

Peter Sloterdijk

Nach Gott

After God

I Götterdämmerung

*“On all gods
the sun will set”¹*

Ruhe, ruhe, du Gott!
Richard Wagner, *Die Götterdämmerung*

I

That the Greeks of the classical era called humans “mortals” is still half-remembered by the educated even of our culturally forgetful time. Men bore this name as they were understood to be the earthly antagonists of the gods, who were called the immortals. Indeed, immortality alone was the distinguishing characteristic of the Greek gods: as far as their behaviour was concerned, there was little to differentiate it from humans and their all-too-humanity.

One hundred years ago, amidst the upheavals of the First World War, Paul Valéry extended the predicate “mortal” to high cultures, claiming that we now knew that even the great collective structures integrated by language, law and division of labour (*nous autres, civilisations*) were mortal. One is entitled to see it as felicitous if that immense proposition still leaves an engram here and there in minds moulded in the old European school. “We civilisations” truly are mortal, and after everything that had happened we ought to have acknowledged the fact. The predicate “mortal” is no longer the domain solely of Socrates and his peers. No longer a mere syllogistic exercise, it overwhelms a continent that cannot come to terms with its Great War. It was not just the more than nine million men sent to their deaths at the fronts in four years who imbued mortality with its new tone. Crucially, the

¹ Gotthard Günther, *Seele und Maschine*, 1955

nightmare statistics of war dead and civilian victims appeared to result from the internal tensions of the cultural process itself. What are nations of culture, and what meaning do civilisations have, if they permit such excesses of sacrifice and self-sacrifice, indeed not just permit but provoke through their innermost workings? What does this mass consumption of human life reveal about the spirit of the industrial age? What is the significance of this unheard of disregard for individual existence? In future the word “mortal”, applied to civilisations, echoes to suicidal options.

The shock Valéry’s memorandum bore witness to penetrated deeper than his contemporaries can have understood. For this time, awareness of the susceptibility of civilisations to decline and fall concerned not the distant worlds of Nineveh, Babylon, Carthage, but great powers one imagined one knew as a neighbour: France, England, Russia... even yesterday still names worthy of respect. They were spoken of as universals among the collective of peoples. They stood for timeless stability, a quality attributed from time immemorial to tribes and the nations they collectively formed. Since time immemorial, the tribes had been ruled by the law of origin. They embodied continuity, flowing through generations, however many individuals came and went. Valéry: “And now we see that the abyss of history is big enough for everybody.”²

The twilight of civilisation begins the moment the inhabitants of the great cultural superstructures start to suspect that even today’s sturdiest man-made systems aren’t built for eternity. They are subject to a fragility one also calls “historicity”. Historicity is to civilisations what mortality is to the individual. In the philosophy of the 20th century this was referred to in respect of the individual as being-toward-death; of cultures, historical consciousness.

As a rule, those belonging to historically driven nations are wont to dismiss the realisation that their historians are at the same time their thanatologists. By virtue of their office thanatologists are the superior theologians: they anticipate – based on a local starting point – God’s position at the end of life and the world. Historians are, as a rule, unaware that by recalling early beginnings, they are also indirectly rehearsing the view from the end of the universe.

From the divine perspective history is nothing other than the process through which the what-has-not-yet-been becomes the what-has-been. Only once all being has cumulated in been will the “all-knowing God”³ of the classical age of metaphysics be at his telos. Only once it is certain that nothing new will happen may God put the initially intoxicating, eventually compromising predicate “omnipotent” to one side – it had become increasingly embarrassing, after all, not to mention superfluous. At the real end of history there is nothing to create nor preserve. Everything that is, is there at the volition of what will be at the end. The case of creation will be closed. The End God wraps himself in the mantle of omniscience: as soon as knowledge, grown complete, ceases to be confronted with new

² “Nous autres, civilisations, nous savons maintenant que nous sommes mortelles ... Et nous voyons maintenant que l’abîme de l’histoire est assez grand pour tout le monde.” Paul Valéry, *La Crise de l’Esprit*, 1919

³ Cf. Raffaele Pettazzoni, *The All-Knowing God*, 1956

problems by creativity (or by “occurrences”), God surveys the universe in its totality. He sees unmoved through everything that ever was.

In the European tradition, the moment of perspective in all-encompassing hindsight was known as “apocalypse”. That means, in the strict sense: the revelation of all things *ab fine*. If everything is complete, everything will be transparent. The so-called “revelations” that mortal observers in some high cultures dispose of in the form of “holy scriptures” are, as it were, views – stranded halfway – of the static beyond. They testify that nothing happens in higher religions if not precipitately.⁴ Such overhaste is subject to the timeframe of impatient belief: right now, foreplay be damned! That said, the religious apocalypses deal as a rule not with the actual “Last Things”; they delight in depicting the tumults that precede the great stillness.

Whoever takes such messages at face value can persuade themselves of their anticipatory participation in total perception *ab fine*. The spheres of such ideas are “belief systems”. They are created in order to bridge the gap between the present and eternity. Nevertheless, the believer remains subject to the law of perpetual motion in the provisional. He knows that the only way he can draw level with God is to join him in ontological equality in death. This held for ancient India as it did for ancient Europe, nor any less for the domains of Islam.

Mystics were those groups of believers convinced they were capable of accomplishing the apparent mission impossible of catching up to God *media in vita*. It is thanks to their efforts that the word transcendence is more than an empty husk. These virtuosos of self-surrender attempted to forgo any separate life exterior to God. So they surrendered themselves to the concept of having already passed on to the beyond in the here and now. To die, of course, is, as the French put it so metaphysically aptly, to *rendre l'âme* – to give up the ghost. Yet only when everything is truly dead, be that ahead of time, be that in time or too late, will everything that was destined to exist be freed from the cycle of change and becoming. Were one to condense into one sentence the thinking of classical metaphysics, it would read: its aim was to convert the “world” to share in the stasis of God’s omniscience. Serving to achieve this were inter alia the Stoic and the Christian doctrines of providence (*pronoia, providentia*), which were designed to secure God’s open flank to the future.

There is a modern world because this attempted conversion failed. Modern can be counted anyone who rejects the idea of ceaseless drainage of the future into the past, and votes for the inexhaustibility of the future, even though this vote precludes the possibility of an all-knowing God. A God who “after all time” reflects on the Creation in comprehensive retrospective.

The “world” – and Nietzsche knew better than anyone else how long “world” had been a dirty word for Christians⁵ – withstood the invitation to empty the future into total pastness, because it renounced the ontological primacy of the past. It resisted, because it learned, in self-struggle, thanks to a remarkably coherent autodidactic tension, to give time its due. Ironically, this new effort to gain a deeper understanding of time played out on, of all places,

⁴ Cf. Peter Sloterdijk, *God’s Zeal*, 2009

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Der Fall Wagner*, 1888

European soil, the very home of dogged stasis-metaphysics and convulsive apocalypticism. The fundamental openness of the future was given its just deserts for the first time by the philosophical thought of Modernity. At the meeting place of will and representation the world forms itself into project and enterprise. It was not traders and seafarers who were responsible for remaking the world as a series of preliminary sketches, but thinkers, who overturned the metaphysical paralysis of the future. Hence the preeminent places in the Pantheon of “contemporary” philosophy for figures such as Schelling, Hegel, Bergson, Heidegger, Bloch and Günther, perhaps Kusanus too. It was these minds primarily who put an end to the evacuation of time and novelty from being. They razed the empty shell of ontology by relocating time and the new to the heart of being.