menacing visions with Zeus if the latter would free him from his eternal torment on the rock in the Caucasus. Zeus – obviously quite far from being omniscient when it came to his own affairs – is supposed to have entered into the deal and “unbound” Prometheus. He did this in order to find out whether a virtual son of his could threaten him with the same fate that he had prepared for his own father Cronus when he, Zeus, emasculated him while Cronus was having sex with Gaia. Zeus subsequently refrained from producing a son capable of imitating his father. He relinquished the spicy nymph who was standing by as the possible mother of his murderer.

Up to this point, the premonitions of unrest in the houses of the gods remain confined to dynastic phase changes. Without further ado, the Greeks of the classical centuries could imagine a palace coup in the Olympian realm; a twilight of the gods in the Indo-Germanic or Nordic style is foreign to their temperament. The Stoic doctrine of *ekpurōsis* (world conflagration) is a later exoticism imported from the Middle East.

Germanic mythology gives us more fecund material for approaching the question of the sort of event that the “twilight of the gods” is. Admittedly, up to the present day scholars have had various reasons to debate whether the poets of the gods in Old Norse had already thought up the idea of a consuming fire at the end of times independently, or whether it was exposure to Christian apocalypticism that gave them an understanding of what it means to take an interest in downfall.

Let us remember that the idea of *Ragnarök* – a word sometimes translated as “the end of the world” and sometimes as “twilight of the gods” – was ushered in at a time of genealogical deregulations. In the wake of these deregulations, brothers strike one another dead, fathers strangle their sons, and parents sexually abuse their offspring. Something similar happens at the cosmological level. The giant wolf Fenris swallows the sun and moon, and the stars vanish.



After a winter of a thousand days when the summer can no longer fulfill its task of separating one winter from next, the earth shakes, mountains topple, the ocean floods the mainland, the world tree trembles, and everything alive is filled with dread. In the final battle between the Muspelheim gods and the archaic monsters, Thor dies from the poison of the giant snake he kills, while the wolf swallows Odin. The battle comes under the law of an almost certain mutual annihilation. Finally, Surtr (“the Black,” Vulcan’s Scandinavian counterpart) sets the world aflame and burns down everything that exists. The only survivors to emerge from the inferno are a few gods and a human couple. It will be their task to establish a new cycle of life.

There is no reason here to delve into analogies between *Ragnarök* and the *Mahabharata* or the Apocalypse of John. Nor are we worried whether the word *Götterdämmerung* [twilight of the gods] is a correct translation of *Ragnarök*. According to the scholarly literature, *Ragnarök* covers a wide range of meanings, which extend from “death of the gods” to “renewal of divine forces.” Even Richard Wagner appears not to have been entirely convinced of the adequacy of the expression. According to a report by Cosima,<sup>12</sup> while he was working on the fourth part of *The Ring of the Nibelung*, he played with the idea of calling the piece *Göttergericht* [*Court of the gods*], “for Brünnhilde holds court over them” (i.e. the gods). Thus at issue for the composer who inaugurated the renaissance of the “twilight of the gods” motif<sup>13</sup> was not so much a myth of downfall in Nordic garb as the corrective to an ethical mistake that had long ago woven itself into the fabric of the world. His *Götterdämmerung* is a moral drama of purification; it is not intended as a phenomenology of spirit for the stage. It recognizes no original sin – just an original mistake. There is ingenious symbolism in the fact that the logs from the fallen world tree make Wagner’s location for the gods, Valhalla, go up in flames. The finale of the stage performance exceeds all proportions. It is as though the profane fragmentation of the world’s organism into pieces of wood were the spiritual and material cause for the dying down of the gods.

The twilight of the gods on stage reveals a marked pessimism. Wagner’s libretto puts up with the fact that the old gods have become metaphysically worn out. Seen from a cultural perspective, even Brünnhilde’s sublime suicide is no more valuable than Emma Bovary’s. A certain anarchic vandalism has the last word. There is no talk of a new cycle of creation. The “estrus of downfall”<sup>14</sup> seizes everything. The reasons for this cannot be found in the work of art itself.

### III

We can invoke Richard Wagner's contribution to the portrayal of the agony of the gods as evidence of the fact that the freedom of the will migrated to the domain of art some time ago. In today's turbulent world, the human being can experience a trace of freedom, that is, an openness toward what is to come, only by drawing on his "own" creative potential – and on that of his companions who share in the same fate. There is an epochal significance in the immigration of creativity to the realms of art and technology. Without this immigration, the word "modernity" would be mere sound and fury. The first thinker of Europe, Giambattista Vico, conceptualized this movement by distinguishing the age of the gods from the epoch of heroes and from that of human beings. This sequence can be rewritten as a progressive incarnation. Where there were gods, human beings should come to be. Where there are human beings, artificiality increases.

Wagner's work is so philosophically remarkable because it brings these three spheres very close to one another. It evokes a demanding near simultaneity of gods, heroes, and human beings. Wagner's meditation on the power of time can be seen in how he presents the heroes after the gods and the human beings after the heroes – without offering any further justification for this sequence. Wagner's new mythology is a hermeneutics of fate. It purports to make us understand by means of pure presentation. Matters of fate can only be shown, not explained. Fate refers to what happens without allowing any questions as to why.

From the perspective of philosophy, Wagner is not just chronologically situated between Hegel and Heidegger. As a reader of Feuerbach, he knows that human beings have an innate god-making ability. As a reader of Schopenhauer, he understands that action incurs debt from blind will. As a reader of Bakunin, it is clear to him that whoever wants something new must lay his torch on what is flammable, that is, on what the critical spirits call the "existent." No purification without passing through the fire. No phoenix without ashes.

The *Götterdämmerung* constitutes evidence of Wagner's insight that the old set of gods has become obsolete. They "are able only to watch this ending approach and do nothing to prevent it."<sup>15</sup> At the same time, Wagner's speculations only provide an indirect contribution to our understanding of the process that, with regard to ontology, can be called *translatio creativitatis* [transfer of creativity]. This expression refers to the fact that it is not only God who is a

creator; nature and human beings have creative qualities too. There are obviously a multiplicity of creativities and a multiplicity of reflexivities in the world that a divine authority cannot reclaim, let alone monopolize. The earth is a place of polyvalent intelligence. It forms the only known point in the universe where one can really say: there is thinking, in manifold ways.

From a philosophical perspective, what mythological discourse called the “twilight of the gods” amounts to nothing but the symbolic condensation of the consequences that result from the thesis that there is thinking. Precise thinking establishes a new reality. Descartes’s fallacy consisted in reclaiming thinking for his ego. Yet the ego is nothing but the place in which we first take note of the discovery that there is thinking. The fact that an ego ascribes its thinking and what is thought to itself is secondary. Descartes’ primary thought that, when I think, I thereby certainly am, turns out to be sterile from the beginning. The cogito builds an unshakable foundation without any structure on top of it. Every substantially fruitful thought belongs to the sphere of the “there is thinking” – or in any case to the sphere of the “there is thinking in me.” (Parenthetically: Fichte’s greatness comes from the fact that in his late work he emphasized the “there is” in the ego. If we are to think, we do need an ego first, but behind the ego that I immediately know – because I am the one who posited it – there is another ego rearing up; I do not know this latter ego, which uses me as its eye, as it were. This unknown ego that looks through me is called God. God is the will to substance, the will to non-sterility, the will to non-exhaustion in empty self-relation, in short, the will to world.)

Mythological aids are not sufficient for grasping the phenomenon of the “twilight of the gods.” Yet the word “twilight” does correctly indicate that God and gods don’t die, but instead fade away. This happens whether a brighter light consumes their own light or whether obfuscation makes them invisible. Lessing’s parable of the ring in *Nathan the Wise* (1779) – which he borrowed from Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (1356) – marks one stage in the process of their fading away. After it an aura of amiable undecidability surrounds the god of the once sharply contoured monotheisms.

Fading away as such need not be fatal.<sup>16</sup> As the present shows, a god can recover from pallor when the times are favorable, even if the color he or she regains is for the most part questionable. Fading away is essentially irreversible because modern civilization has produced so much artificial light with its art, its science, its technology, and its medicine that God’s light seems faint in comparison. One can only let it shine on Sundays and holidays by turning off the machines of artificial light.

This last point can best be explained by turning back to the thanatology of classical metaphysics. According to old Europe's authoritative story of creation, it was divine breath that lent human beings their feeling and reflecting soul. As long as the soul preserves its community with the body, the human being is still alive – or, as the German language puts it so profoundly, the human being is still *am Leben*. In the universe of Genesis, the pinnacle of reflection is located in divine intelligence, which can do what it wills and wills what it knows. (This is the case in most creation myths that are acquainted with a demiurge, a maker,<sup>17</sup> a first author.) Individual human intelligences are loans that have been portioned out from the stock of the total intelligence. These gifts are repaid to the creator upon the death of the creature. The myth of the Last Judgment suggests the logic of a loan agreement: when the soul that has been borrowed is taken back, there is an examination of whether the refund is whole and sound. If it is not, the lender enacts his revenge on the dead ones who bring their souls back damaged, defaced, and darkened.

It is obvious that the classical model of transactions between God, the soul, and the world does not allow any other intelligent being to enter the world. Nor does this seem necessary to allow it, since God has drawn from his unsurpassable abundance and given to creation or nature as much order as they need for their existence. Not even the intelligently animated human being can arrange the world any more cleverly than it is as he finds it to be according to its primordial arrangement. For this reason, it is not uncommon for him to feel that the world is an “external world.” He is its guest, not one who should change it. Within this metaphysical model, the reflexive communication plays out only between God and the human being. The one who bestows intelligence brings souls into being and grants them enough revelation to lead them to believe in him; for the rest, human beings live “in their time,” after which they give back their animated intelligence, at death's door. Once again we recall the subtle turn of phrase in French: *rendre l'âme*. The Protestant hymn knows this too, in its own way: the world is not my “proper home.”<sup>18</sup>

The suggestiveness of these ideas may remain unaffected. Yet one cannot fail to recognize that they, too, breathe the spirit of a sublime sterility. This spirit gives the events of the world and creation the form of a zero-sum game. In this respect God gains nothing in the end. Human beings, by contrast, risk damnation if they have lived in a problematic fashion. An influx of intelligence into the world is unthinkable on the classical model of communication between God and souls. Under these circumstances, Post-Babylonian humanity,

which has been dispersed into different cultures, can do no more than produce sufficiently similar offspring.

At this point modernity raises its objection to classical metaphysics. Owing to the matter under discussion, this objection must take the form of an alternative interpretation of death. One cannot rule out the possibility that the human being “gives the soul back” upon death. Yet it no longer corresponds to the experience of symbolically and technologically active human beings in higher civilizations to assume that the world remains unaffected by the departure of an intelligent soul from it.

Indeed, wherever one looks, one sees that human beings have been active as god-making animals. Yet as soon as they invested in their god creations, their god-making frenzy revealed them to be the sort of animal that raises monuments. In high cultures, they act as producers who fill the “hall of memory” with material. They operate as collectors of sacred and profane memorabilia. They function as administrators of “cultural heritage” and as wardens of patrimonies. These observations can in no way be aligned with the basic idea of classical thanatology, namely that in death human beings give their soul back to God without any deductions. Rather it seems that, to the extent that they have become “creative,” humans have gained the ability to leave behind, in the world, something of their intelligent soul. They do, admittedly, give “themselves” back in death. Yet they also frequently create a “work” that is preserved in the world and can become the point of departure for further creations and for renewable legacies.

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The phenomenon of the “twilight of the gods” thus has practically nothing to do with transcendent fatalities at the divine level. Rather it concerns only the relation between creative intelligences and the world. If we want to keep making use of the concept of fate, we could say that this concept pertains to the fact that higher cultures become beholden to the backlash of their creativity. The more they advance in accumulating artificial effects – and the more these effects succumb to the law of self-intensification (or, in cybernetic terminology, to positive feedback) – the more intensely can we notice culture’s overshadowing of nature, and the more relentlessly does the fading away of the divine side take place.

It is no accident that the pious have always suspected that large cities were hotbeds of atheism. And they were right to do so, for city dwellers have always been surrounded by proofs of the mind and of the power of purely human environment formations. Since the days

of the Tanakh (in Christian language, the Old Testament) the name “Babylon” has stood for the funfair of artificialities. This inevitably turns people’s attention away from the one thing that is necessary. The artificial environment of the city directs its inhabitants more toward themselves and toward the architectonic ambitions of their predecessors than toward the work of the gods or of God. The fact that metropolises such as Jerusalem, Rome, and Benares survived as holy cities proves only that certain priestly elites were able to mystify their cities as theaters of constructed proofs of God. In Chicago, Singapore, and Berlin, as well as in other urban agglomerations around the earth, such a maneuver would have failed beforehand.

If we wish to use terms from philosophy and cultural studies to interpret what is going on with the dynamic of the twilight of the gods, it will be necessary to revise the classic metaphysical image of giving back one’s soul. We need not infringe on the noble idea of the soul’s returning home to a transcendent source. However, it will be essential for us to rethink the figure of the testament or of the “legacy,” from the ground up. In the civilization of modernity, which is animated by creativism and where artificiality is raised to ever higher powers, we can no longer ignore the fact that human intelligence flows out into “works” or artifacts. And this is so even if, today as always, their creators succumb to mortality. (The secondary outflowing of mass culture into trash is another theme.)

In this respect, the necrologist is the key figure when it comes to understanding the process of civilization. When a creative type passes away, the agitated world pauses for a second and meditates on the conveyance of a work in progress<sup>19</sup> into the global archive. During this meditative second we are closer to the phenomenon of the twilight of the gods than we would otherwise be.

It was Hegel who, with his concept of “objective spirit,” first took note of the outflowing of intelligence into informed structures with relative stability. His concept was too laden with metaphysical presuppositions to be integrated into the vocabulary of the human sciences without suffering compromises. It was discreetly replaced by the noncommittal term “culture.” Yet, even in the often unbearably vague concept of culture, there is an unmistakable echo of the basic phenomenon: what is invariably at issue is the entrance of living reflexivity into objectivized and materialized structures, whether they be signs, rituals, institutions, or machines. As soon as they stand the test of time, they all take on the quality of a legacy or bequest that no longer presupposes the presence of the living originator. The thanatological significance of books, houses, artworks, administrative bodies, and machines can be seen in the fact that their “functioning” – as readability, as inhabitability, as usability,

as sustainability – has become detached from their originators and emancipated for a sort of independent life. The durable artifact often outlives its creator’s lifespan many times over. In time, the light of the legacies, taken together, outshines the idea of a transcendent originator and plunges beings as a whole into the artificial light of civilization. It was with good reason that Gotthard Günther spoke of the “historical frenzy of high cultures.”<sup>20</sup> It arises from evolutionary acceleration due to the combined effects of writing, schooling, technology, art, empire building, archives, and askesis.

Historians of ideas have designated the seventeenth century as the key period of burgeoning modernity, because ever since then it has not been just individual, unconnected inventions that have caught sight of the light of the world. This period was epoch-making because it was in this period that invention was invented as the universal method of innovation. The engineer is an invention of the seventeenth century – even if his name already appeared two centuries earlier, at the same time as that of the virtuoso. It was at that time that the evening twilight of God stirred the morning twilight of human creativity. In the following three centuries, this changed the world more starkly than millions of years of natural evolution could have done.

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In order to understand the present as a time of growing complexities and intricacies, we must gain insight into the proliferation of twilights. At issue now is no longer merely this or that twilight of the gods, which gave mythologists, theologians, and artists pause. If twilights of the gods follow from the very dynamics of cultures of invention, it stands to reason that future twilights won’t stop at the mysteries of the human power of invention either.

Since the early twentieth century we have been able to recognize how an earthly twilight of souls has overlain the metaphysical twilight of the gods. There is a certain consistency here, insofar as God and the soul formed a pair in classical metaphysics. The fading away of one authority cannot be easily conceived without the fading away of the other. The arrival of depth psychologies around 1800, of Viennese psychoanalysis around 1900, and the sublation of both in the neuro-cognitive sciences around the year 2000 are unmistakable signs of this occurrence.

Consistent with this twilight of souls is a concomitant twilight of intelligence. In the course of the latter, numerous accomplishments of the human mind are increasingly transferred to the “second machine” – to use a term that Gotthard Günther coined



in 1952 (in a commentary on Isaac Asimov's novel *I, Robot*). In the processual universe of the second machines, the remainder of the old Indo-European concepts of the soul become secularized.

In view of this evidently inexorable event, the question arises, what remains of the eternal light of the soul once the artificial lights have been turned on? What remains of it after the soul has ceded a good part of its former luminosity to the more and more clever artifacts of the world, to computerized objects? The first machine empowered the soul; the second forces it to question itself.

Must we really entertain the suggestion that the inventors of artificial intelligence had thrust themselves into the vacant position of God the maker? But then shouldn't they have followed God's lead and banked on the resistance of their creatures? Is there an original sin for machines? Should machines believe in their humans, or will we have an ahumanism of robots?

What should we say to the antimodernist hysteria that has been blazing for centuries, now that it alleges that the human being would like to "become like God"? And if the answer were that, according to basic Christian doctrine, God wanted to become human, should anyone be surprised then that humans' certainty of their distinguished provenance from a maker leads them to want to become a second machine?

We cannot foresee the consequences of this ever faster emptying out of human reflections into machine reflections. Countermovements make their stand against it. Dams are built to resist the floods of externalized intelligence. To speak in traditionalist terminology: we no longer live merely in the midst of the first *analogia entis*, between God and human being, but also with the second one, between human being and higher machine. Being is intrinsically constituted as a scale of powers and intelligences. Not a few of the shrewdest among our intellectually virulent contemporaries – here I will name Hawking and Harari, but many more are worth mentioning – express their spiritual worries by envisioning humans as taken over by their digital golems.

Perhaps the distinction between God and idols will soon reemerge here for the citizens of modernity – but this time in a technological and political register. For them, theological enlightenment – which is completely different from an instinctive rejection of religion – will be a fateful task.

For the time being, let me leave the last word to the thinker who reflected on the phenomenon of artificial intelligence earlier and more incisively than all of our contemporaries. At the end of his 1956 essay *Seele und Maschine* [*Soul and Machine*] (1956), Gotthard Günther writes:



The critics who lament that the machine “robs” us of our soul are mistaken. There is a more intensive interiority that lights up on a deeper level. With a sovereign gesture, this interiority thrusts away its forms of reflection that have become indifferent and reduced to mere mechanisms, in order to affirm itself in a more profound spirituality. And the doctrine of this historical process? However much of its reflection the subject cedes to mechanism, it only becomes richer. For it thereby acquires ever-new powers of reflection from an inexhaustible and bottomless interiority.<sup>21</sup>

## IS THE WORLD AFFIRMABLE?

### On the Transformation of the Basic Mood in the Religiosity of Modernity, with Special Reference to Martin Luther

#### 2.1 The eccentric accentuation

“The rays of the sun drive out the night, / The surreptitious power of hypocrites annihilate.” This celebratory, incontestable declaration by the priest-king Zarastro, with which Mozart’s opera *The Magic Flute* (first performed in September 1791) ends, condenses the two primary motifs of the theological and political Enlightenment into a compact threat. Whenever the Enlightenment takes the stage, whether it is inspired in a rational–religious fashion or filled with the pathos of a movement of liberation, it undertakes to expel the despotism that is allied with “the night” and to unmask the systems of established hypocrisy. The protagonist in this drama can be none other than the sun itself.

Schikaneder’s childish, folksy Enlightenment did not do a bad job of striking the critical nerve in the psycho-political construction of the ancien régime. Since time immemorial, a problem of constitutional hypocrisy has indeed accompanied the alliance between throne and altar in the monarchies of old Europe, supported as they were by clerical power. Its reflections entered into the popular image of the medieval church; they are just as inseparable from it as is the old, tacit conviction of humbler people that hardly one of the greats of the world can be trusted. From the late Middle Ages on, the hypocritical priest and the dissolute monk functioned as standard figures of popular realism. Starting in the sixteenth century, the consultant to the prince, the trickster who teaches deception in order to prevent his listeners from falling prey to it themselves, was added to their number. In the literature of the baroque period, worldly wisdom and masked existence closed ranks