

Preface

The essays in this volume are literary-critical in nature and at the same time ventures in speculative philosophy and theology. They propose a model for reading literature theologically, even as they illustrate a method for thinking through fundamental problems of theology in specifically literary terms. They constitute a quest for poetic and religious vision granted each in and through the other. Understanding language and its life as metaphor proves to be crucial to this endeavor. Although the path opened owes no specific allegiances to schools or movements, retrospectively it seems accurate to characterize the viewpoint that emerges as a postmodern negative theology of poetic language. This perspective is presented as an alternative to the apocalyptic theology of Thomas J. J. Altizer, since Altizer's work similarly, but differently, apprehends genuinely epoch-making theology in works of literary and linguistic imagination. This positioning of the work finds its way to explicit articulation in the last of the four essays.

These discussions of poetry and apocalypse fit into a broader project of reading Western literature from within the horizon of a poetics of revelation. Concertedly, they treat literature (in certain of its most potent instantiations) as religious revelation. But at the limit of apocalypse both terms of the equivalence lose their identity: revelation is no longer revelation, just as literature can no longer be literature. The mediation of the letter no longer has any place in the face of the immediate presence of apocalypse, and neither can anything be revealed any more, especially not in the literal sense of "*re*-velation," or *re-veiling*, when all veils have been stripped clean away by apocalypse. It is the region in between poetry and apocalypse that stimulates the sort of thinking that these essays embody and explore. The sequence of essays follows the mutual co-implication of literature and theology as modes of representation that parallel and con-

verge upon each other up to the point where both would vanish into the apocalypse of what is beyond representation altogether. This Unrepresentable is what each of these modes of representation in its own way moves toward and evokes.

Taken together, the essays suggest that poetry and apocalypse need each other. Each in some ways becomes vitiated when it loses contact with the other. The first essay exposes weaknesses of apocalyptic as a genre unto itself and discovers apocalyptic vision at its most authentic and vibrant rather in poetic prophecy. The second essay explores the radical secularization of revelation as poetry in the Christian epic tradition. It finds that even in James Joyce this poetry has not forsaken—and cannot shake—its vocation to be theological revelation. The third essay highlights a specific aspect of poetic representation that has played a crucial role in religious revelation—namely, typology. It shows how typological representation is constituted by the dynamic of repetition, a topic pursued further in the fourth essay. I have sketched a general theory of the metaphoricality of language elsewhere;¹ here, I attempt to account for revelatory capacities inherent in the typological dynamics of figurative language due to the intrinsic, constitutive repetitiveness of the type.

Nevertheless, a key to the mutual dependence of poetic representation and theological revelation in a general sense is the inherent metaphoricality of language (as discovered eminently by Vico): language originates in and as the radical disclosure of world as an ambit of truth or a revelation of things as they are (thought by Heidegger as *aletheia*), and at the same time in the weaving of the veil of representation, essentially the “turning” of the “verse,” which is poetic metaphor. The one actually takes place in and through the other, so that language in its intrinsically poetic character is inherently both revelation and at the same time a mediation interposing itself and, to that extent, covering over things as such—“reality” in its ultimate, unspeakable truth. This is reality such as it, presumably, would be presented by apocalypse.

If apocalypse really takes place, then, it does so not in language at all. Apocalypse is the moment when language at its limits shatters and all beings are speechlessly present and open to one another, the moment when

1. “Metaphor and the Making of Sense: The Contemporary Metaphor Renaissance,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 33, no. 2 (2000): 137–54.

all articulable differences are surpassed. It is my conviction that this “moment” outside of and before speech must be the premise for all our discourses if they are to escape entrapment by invidious world-orders imposed in an inevitably imperialistic manner. I further maintain that such a speechless openness cannot be engineered by any logical process or protocol, but rather can be induced through the agency of poetry that bears language to its point of rupture. We must first become aware of the intrinsically poetic nature and underpinnings of all our communications. Then we need to see how poetry by *its* nature opens toward what lies beyond the grasp of our language, toward what is here being called “apocalypse.” This, I believe, is how understanding and tolerance among human beings committed to radically disparate belief systems can be fostered.

These issues are highly theoretical, yet they are discussed with a view to recovering modes of understanding necessary for enabling genuinely open dialogue and cross-cultural communication in increasingly apocalyptic times—times in which incomprehension between cultures threatens to precipitate the world into Armageddon. Particularly, the lead essay is framed, in sections i and v, by a pragmatic, hermeneutic meditation on the vital importance of learning to hear and interpret theological discourses, with an ear especially for their apocalyptic intransigencies and madness, in poetically open and sensitive ways, lest they become disastrously fractious—and not just within the academy.

The three pieces following the first essay all revolve to a considerable degree around interpretations of James Joyce. Joyce emerges as a crucial figure for the question of apocalyptic poetry in modern times. He takes on an exemplary role in demonstrating a much more general apocalyptic vocation of literature. This specific focus is determined by engagement with current criticism presenting Joyce as the apocalyptic culmination of Christian epic tradition and projecting a suggestive new outlook on the mutual implication of literature and theology. Reading poetic language in Joyce’s transformation of the novel thus turns out to complement the focus on the language of lyric in the poetry of Paul Celan, Wallace Stevens, and others in the lead essay. Read as a coherent sequence, the essays trace, along a trajectory beginning from the Bible and then for the modern era with Dante, a genealogy for poetry as prophecy becoming apocalyptic.

The book thus breaks down into essentially two parts. The second part, comprising essays II–IV, elaborates a theory of poetry as apocalypse in the tradition of the Christian epic as it develops from Dante to Joyce. The first part, comprising the longer essay I, places the discourses of poetry and apocalypse, starting from the Bible, into the framework of a theory of dialogue. This theory is developed from the Frankfurt school’s critical theory of religion interpreted in a negative theological key that contrasts with Habermas’s thinking on dialogue. It probes the possibilities for dialogue between cultures, especially between theological fundamentalisms and modern secularisms. Poetic and apocalyptic discourses, through their mutual qualification and enhancement of one another, thereby prove to be pertinent, in an indirect but highly significant way, to our efforts to understand and communicate with each other on this precarious planet.

Of course, this book cannot pretend to intervene directly in the political crises of our time. Still, our training in the humanities is not irrelevant to how we as a nation and culture relate to others, not least importantly on the international scene, and I urge that a sense of this relevance can well inform the way in which we pursue such studies. Studies in the humanities should contribute to refining the modes of thinking and communication that we need to employ in dealing with people around the world. Fed from our deepest sources of insight, such studies can help to nourish and shape the very spirit with which we undertake these critical encounters.