

I Through a Glass Darkly: Time, the End, and the Essence of *Apocalyptic*

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I have been a die-hard fan of the band Blue Öyster Cult since a friend loaned me a copy of *The Revolution by Night* in the seventh grade. Donald Roeser (a.k.a. Buck Dharma) is, in my opinion, one of the most underrated guitarists in rock-and-roll history. Although many people might not recognize the name, they probably know his best-known song, “(Don’t Fear) the Reaper.” It was used in the original *Halloween* movie, and later—more prominently—during the opening credits of the television adaptation of Stephen King’s *The Stand*. It continues to enjoy steady rotation on classic rock radio, and experienced something of a renaissance at the turn of the millennium after being featured in the classic *Saturday Night Live* sketch “More Cowbell” starring Will Ferrell and Christopher Walken.

But hardly anyone still listens to the first track on that same 1976 album, *Agents of Fortune*. After an opening salvo of pick slides and ominous minor third alternations of A and C power chords, the lead singer Eric Bloom snarls:

This ain’t the garden of Eden
 There ain’t no angels above
 And things ain’t what they’re supposed to be
 And this ain’t the summer of love

And so perhaps I was destined to take an interest in apocalyptic literature.¹ Apocalyptic speculation is largely a response to scenarios—

¹ I use the term *apocalyptic* to refer to all phenomena—e.g., literature, visual art, music, film, philosophy—that are integrally informed by an apocalyptic worldview, defined by Lorenzo DiTommaso as “a fundamental cognitive orientation that makes axiomatic claims about space, time and human existence.” See Lorenzo DiTommaso, “Apocalypticism in Popular Culture,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*, ed. John J. Collins (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 474; and Lorenzo DiTommaso, “The Apocalyptic Other,” in *The “Other” in Second Temple Judaism: Essays in Honor of John J. Collins*, ed. Daniel C. Harlow, Karina Martin

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societal, cultural, political, environmental—that seem untenable and insurmountable, beyond human cognition and agency: the order of the world is not how it is supposed to be. Jewish and Christian apocalypses—the best-known example of which is the New Testament Book of Revelation—have captivated theologians, writers, artists of all types, and the general public for centuries. This corpus of literature has had a profound influence on world history from its initial production by persecuted Jews during the second century BCE to the birth of Christianity—Ernst Käsemann famously (and provocatively) declaimed that “apocalyptic was the mother of all Christian theology”²—through the demise of the Western Roman Empire and the medieval period, and continuing into modernity.³ Far from being an outlier concern, or an academic one that may be relegated to the dustbin of history, apocalyptic thinking is ubiquitous and continues to inform nearly all aspects of modern-day life. It addresses universal human concerns: the search for identity and belonging, speculation about the future, and (for some) a blueprint that provides meaning and structure to a seemingly chaotic world.

Joachim of Fiore—the Calabrian abbot, the *sine qua non* for the revival of apocalyptic thinking in the twelfth century—was inspired to take up a career as a writer and prophet by two visionary experiences he had when he was in his late forties.⁴ Like Joachim, I also came to the study of apocalyptic literature later in life, having spent most of my career as a classical guitarist and conductor, focused especially on the premiering of new works. Although I cannot claim to have labored “twelve years day and night,” as Thomas Malvenda did in composing his leviathan *Eleven Books on Antichrist*, published in 1604,⁵ this volume has been a few years in gestation, and so I have often mentioned

Hogan, Matthew Goff, and Joel S. Kaminsky (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 221–22.

² Ernst Käsemann, “The Beginnings of Christian Theology,” *Journal for Theology and the Church* 6 (1969): 40.

³ For a magisterial overview of what properly constitutes the apocalypse genre, and the societal and cultural matrix of its genesis, see John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 1–52.

⁴ Bernard McGinn, *The Calabrian Abbot: Joachim of Fiore in the History of Western Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1985), 22.

⁵ Thomas Malvenda, *De Antichristo: libri undecim* (Rome: C. Vullietus, 1604), author’s note to the reader. Quoted in Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 229.

to musical colleagues that I'm working on a book. Subsequent inquiry frequently leads to a nonplussed look and the question, "but why are you editing a volume on apocalyptic literature?" Why indeed. Well, studying apocalyptic literature and being a performing musician are both intimately concerned with time and the End.

I have always been fascinated with conceptions of the "end" in music, particularly the demise of tonality and metrical time in the Western classical tradition.⁶ Tonal music, after all, is teleological, that is, its *raison d'être* is dictated by its end result, in this case, the impetus to resolve the inherent dissonance in the binary construction of tonic and dominant.⁷ The eventual "ending" of tonality was largely set in motion by the composer Richard Wagner in the mid-nineteenth-century. In the opera *Tristan und Isolde*, based on the famous medieval story of forbidden love, longing, desire, and death, everything that unfolds is prescribed from the very beginning. Via the opening famous "Tristan chord," and the successive dominant seventh, a musical tension is immediately introduced, to which Wagner then maps the psychological, emotional, and sexual tension of the storyline. Through a variety of compositional techniques, Wagner prolongs this tension to the breaking point. Three acts and an astonishing four hours later, the music at last reaches a cataclysmic authentic cadence and resolution when Isolde—after singing out her broken heart in the final aria, the *Liebestod* (love/death)—collapses lifeless on the body of Tristan. The developments and implications that Wagner introduced could not be ignored by future generations of composers, especially Arnold Schoenberg.

Through the composition of his String Quartet no. 2, op. 10 (1907–08), Schoenberg posited that tonality might be no more. The turning point of the work occurs in the second movement, when the

⁶ Tonality is a system of musical organization wherein melody and harmony are derived from a central *tonic* pitch and scale. Gradually developed by practice over hundreds of years, it was fully realized during the seventeenth century and governed the composition of music in the Western classical tradition until the early twentieth century (and continues to do so for most popular genres today). "Metrical time" refers to recurring patterns of stresses or accents that provide a pulse or beat (usually in groups of two, three, or four).

⁷ Jeremy S. Begbie notes that many twentieth-century compositional techniques—especially the advent of non-tonal (or atonal) music—aimed towards a reversal of the dominant relationship between time and space, and that such works achieve a timelessness in music, thus moving beyond a purpose related to "the end." See *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), esp. 34, 141.

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thematic development abruptly ceases and gives way to a quotation of the popular Viennese folk tune “O du lieber Augustin.” According to the apocryphal tale, Augustin was an alcoholic musician who became so stupefied while making his rounds of the inns during the 1679 plague in Vienna that he was taken for dead and thrown into a mass grave for victims of the epidemic. Upon awakening the following morning, he climbed out of the pit and composed this tune with the refrain “O du lieber Augustin, Alles ist hin”—an ironic ode to life. Commentators have puzzled over this juxtaposition of a popular melody within a highly chromatic, contrapuntal texture. Is it a musical metaphor pointing to Schoenberg’s awareness that he had pushed tonality beyond the breaking point?

The appearance of Augustin represents a dramatic turning point that prepares for the expression, in the following two movements, of an epitaph for the world that has been lost, and the ecstatic expectancy of new worlds to come. In these final two movements, we bid adieu to any true functional tonality. Schoenberg adds a soprano voice, setting two poems from *Der siebente Ring* of Stefan George, whose remote and aristocratic ethos resulted in works that “created a mythic world of the imagination in which the poet often assumes the persona of a solitary pilgrim estranged from his true homeland of the spirit.”⁸ At the conclusion of the fourth movement, “Entrückung” (“Rapture”), which begins “Ich fühle Luft von anderem Planeten” (“I feel the air from another planet”), we do at last reach a final, eminently satisfying cadence. And yet, after this long traverse, the sense of homecoming is replaced by one of wistful, bittersweet nostalgia. We look back through a long, dark corridor to a dimly lighted room that is becoming enshrouded in mist, already fading from our perception.

The end of metrical time is addressed in Olivier Messiaen’s *Quartet for the End of Time*, an important and far-reaching work within the musical, political, and cultural history of the twentieth century. Written and premiered in a Nazi prison camp in 1941, it was directly inspired by Revelation 10, where the descending angel wrapped in a cloud and with a rainbow over his head announces that there will be “time no longer.”⁹ Messiaen stated that the lack of nourishment as a prisoner of war led him to dream in color and to see images of the

⁸ Bryan R. Simms, *The Atonal Music of Arnold Schoenberg, 1908–1923* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 29.

⁹ King James Version, although most English translations say there should be “no more delay.” The Greek word is *χρόνος*.

rainbow of the angel, an experience perhaps not unlike that of the visionaries who composed the ancient apocalyptic literature. The title *Quartet for the End of Time* primarily refers to the composer's engagement throughout his career with the aspect of rhythm in music. Messiaen explained that the "dual meaning of the title rests not with the notion of the interminability of captivity, but with the ... desire to eliminate conventional notions of musical time and of past and future."¹⁰ By using birdsong, Hindu rhythms, augmentation and diminution of note values, rhythmic palindromes, and often very slow tempi, Messiaen thwarted any sense of metrical regularity within the music, and declared that "time is no longer," inviting the listener to contemplate eternity.

I have also pondered the concept of time, particularly how it is perceived by a performer.¹¹ When I am on stage, I know that my experience of time is very different from that of the audience. There is nothing "normal" about performing music—a heightened mental awareness, the exacting kinesthetic demands on the motor apparatus, and a desire to elicit an emotional response quickening the entire setting. In addition, I often perform contemporary works that demand a finely articulated sense of temporality: my internal time-keeper is on overdrive, calibrating and executing more than one stream of rhythmic activity simultaneously. There is also a marked phenomenon of time compression, as what took dozens, or even hundreds, of hours in the rehearsal atelier burns "like a kind of musical lignite" in just a few minutes on the concert stage.¹²

This is my experience of living in what Gabriel Motzkin calls "abnormal time," a transcendent state that "can be experienced only at those rare moments when the normal, everyday world loses its meaning," thus making this kind of time more "authentic."¹³ Motzkin contends that a "change in the underlying temporal structure is presupposed in different conceptions of the apocalypse," that is, an

¹⁰ Rebecca Rischin, *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 52.

¹¹ Not much has been written about this, although there certainly has been significant research on the temporal perception of the *listener*. For a recent contribution see Richard Glover, Jennie Gottschalk, and Bryn Harrison, *Being Time: Case Studies in Musical Temporality* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019).

¹² Steven Schick, "Developing an Interpretive Context: Learning Brian Ferneyhough's 'Bone Alphabet,'" *Perspectives of New Music* 32, no. 1 (1994), 133.

¹³ Gabriel Motzkin, "Abnormal and Normal Time," in *Apocalyptic Time*, ed. Albert I. Baumgarten (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 203.

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"apocalyptic time."¹⁴ This is an analogue to my performative time. I'm experiencing, as Augustine called it, the *distentio animi*, the distension of the mind that refers to its stretching out in relation to past and future, a "three-fold present known in memory, attention, and expectation."¹⁵ I know where I am within the architecture of the piece, am calibrating what I am doing on the basis of what came before, and am always anticipating the end, regardless of how far off it is. This is the same for apocalyptic expectation: not only are we headed towards the future, but the future is also "reaching out to us in our anticipation of it."¹⁶ Apocalyptic literature is not just about what will happen in the future; it is also about the past, and—most importantly—about the here and now. Apocalyptic literature, like music, asks us to reflect not only on where we are going, but on where we currently are, as well as from where we have come.

In the concluding chapter of this volume, Lorenzo DiTommaso observes that the immediacy of apocalypticism has and is becoming more pervasive. Apocalyptic predictions, he writes, "have become more public, pervasive and participatory. The passport is Internet access. Where once apocalyptic revelation was transmitted from prophet or seer to prophetic community along restricted channels, now it can be broadcast across the entire social bandwidth. The prophet today has six billion faces, and that prophet is us." The apocalyptic mindset paints a picture of the world in sharp, binary contrasts: light against darkness, good vs. evil, God against Satan, "Us" vs. "Them"—themes that seem to resonate more loudly in the tenor of our time.

And yet apocalyptic literature is also about hope. As John Collins notes:

To be sure, the hope of salvation in another world, whether conceived as a new creation in the future or as a heavenly world of eternal life, is not without its problems, as it lends itself to displacement of human endeavor. But at the least we should give it credit for its indomitable hope, which is not always supported by rational analysis of human affairs, but may well be indispensable to human flourishing.

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¹⁴ Ibid., 209. See also Charles B. Strozier and Katharine Boyd, "The Psychology of Apocalypticism," in *The Apocalyptic Complex: Perspectives, Histories, Persistence*, ed. Nadia Al-Bagdadi, David Marno, and Matthias Riedl (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2018), 54–55.

¹⁵ Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, 78.

¹⁶ Motzkin, "Abnormal and Normal Time," 209.

John J. Collins is the preeminent authority on ancient apocalyptic literature. His overview “Apocalypticism as a Worldview in Ancient Judaism and Christianity” follows this chapter. The genre takes its name from the Apocalypse of John (or Book of Revelation), the last book of the New Testament. But it is important to understand that Revelation stands within a tradition of Jewish literature that includes the Book of Daniel in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, but also noncanonical works such as Fourth Ezra, Second Baruch, and various works attributed to the antediluvian sage Enoch. Although akin to prophecy, these texts differ from earlier prophetic works like Isaiah or Jeremiah in significant respects: they contain elaborate visual imagery, the revelation is mediated by a heavenly figure, and the visionaries themselves—with the exception of the author of Revelation—are typically pseudonymous, legendary figures from the past.

This phenomenon of apocalyptic literature did not arise in a cultural vacuum. Collins reminds us—as Hermann Gunkel affirmed at the end of the nineteenth century—that there is a great affinity between apocalyptic literature and Near Eastern combat and creation myths, notably the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* and the Canaanite Baal cycle. These affinities are useful when we seek to understand much of the symbolism found in Daniel and Revelation. The apocalyptic texts also reflect a worldview—apocalypticism—that concerns itself with an attempt to comprehend the totality of history (from creation to the coming eschaton), the role of supernatural beings in human affairs, and the nature of the heavenly and, sometimes, infernal realms. Apocalypticism is also deterministic; in other words, the course of events cannot be altered by human intervention: history has its own momentum. And it is dualistic: the grand scheme of history may be reduced to a conflict between two opposing principles, often characterized by “good” vs. “evil.”

Modern-day forms of apocalypticism may seem to promote polarization, intolerance, and extremism. Classical apocalypticism assumes “a situation characterized by anomie, a loss of ‘world,’ or erosion of structures, psychic and cultural.” And yet, as Collins contends, the classical apocalypses also contain a core of hope: hope that we live on in an immortal soul, or through resurrection, hope for the ultimate triumph of the good, and hope for a reunion with the divine at the end of history.

Next, Ian Paul lays out a thorough “Introduction to the Book of Revelation.” Revelation is a rich and complex work that constructs its theology “not only through its semantic content and metaphorical

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signification, but also through its structure and fabric." Its language and imagery draw extensively on both the Old Testament and contemporaneous Roman imperial cult practice, mythology, and propaganda. After noting the unique characteristics of Revelation in comparison with the general corpus of the genre, Paul discusses the composition, date, and authorship of the book, arguing that the text was written by a single author (as opposed to a composite work), who may or may not have been the apostle John. It was likely written during the reign of Domitian (ca. 95–96 CE), a dating based primarily on evidence *external* to the text. Paul then moves on to summarize the temporal and spatial aspects, noting that the narrative is disrupted by frequent use of anticipation and recapitulation. As he puts it, "the eschatological finale casts its shadow (or, perhaps better, casts its light) ahead of itself into the early narrative sections." Revelation is striking in its pervasive use of numerology, not only as an explicit structuring device—seven lampstands, seven assemblies, seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls—but also as words that occur with particular frequency, evidence that Revelation is a very carefully composed text. The author also makes use of the properties of "square" (144; 1,000), "triangular" (666), and "rectangular" (42, 1,260) numbers, and employs the technique of *gematria*—assigning a specific numerical value to each letter of the alphabet—to calculate the "number of the beast" in Rev 13:18.

Paul then explains the four historical stances of interpretation (idealist, futurist, church historical, and contemporary historical, or preterist) as well as dominant understandings of the controversial millennium of Rev 20: premillennial, amillennial, postmillennial, dispensational premillennial. He ends the chapter with a discussion of the salient theological themes in the book, concluding that "in the narrative world of Revelation, to become a follower of the Lamb is to enter into a sense of history as the story of God's faithful dealings with his people in the past, and the eschatological story of God's redemption and renewal of the whole of creation."

One common thread that weaves throughout this volume is the difficulty of defining and delimiting what properly constitutes "apocalyptic" literature within various geographical regions, language groups, and temporal epochs—a concern that continues to be addressed forty years after the publication of the seminal *Semeia* 14, the fruit of the Society of Biblical Literature group headed by John J. Collins. Addressing another notoriously difficult topic, "Gnostic literature," what he calls apocalyptic literature's "unruly cousin," Dylan M. Burns contributes a chapter entitled "The Gnostic Apocalypses." If we include texts

commonly called “revelation discourses” as “apocalypses without a heavenly journey,” we may count about twenty-five apocalypses with Gnostic features—nearly all of which are preserved in the collection found at Nag Hammadi in 1945—and these are some of the most fascinating examples in the corpus. Using two examples as case studies, the *Apocryphon (Secret Book) of John*—perhaps the best-known extant Gnostic work—and the *Apocalypse of Paul*, Burns investigates the questions of who wrote these apocalyptic texts, and the social dynamics behind them. The *Apocalypse of Paul* features a heavenly journey that highlights the fate of souls after death, whereas in the *Apocryphon of John*—exemplifying the complexity of the genre discussion—the “cosmic trip” is actually one into the human mind, the true heaven. These Gnostic apocalypses are also of great importance for our understanding of late antique philosophy and religion in their reception history, especially in the arenas of later Greek philosophy, Jewish mysticism, Coptic literature, and the formation of two new religions that emerged in late antiquity: Manichaeism and Islam.

In “Exegeting the Apocalypse with the Donatist Communion,” Jesse Hoover takes us to the “Bible Belt” of late antiquity to investigate the apocalyptic claims of the Donatists, an ecclesiastical community that, for a brief period of time, constituted the majority church in Roman North Africa—modern-day Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya. The Donatist position was defined by a question of ecclesiastical purity. During the Great Persecution of Diocletian (303–13 CE), many bishops and priests relinquished the Scriptures to be burned in order to appease the authorities. According to the Donatists, the prayers and sacraments administered by these *traditores* were no longer valid. Contrary to the views of many twentieth-century historians (following in the footsteps of Augustine), Hoover argues that the Donatists were not apocalyptic fanatics, and that their eschatology was more complex and nuanced than has been supposed. Although their position may be firmly situated within a fifth-century context—which, *contra* Augustine was replete with speculation about the imminent End of Days (see the chapter in this volume by Brian Duveck)—there are key divergences with other contemporary exegetes. Hoover discusses these differences, which include the number of the beast as 616 (a marker for Donatist exegetical texts and later authors dependent on them) and aspects of a “remnant ecclesiology . . . which posited that the hostility of the wider ecclesiastical world towards the Donatist cause constituted a fulfillment of prophecy.” Hoover concludes with a discussion of the “rogue” Donatist Tyconius, whose *Exposition of the Apocalypse* was a reaction against

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the rising popularity of this remnant ecclesiology, and which significantly influenced the early medieval commentary tradition in the West (for more on this, see Ann Matter's chapter).

Brian Duivick's "Tests of Faith, Rebirth out of Corruption, or Endless Cycles of Regeneration: Experiments in the Restoration of the Late Roman Empire" takes an historical approach, addressing societal and ecclesiastical concerns at the twilight of the Western Roman Empire, with particular examples of collapse in North Africa and southern Gaul. The barbarian incursions and critical military losses that Rome experienced in the late fourth and early fifth-centuries—including the devastating defeat at the Battle of Adrianople in 378 CE and the sack of Rome by the Visigoths under Alaric in 410—significantly destabilized Roman institutions and belief systems. The ensuing political, economic and religious crises began a "long process of socio-political transformation ... whose identity contemporary witnesses contested with a rich variety of traditional and innovative ideology and with a literary verve equal to the intensity of the times." Duivick discusses a variety of apocalyptic literature from the early fifth century—sermons, imperial biographies, and theological tracts, both Christian and pagan—including Augustine's *City of God*, his pupil Quodvultdeus's *Book of the Promises and Predictions of God*, Salvian of Marseilles's *On the Governance of God*, and other works by Paulus Orosius, Rutilius Namantianus, Peter Chrysologus, and the biographer of the *Historia Augusta*. Reacting to contemporary affairs, common threads in these works demonstrate a renewed imminence of catastrophe and divine judgment and a concern for moral reform as well as political and cosmic transformation and restoration, themes advanced in the papers collected in Matthew Gabriele and James T. Palmer's recent *Apocalypse and Reform from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages*.

When contemplating this volume, one of my first ideas for an essay was to approach E. Ann Matter (whom I had met at the "Through a Glass Darkly" symposium in 2016) with the idea of revisiting her seminal 1992 article on the early medieval commentary tradition in the Latin West, which to this day is the standard introduction to the topic.¹⁷ I believed that a revised and augmented version would be an invaluable contribution in light of the many new critical editions and

¹⁷ E. Ann Matter, "The Apocalypse in Early Medieval Exegesis," in *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, ed. Richard K. Emmerson and Bernard McGinn (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 38–50.