



## THE TERROR OF HISTORY

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FOR MORE THAN THREE DECADES, I have taught an undergraduate course entitled, as this book partly is, “The Terror of History.” The class examines the development of mysticism, heresy, magic, and witchcraft in medieval and early modern Europe. I often have large enrollments in my classes, but none compare to the crowds that attend my lectures on these subjects. I have long thought that students flock to this particular course because of the unorthodox nature of the topics discussed, but year after year I am struck by the many students who eagerly take the class for more than its esoteric or “magical” aspects. They come—many of them do—seeking answers to existential fears, seeking to understand and deal with the harshness of the world in which they live.

One could argue that college students—often coming from well-to-do families and being impossibly young—seldom know about the angst and anxieties provoked by historical events and existential questions. In these materialistic and apathetic times in which we live, spiritual concerns are, more often than not, overshadowed by the pursuit of commodities, a career, or a good job. Law school, often chosen without any real sense of what the law is or what it is for, beats the reflected life most of the time. But to my amazement a large

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number of students not only take the class but also come to my office with heartfelt queries about their place in the world, articulating, as honestly as only the young can often do, their fears and uncertainties, questioning their faith or lack of it. This is even more touching since my own approach, a fairly skeptical one, posits mystical experiences and belief in witchcraft as forms of escape from history or, often, in a harsh functionalist fashion only possible in lower-division undergraduate courses, as part of the way in which those on top rule or deploy belief and persecution to advance their own agendas and power. This book is, in some respects, an honest attempt to answer those students' queries raised over the many years I have taught, and to provide some explanations that go beyond (and seek to debunk) many of the fictionalized or self-help accounts that are now popular among the reading public. Over the last two decades or so such books, from popular studies of the occult, to fictional recreations of mysteries à la Dan Brown, or self-help books, have had a hold on the popular imagination.

This book is also an attempt to answer these questions for myself, for, despite the more than three decades that I have been teaching and writing, I am still uncertain as to what the answers are, or, worse yet, if there are any answers at all. Teaching this quarter (fall term 2010), an introductory class on world history from the Big Bang to around 500 CE, reading with the students texts ranging from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, to the *Avestas*, the *Life of the Buddha*, the *Gita*, and other such books, I have become even more confused that I have ever been, but also more keenly aware of our endless search as humans for meaning.

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**What Is This Book All About?**

In the simplest of formulations, this book is a reflection or meditation on how men and women in Western society have sought to make meaning of the world in which they live and of the often troubling historical events that serve as the context for their individual and collective lives. This book is also about the manner in which they have managed to do this in both mundane and unusual ways, ranging from the embrace of religious experiences to the pursuit of the material world to the quest for aesthetic bliss. These actions and beliefs may seem, at times, a form of escapism, as ways in which certain individuals and groups hoped to flee from the death-grip of history and build alternative and, often, ahistorical lives. But this book also reflects on the meanings and usefulness of these diverse attempts to confront the weight of history and the uncertainty of the world.

In the chapters that follow, I examine only a few and discrete instances of the ways in which men and women have tried, and continue to try, to make sense of the world in the long period between roughly the ancient world and the recent past. My inquiry, thematic rather than chronological, ranges across the centuries, highlighting specific communal or individual patterns of behavior, with examples of how some individuals and groups in the West faced and escaped the cruelty of their times. I do not argue that these experiences were replicated in different periods, or that they are all the same. Each age provided its own unique setting, and its own responses to the crises shaped by these shifting contexts. Nor do I claim that these experiences or responses were or are universal. They were and are not. And if I ever did, teaching world history has certainly cured me of that. Moreover, if my emphasis is on the experience of Western men and

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women, that follows from my own expertise and knowledge of European society and my very limited understanding of other parts of the world. Nonetheless, I am certain that a similar and perhaps far more meaningful book could be written about other regions of the world.

I have long thought, pondered, and taught about these matters. I do not claim, in any case and as I wrote before, to have answers to these questions or to be able, by some clear and direct formulation, to explain the complex mechanisms that prompt human beings to react in often unpredictable fashion to historical or natural catastrophes. I am, in many respects, often as confused and clueless as my young freshmen and sophomore students are sometimes. Age, I fear, does not necessarily confer wisdom. What I do claim is an enduring desire to grapple with these issues and try to come up with as honest an answer as I can to what is one of the central themes in human history: how do we act and react in the face of terrible challenges in our lives? Why? At the core of this reflection is also a wish to see and understand history and historical processes not in a Whiggish or linear fashion but histor(ies) as unfolding, unpredictable, and contentious contexts for our lives. Far more significant, these reflections seek to understand why we often have such an inexhaustible desire to make and have meaning. Tragedy, as a literary trope but also as a form of self-representation and a form of life, is inherent in historical processes.

### **What Is the Terror of History?**

Anxieties about the world in which we live and about our individual lives are not unique or exclusive to small groups of susceptible young students or aging cynical scholars. We all,

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to some degree or another, are susceptible to these pressures and seek, in myriad ways, to insulate ourselves from the stress of history. After all, personal tragedies and stresses, as well as wider historical phenomena, affect almost everyone. They range from quotidian preoccupations about family, jobs, and personal relations to the broader collective concerns of war, national policies, international strife, and ecological disasters. In today's world, we are constantly reminded of the cruelties of history by the onslaught of printed and visual news, by commentary and spinning. Any fairly reasonable human who reads the news or watches the international scene cannot but be shaken in the belief that the world is all right or even rational. The flip side to civil and ordered societies is genocide in Darfur, sectarian violence in Iraq, Palestine, Kashmir, and elsewhere, wanton and inexplicable violence on our campuses, appalling natural disasters, governmental neglect bordering on the criminal, and other such recurring events. There, in the endless strife of our world, personal and collective concerns intersect, provoking fears and anxieties that are always felt at two levels: by individuals and by members of wider communities.

These fears are not new, nor are they necessarily related to an increase in media coverage. We share them with our ancestors. We share them with prehistoric people. In a dramatic chapter entitled "The Terror of History" (from which I have shamelessly borrowed my own title), the always suggestive and engaging Mircea Eliade examines how early homo sapiens' dread of the evening, uncertainty about the sun's comforting rise every morning and the return of spring, and our own fear of an atomic holocaust—a fear most vivid when Eliade wrote his book, *Cosmos and History*, more than half a century ago—affected, and continue to affect, the way we see history and the future.

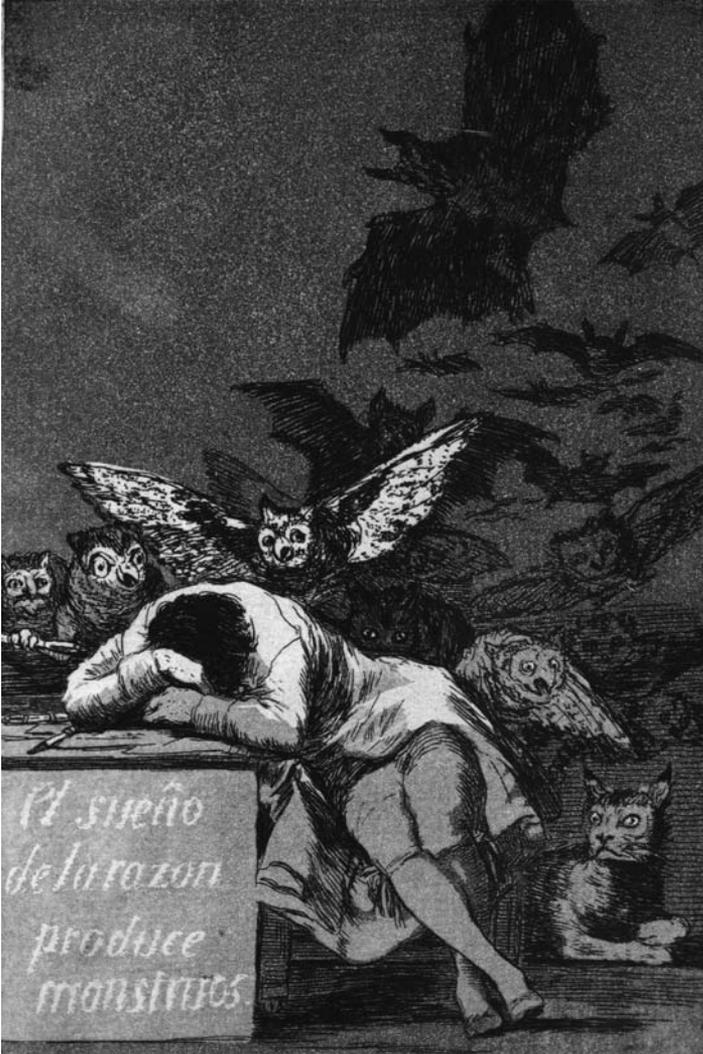
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Borrowing from Eliade, I argue that the unpredictability of history—the weight of endless cycles of war, oppression, and cruelty beyond description—shapes our individual and collective lives. Few have the courage or cold existential resignation of Meursault, Camus' protagonist in *The Stranger*, or Meursault's ability to look at the blank and indifferent face of the universe and "to open [himself] for the first time to the tender indifference of the world" ("... je m'ouvrais pour la première fois à la tendre indifférence du monde"). Most of humanity seeks to escape the terrifying reality of human history, to make some sense of events, to hope for something better (an afterlife? a redemptive life? remembrance?) than what we have. And most of all, a majority of humans refuse to accept that the universe, the world, god(s), are utterly indifferent to our plight. But this is only the beginning.

One of Goya's most disturbing etchings, *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*, shows a learned man sleeping at his desk, dreaming of irrational monsters. The etching has long been a coda for my course on the terror of history, and it is, in a sense, also a symbolic image for this book. Two translations of the title are possible from the original Spanish. One is that the sleep of reason produces monsters, meaning that when we cease to be rational (that is, when reason sleeps), irrational monsters come to the surface. In many respects, this interpretation of Goya's etching is the one closer to a long tradition in Spanish letters, harkening back to Calderón de la Barca's extraordinary play, *Life is a Dream*, which raises central questions as to the nature of reality. The second reading of the caption, I believe closer to Goya's meaning and to my own understanding, is that reason's dreams conjure monsters. What do I mean by that?

Most of Western civilization is a continuous dialogue between reason and unreason. The periods in which reason

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**Figure 1.** Francisco de Lucientes Goya (1746–1828), *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos* (The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters), plate 43 from “Los Caprichos,” etching and aquatint, originally published in 1799. Image courtesy The Art Archive.

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seems to have held sway—Classical Athens, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, the Europe of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries or the Belle Époque—were always accented by latent irrationality, religious fanaticism, and peculiar beliefs. It seems that Goya was absolutely right, and that the more we seem to embrace reason, the more irrationally we dream. If I am allowed to draw an example from not-so-recent popular culture, the iconic science-fiction film *Forbidden Planet* (a movie that is a loose rendering of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*) forcefully depicts the darker side of reason: a civilization so committed to the rational life that their dreams (their Ids in the pseudo-Freudian parlance of the movie's script) created monsters that eventually destroyed all life on the planet. Examples from the past also abound. We have long identified Classical Athens as the cradle of Western reason, but we should not be surprised that Plato, perhaps the most influential philosopher in Western thought, wrote his dialogues while Bacchic celebrations and mystery devotions (Orphic rituals, the cult of Demeter, and other such quasi-mystical practices) took place in Athens, or that Athens kept a human scapegoat ready to be sacrificed if things went too wrong in the city. Plato's most signal works were written shortly after Athens' defeat at the hands of Sparta and from a clear Spartanophile perspective. The Athenians, our standard paragons of democracy and enlightenment, had, after all, imposed a rather imperialist, oppressive, and not too rational, rule on its allies. They were also committed to an unmitigated misogyny, one of the aspects of Athenian society that Plato most severely criticized. This, that is Athenian imperialism, was, in turn, one of the causes of the Peloponnesian War and of the eventual demise of the Athenian empire. We tend to forget that it was Athenian democracy that executed Socrates, Plato's beloved teacher and the protago-

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nist in almost all of his dialogues. Political liberty does not necessarily result in rational deeds.

The Scientific Revolution that transformed European thought in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was paralleled by the untold cruelties of religious warfare and the savagery of the witch craze. The same people who zealously advanced science were firm believers in the existence of witches and complicit in their destruction. The dazzling achievements and elegance of the Belle Époque in *fin-de-siècle* Western Europe, with its rational and beautiful art and architecture, was nurtured by European imperialism and the exploitation of colonial empires. Vienna's great cultural achievement paralleled the election of a vitriolic anti-Semitic mayor. It ended in the unprecedented (for the age) killing and destruction of World War I. In our own times, in this age of revolutionary technological breakthroughs and expanded university education, large segments of the population in the United States firmly believe that the end of times is imminent and that the selected few (which, of course, always includes them) will experience a "rapture" and be taken directly into the presence of god. Even more depressing is the fact that in a debate among Republican candidates for the presidential election in 2008, almost one third of the ten candidates running declared in public that they did not accept Darwin's theory of evolution, while some of the leading candidates advocated torture as a "rational" way to deal with terrorists. One should not be too harsh. It is perhaps after all part of the human drama that to live a rational life without fear is rare, and that what we call rationality and irrationality are part of the normal pendulum-swing of human existence. The terror of history is all around us, gnawing endlessly at our sense of, and desire for, order. It undermines, most of all, our hopes.

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*Writing History and Explaining Its Terror*

Walter Benjamin, one of the most provocative thinkers of the first half of the twentieth century, committed suicide on the Spanish border with Vichy France in the fall of 1940. Fleeing Nazi Germany and denied transit through Spain on his way to freedom, Benjamin chose to end his life rather than to return to Germany and face the increasing persecution of Jews and others that led, in just a short span of time, to the horrors of the Holocaust. In one of his most thoughtful pieces—a short entry in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*—Benjamin evokes a series of images that powerfully illuminate the critical vision of various twentieth-century intellectuals and that inspired the main themes of this book.

In a lapidary critique of historicism, Benjamin reflects on the meaning of culture and the writing of history. Not only is history written by the victors, he argues—an idea that seems self-evident in this age of spinning the news and managing public opinion—but, as he powerfully states: “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”<sup>1</sup> Every cultural achievement, every iconic monument that stands as an example to the greatness of civilization has been created at a price. The price is injustice, oppression, inequality, war, and other barbarities that turn our individual and collective histories into what Hegel, describing history, once called “the slaughter bench of humanity.” This is why Benjamin calls on all of us, historians and non-historians alike, to “brush history against the grain” and to write a different kind of account, one that deepens our

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) 256.

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understanding of the suffering of victims and losers, one that seeks to reveal the interstices of resistance and pain.

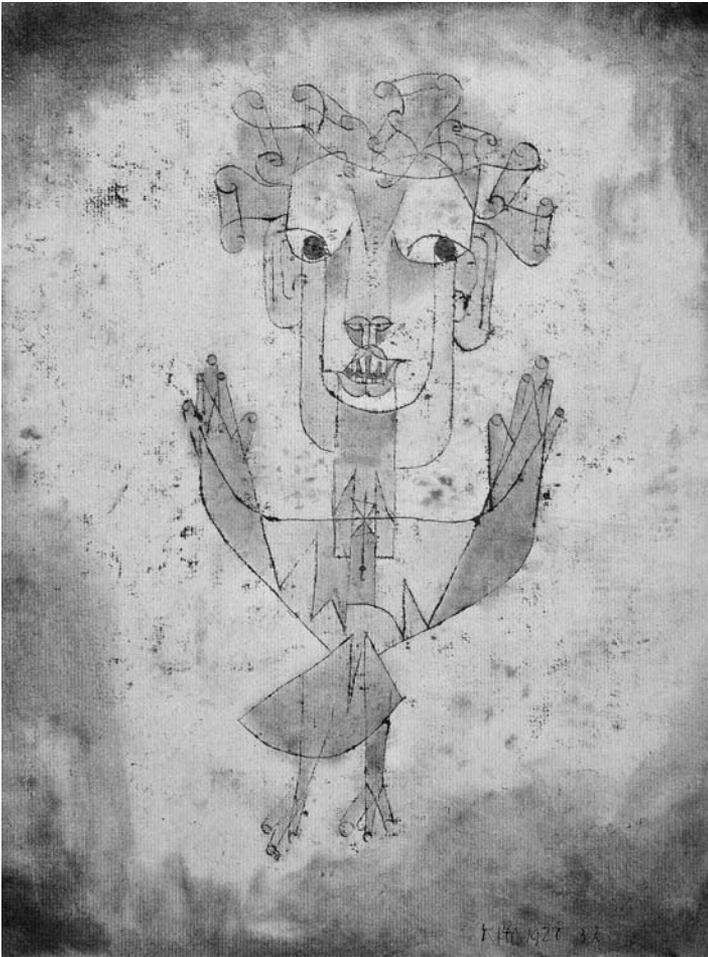
Benjamin's gloomy image is further accentuated in his moving allegory of the "angel of history." Having seen a painting by Klee entitled *Angelus Novus*—a rather odd painting, depicting a threatening and phantasmagorical vision (fig. 2)—Benjamin tells us that he likes to think of it as the angel of history.

This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.<sup>2</sup>

Benjamin's indictment of progress and, by extension, of the Enlightenment project invites us to look at the flip side of history, at the chasm between official celebrations and harsh quotidian realities, and to become aware of the terrors and catastrophes that beset us at every step in our lives. It also invites us to reflect on the reality that our continuous celebration of Western technological advances and political order has been achieved through the continuous projection of power beyond our borders, by endless wars, and by systemic injustice and inequality.

<sup>2</sup>Benjamin, 257–58.

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**Figure 2.** Paul Klee (1879–1940), *Angelus Novus*, 1920. Indian ink, color chalk, and brown wash on paper. Image courtesy The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel / Carole and Ronald Lauder, New York / The Bridgeman Art Library. © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

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As social and political communities, we are constantly assailed by the unpredictability and cruelty of historical events. From the carnage of World War II to the nuclear terror of the Cold War to the events and aftermath of September 11, 2001 to new debilitating forms of warfare, we have been shaken again and again in our sense of security. On September 11 thousands of people died, parts of lower Manhattan were either destroyed or badly damaged, and the carnage and symbolic meaning of the targets chosen by the terrorists had a cumulative impact on most Americans and on many people abroad. One of the outcomes was that the terrorist attacks overthrew briefly, as they were intended to do, any sense of order. The act, unexpected for most people, undermined the very foundation of trust in the ability of governments and/or systems of belief to protect us or to foresee and thwart such deeds. Even if it did this only very briefly, the impact of September 11 also led to initial widespread support for unjust wars, internal restrictive and oppressive measures that may be a permanent legacy of 9/11, and a conflict with Iraq and Afghanistan already beyond its tenth year as I write these pages. The war has inflicted and continues to inflict an unspeakable toll on an innocent Iraqi and Afghan population and has cost a steadily climbing number of American casualties in both war theaters.

This is nothing new. Throughout human history unexpected catastrophes have shaken peoples' trust in rulers and beliefs, yielding harsh consequences. In fourteenth-century medieval Western Europe, to cite one example, severe famines, plagues, and wars often exposed the inability of monarchs and church dignitaries to provide solace to the population or to remedy disasters. The inefficacy of royal measures or religious rituals fueled the anxieties of the populace and led them to seek answers elsewhere: in flights of religious fervor,

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in apocalyptic and revolutionary outbursts, and in scapegoating the less fortunate. Their rulers also saw war as an option, and for more than a hundred years, France and England battered each other on the battlefield. In our own times, as the case of Iraq so clearly shows, modern governments have sought to respond to crisis by striking perceived or constructed enemies in ceaseless acts of violence.

From antiquity to the recent past, those in power have sought to protect their status by providing palliatives for uncertainty and disaster. Authority has often been projected in elaborate demonstrations (royal entries, religious processions, public executions, and the like) aimed at providing distraction from present evils and as didactic reminders of the social hierarchy and the unassailability of constituted power. Processions and spectacles—that is, the re-enactment of religious beliefs and the secular display of power (often a combination of both)—may go a long way toward assuaging fear and providing escape from the terror of history and the vicissitudes of historical events. But this is not always the case. There are moments—too frequent for our individual and collective comfort—when the routines of everyday life, the enduring presence of power, and the semblance of order are obliterated. Then the old trusted explanations and support systems are not enough.

Beyond extraordinary events or historical catastrophes “that pile skyward at the feet of the angel of history,” the existential questions about why and how we live and what is our place in the universe remain crucial and agonizing for all thinking women and men. Deep within, we are aware of the uncertainty of life and the elusiveness of answers. The Greeks knew this long ago. Their most pessimistic take on the quandaries of human existence is best summarized in Sophocles’ laconic but powerful line: “Not to be born is, past all prizing,

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best,” a thought glossed brilliantly by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* to the effect that, if you have the misfortune of being born, then it is best to die at an early age.

The choices are stark indeed. One choice leads us to accepting the world as we find it and trying to make the best of it by forceful and conscious acts of self-deception or denial. That is, being all along aware of Sophocles’ dictum, we nonetheless embrace life and choose to live rather than never to be born (an act over which, after all, we have no control). The conundrum presented by this option is old indeed. In the *Odyssey*, one of Western culture’s foundational texts, Odysseus, the indefatigable traveler and seeker of new knowledge, descends into Hades where he meets, among many Greek worthies, Achilles, the proud king of the dead. Achilles, who chose a short and heroic life over a long and mediocre one, now bemoans his demise. Praised by Odysseus and told not to “grieve at your death,” Achilles responds with revealing words: “. . . not to make light of death, illustrious Odysseus. . . . I would rather work the soil as a serf on hire to some landless impoverished peasant than be king of all these lifeless dead.”<sup>3</sup>

So much for the glorious death! The other choice in front of us is ignorance: to live, as many people in the world do today not by their own choice, a subhuman existence, to live an unreflected life. In this type of life, scrambling not to die of hunger or not to be killed in meaningless wars or mindless violence—think of the ongoing mass killings, mutilations, and the like carried out by drug cartels in Mexico—become the driving goal of one’s life. There is of course always the option of ending one’s existence, an idea not unlike Camus’ assurance that suicide is the last form of self-control in a cruel universe. Yet Achilles’ utterance just cited above is a powerful

<sup>3</sup> *The Odyssey* (London: Penguin Books, 2003) 152.

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reminder that putting an end to things, trying to escape with that final act, though seemingly easy, is indeed very difficult. We strive mightily, whether consciously or unconsciously, to live.

This is in spite of the fact that the burdens we face in our individual lives are many. If I may borrow from a non-Western story, in the life of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, the young prince awakened to his quest for enlightenment by successive encounters with other people's illness, old age, and death. Moved by the awareness that humans will most likely experience all three, he chose to be enlightened; he chose a path of action and meditation that would lead him not to be born again and again in the endless wheel of life, not to experience life in endless stages of reincarnation. For Westerners, this idea of nothingness as the goal of one's life is a hard pill to take.

And yet, like the Buddha, we are also deeply aware of the frailty and arbitrariness of our lives, of illnesses, aging, and death. Suspecting or knowing that there is probably no meaning or order in the universe, we combat this dark perspective by continuously making meaning, by imposing order on our chaotic and savage past, by constructing explanatory schemes that seek to justify and elucidate what is essentially inexplicable. These half-hearted attempts to explain the inexplicable and to make sense of human cruelty are what we call "history." It is the writing of history itself. Take the twentieth century, a century of extraordinary technological and scientific achievements. It was also a century of such horror and carnage that the mere telling of one act of genocide after another, of one war after another, of our nuclear nightmare, of untold ethnic cleansing, religious strife, and continuous racism and misogyny should make any rational human being

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shudder. And the twentieth-first century does not seem promising either.

*Escaping History*

One can describe human attempts to deal with disaster in myriad ways. A few selected categories will serve as a framework for these reflections. Johan Huizinga, a great and perceptive Dutch historian who wrote about the morbidity and angst of the “autumn of the Middle Ages,” posited three ways in which late medieval people dealt with the uncertainties of their lives: religion, possessions and material goods, and aesthetic or artistic yearnings. In other words, men and women at the “waning” of an age sought relief either through belief (in a whole variety of orthodox and heterodox forms), the life of the senses, and/or through culture and the pursuit of the beautiful. We can apply Huizinga’s typology to our own lives and historical experiences and place our discussion within these categories.

## RELIGION

Religion or religious experiences, in its (or their) many different variations means essentially the way in which one (or the many) places oneself in the hands of god (or the gods). Religion posits the terrors besetting one’s own personal life and the weight of collective history as part of a divine plan and as the sum total of inscrutable but always wise actions of an all-powerful, all-knowing deity (or deities). The religious man or woman will often find great solace in belief. Though god’s (or the gods’) actions often seem inexplicable and cruel, there is always the reassuring belief that the deity knows why such things need to happen. There is, after all, a higher

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purpose. In the end, all events, awful and good, form part of an overarching sacred project in which we all play a part.

Let's not discount religion. Having attended a religious ceremony recently in which a group of young men took their initial vows into the Society of Jesus, I, who claim to be a devoted atheist, was strangely swept by the heightened emotions present in the very crowded church. It was a very moving experience, and, as I was leaving the ceremony, I had to remind myself once more that some historians (myself most guilty of this) fail to acknowledge the power of belief only at their peril. Religion, after all, has created, and continues to create, meaning for a significant part of humanity. It promises, at least in the Western world, redemption and a life after. It guarantees eternal rewards to those who endure the terror and remain faithful to a prescribed set of doctrines or rituals. It provides, with extraordinary clarity and assurance for the believer, what is, in fact, a form of life. Religious beliefs have often been deployed and articulated—sometimes in rather peculiar forms—to deal with the social, economic, cultural, and political transformations of Western Europe and the anxieties that these changes brought to the minds and hearts of Europeans from antiquity to the present. Often, however, religious answers, as interpreted by those in power or by those dissenting from that power, led to persecution and strife.

This is indeed a question worth pondering: Is religion, in its effort to emplot human life within a divine scheme and to emphasize the superiority of one set of beliefs over another, one of the main causes of warfare and injustice? Norman Housley's book, *Religious Warfare*, adroitly raises the issue of the role of religion in some of the most violent episodes in late medieval and early modern European history. The evidence seems to point to a linkage between exalted religious beliefs and violence, between uncompromising faith and per-

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secution. In that sense, religious violence is, in a bizarre and perverse fashion, yet one more way of dealing with the uncertainties of the world. When a man is ready to blow himself up and take enemies along because the act will lead him straight to paradise, what we are witnessing is an extreme form of belief that, although grounded in long traditions of sacrifice, religious martyrdom, and historical realities, is, by its very nature, ahistorical, a form of escape from history and from the world as presently constituted. We do not even need to use contemporary examples to make this point. History is filled with such extreme forms of behavior: from Christian martyrdom in pagan Rome, to the fierce and suicidal defense of believers at Canudos (see chapter 2) to other forms of religious behavior. Religion explains the inexplicable. Many however do not accept the explanations of religion. Many, including myself, do not believe. Some, even though believing in god (or the gods), have also resolutely and sometimes even bitterly turned their backs on organized forms of religion or religious rituals. The problem perhaps is not belief per se. The problem is intolerant forms of religious belief.

## EMBRACING THE MATERIAL WORLD

Many of those who have lost their faith, or who never had one to begin with, have developed ways just as intricate as those created by religious individuals to keep at bay the terrifying specter of history. Throughout human existence, many have embraced the material world as a means of keeping down the gnawing suspicion that we live in a Sisyphean universe in which, with great effort, we roll a heavy stone up a hill only to have it immediately roll down to the starting point. By acquiring material goods and accumulating wealth, we often seek to provide an answer to the quandaries of history

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and life. In the Western world today, most of our aspirations, thoughts, and fears have been ameliorated or exorcized by the ephemeral possession of goods and the commodification of our daily lives. But owning things is inherently impermanent and leads to greater fears: losing what we have, or not having enough (most people never have enough money, enough paintings, enough books, enough rare wines, etc.) to truly quell existential fears. It is never enough.

What other paths are there? There is the life of sensory and sensual pleasure, of permanent intoxication—Baudelaire argued that one must go through life intoxicated (though he meant it in an aesthetic sense). As attractive as this alternative may seem as a release from the burdens of human existence, our bodies will not endure a life of dissipation and intoxication for very long, even if one ignores the social and ethical consequences of a permanent state of intoxication. In the same vein, love—by which I mean here sexual, physical love and not its romanticized and aestheticized form that is far more part of art than of the here-and-now world—also intoxicating and consuming, and work, which is the main and most consuming activity for most people in the Western world, provide temporary solace from the harsh realities of the world. As to work, this would include not just physical activity, but also intellectual and/or creative processes that although also a form or “work” seek to come to terms with history in a different fashion. In the end, creating and maintaining routines (whether in our quotidian activities, love-making, or work), we establish recognizable patterns in the fabric of our individual lives and fold them into the collective destiny of our communities. By making love, working, owning things, spending money, building careers, getting fellowships (such as the one that partly allows me to write this book), we gain membership in a larger community. We give

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meaning to our lives. We make some sense of the universe, even without religion.

## THE PURSUIT OF BEAUTY

There are those who, rejecting religion or refusing to embrace the material world, build their lives around the pursuit of knowledge, art, and beauty as an end unto itself. “The unexamined life,” Plato argued famously, supposedly quoting Socrates, “is not worth living.” And indeed the pursuit of “the beautiful and the good,” both of these categories in their full Platonic sense—but also as naively articulated in our pedagogical programs and ethical ideals—can certainly become a different kind of secular religion. Scholars, artists, and aesthetes may wish to think, and do most often (see chapter 4), that their approach is superior, or that it is more worthwhile and less delusional than the pursuit of religion, hedonism, or intoxication. I may even say that art as an escape is probably more useful and far less threatening than the other two options. After all, scholars and artists do not go around killing people because they do not like or believe in Klee’s artistic value or agree or disagree with Descartes’ *Discourse on Method*. We do get at times vitriolic in our comments and reviews of the works of others, but it never leads to widespread bloodshed, and only rarely to physical violence. In the end, however, all three ways briefly discussed above—religion, material and sensory aspirations, and aesthetics—remain forms of escape from the reality of the world and the cruelty of history.

All of these approaches—and there are of course others—aim at coming to terms with our awareness of mortality, with the fragility of our lives, with the ephemeral nature of our well-being and happiness. The Greeks, who in the West understood the tragedy of life in a keener fashion than any-

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one else, tell us in their open-ended myths and engaging stories about this quandary. Herodotus, the great storyteller, describes Solon's voyages in the Aegean after he had given a constitution to Athens. Stopping in the kingdom of Lydia, he is given hospitality by King Croesus, reputed to be the richest man alive. Asked by Croesus who is the happiest man—and the king, of course, equates, as many do in our society today, wealth and power with happiness—Solon embarks on elaborate stories about two athletes and a warrior who, through their sacrifices and honorable deaths, gained the admiration of their fellow citizens and posthumous fame. The king is puzzled indeed. After all, these worthies were no longer among the living. How happy could they really be? Much later, as he waits to be burned alive by the conquering Persians, he comes to a full understanding of the poignant reality that we cannot call our lives happy until the very moment of death. We live, as it were, always on the edge of the abyss, and when we think we are happy and at peace, as individuals and as communities, awful things may be waiting just around the corner. Yet, though the Greeks knew this—as do we in the recesses of our minds—they turned their backs, as we do too, on Sophocles' uncompromising admonition that it would have been better never to have been born. It is, as noted earlier, in human nature to cling to life, to hope against hope. We make meaning. We write history. In various ways we seek to escape from the terrors of our individual and collective lives. We want both to escape history and, in my case, to write it as well.

### **Time and History**

But these ideas and categories of forms of escape from history are just thin layers, a palimpsest over which other themes

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are written and rewritten again and again. Behind the conscious efforts to create or imagine ways that may permit us to live in the world “as is” and to endure the cumulative burdens of history, there is a deeper and far more troublesome awareness. An earlier reader of this book commented perceptively on my role as “notary,” that is, as a recorder of these reactions to history, as a somewhat detached narrator. Seeking to offer explanations, retelling events, I have failed to note fully the extent to which I am complicit in these unfoldings and representations of history and how my “reflections” become entangled in the process of my being in history. Writing about the different paths that lead us away from history cannot be done from the outside. I am, as would anyone be who engages in this task or in the writing of history, implicated in the actual process that I seek to describe. I have been, I am, far more of an actor here than my impersonal narrator may lead you to believe.

In writing this, I have the powerful sense that I have not conveyed exactly or clearly what it is that I mean to say. It is quite difficult to write about something in which one is a participant without having the “I” that writes intervene, shape, distort what one is attempting to express. This is one of the reasons I have inserted autobiographical vignettes throughout the book. I have not done so because I think my life is so interesting that it should be told; rather, I do so as a reminder to the reader, and to myself as well, that we are all participants in this process. The same reader, a cherished friend, also insightfully noted that when I reflect on the terror of history or write, as I do in succeeding pages of Benjamin’s “angel of history,” I make a crucial mistake. History, as he pointed out, has no agency. People do. Historians do. The terrors that befall humanity have been (and are) described, rendered into words, analyzed, and bent into place by historians. This

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continuous recapturing of past events, the reshaping of them according to our own particular ideological leanings is the ever-evolving context in which individuals and communities journey through history. The muse of history, in her simplest incarnation the attempt to memorialize the past, is always neutral. What historians and other scholars do is never so.

There is a further point that needs to be considered. Far more relevant than the uneasy relation of historians to history is the relation of humans to time. Long ago Augustine of Hippo engaged in one of the most thorough and insightful discussions of time. In Book XI of his *Confessions*, Augustine sought to understand the relation between eternity and time, between god and his creation. For my purpose here, two points are significant. One is the relation of time to history; the second is the link of others and myself to time. Following a reader's suggestion, I argue therefore that Santillana's famous dictum that those who do not know history are condemned to repeat it is blatantly false. In the chapters to come I have eschewed a chronological narrative in favor of conveying my own "phenomenological account," that is, my own narrow and limited experience of history, both as thought and as lived. This is, though I did not realize it fully until it was pointed out to me, a confession. But it is also my own attempt to place myself within history and in time. In that sense, history here is understood not as pedagogy, in Santillana's sense, but as reflections on experiences. To write or to live history is to encompass those narrated moments that were once the past, present, and future. Thus, I wish to note that it is precisely this shifting sense of time that I seek to capture. A sense of time in which the present is always becoming the past, in which the present is always giving birth to an undetermined future. A sense in which the future soon ceases to be and becomes both present and past.

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There is something terrifying in our awareness of time, or, to be more precise, in our awareness of the passing of time. Not only is time puzzling and difficult to understand in a philosophical sense, as Augustine's brilliant grappling with the subject shows, but time, as experienced by humans, is terrifying indeed. When you get to be as old as I am at present—and I will be older still when you read this—you become aware of how swiftly time runs. Long ago, when I was young, it did not seem to move. Now it seems like a huge waterfall, moving incessantly to some appointed death. I am, of course, not saying anything new. Among Goya's striking dark paintings, there is a ghastly one of Saturn (Chronos) eating his children. It is a pictorial representation of one of Ancient Greece's most telling myths. The god Chronos (time) devours his children out of fear that, as fate has predicted, one of them will overthrow him. And so does Chronos devour all of us. As I retell stories about mystics, messianic figures, those who seek the pleasures of the body, those who embrace beauty, one common tread runs through their collective wishes: to obliterate time, to stop change, to end time or to achieve, through prayer, purgation, ecstatic physical joy, or aesthetic redemption that timelessness that would take us beyond history and decay.

**Reflections on the Terror of History**

What I hope to accomplish in this enterprise is to construct a narrative that functions as a "reflection" or exploration of the human condition, using specific historical examples to illustrate how religion, material concerns, and aesthetic yearnings have partially driven and shaped the contours of our responses to the harshness of history. In doing so, we should

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note the palliative measures that are plotted by those in positions of power as a distraction, and the diverse forms of escape that are, themselves, ways of resisting history and the established order. For they are not mutually exclusive. What begins as an attempt to shape society and systems of beliefs to benefit one social class may lead to unpredictable consequences. For example, Carnival, often heavily scripted from the late Middle Ages to the present for the benefit of those on top, could, and did, devolve into rebellion and resistance from below. When a town was swept by Carnival fever, the ordinary flow of time was suspended—as still happens today. Carnival creates a timeless space in which to ignore the continuous devolution of history, the inequity of social and economic differences.

The challenge of writing a book such as this is an exciting and difficult one. This is, of course, not intended to be a typical history book, addressing particular aspects of the social and cultural history of the West. Instead, it is a reflection on human reactions to disaster and on the ways in which we, collectively and individually, cope with crisis (social, structural, as well as existential). What I seek to capture is the ever present tension, to return to an earlier comment, between Sophocles' bitter statement in *Oedipus at Colonus* that "not to be born is, past all prizing, best," and Camus' stark and courageous (or pessimistic) acceptance of life in the face of the indifference of the universe (and history) in *The Stranger*. In the interstices created by the tension between these two difficult choices, human beings formulated, and continue to formulate, diverse ways of escaping from the "terror of history." Or to put it more bluntly, when faced with these two choices—one denying existence, the other arguing for its acceptance despite its meaninglessness—we seek to make sense of the world through varieties of religious experiences, by em-

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bracing the material world, by the quest for the beautiful or wisdom, or by a motley combination of all of these methods. Moreover, a distinction should be drawn between mass movements and individual responses to the pressures of history, though undoubtedly individuals in this account are chosen as examples only because their actions led to collective withdrawals from, or resistance to, history.

In the preface and in this first chapter, I have sought to explore how men and women have shaped and responded to history in the West over *la longue durée* and, specifically, to explain what I mean when I write about and discuss “the terror of history.” Reflecting on these issues, I aim to understand or try to make sense of how historians—and that includes myself—have sought to explicate the past and make sense of historical experiences. In chapter 2, I examine religion (both orthodox and heterodox spirituality, including millennial agitation). These religious experiences come in a diversity of forms. They range from mysticism to heresy to millennial agitation, esoteric forms of belief, and the widespread acceptance of the supernatural. For example, from antiquity to the present, one of the signal individual and collective responses to social, economic, and cultural crises has been mysticism. Mysticism is an exalted form of religion, in which the mystic claims that he or she has become one with god. Though mystics are relatively few in number, they play a unique role in reinforcing religious beliefs and in reassuring their contemporaries of the validity of their claims of oneness with god. Few religions, certainly few Western religions, can prosper without mysticism. The mystical experience, described and claimed as true by numerous mystics (and, more significantly, accepted by many others as true), was a religious state open to the very few; yet it inspired the many. Mysticism was, and remains, a highly individual pursuit; yet, once they had

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achieved union with god, most mystics in the West, as shall be seen, took a hand in the affairs of the world and strove mightily to transform the society in which they lived. By doing so, they provided solace to those who accepted the validity of such experiences.

Mystics came in two forms: orthodox and heterodox. Both played a significant role in the formulation of escapes from history. Not unlike mystics, heretics and those who embraced millennial dreams shared a commitment to their own vision of the world and of faith. To hold heretical views or to preach the end of time in medieval and early modern Europe was a risky business. The upholding of heterodox beliefs in Western Europe even into the present could, and often did, have dire consequences. It could lead to death or to exclusion from society. Yet heresies and apocalyptic expectations were seldom individual activities. Most often heretics and believers in the millennium formed groups of men and women ranging from a handful to thousands. They joined together in a common assertion that either the Church was upholding mistaken beliefs or that the end of time was at hand. The real strength of these movements resided in the strong bonds that were created among their members and in the sense of belonging and identity that these beliefs engendered.

Unlike mystics, heretics, and millenarian groups, others delved into a series of esoteric practices—magic, alchemy, astrology, and hermeticism—practices that, at least in the Middle Ages and the early modern period, straddled the worlds of religion and science. These pursuits were open only to a few scholars, although some forms of magic had wide popular appeal. These types of knowledge, therefore, required unique dedication, faith, and secretiveness. There was no desire to convert others or to reach the masses. Whether in search of power or patronage in the case of some magicians and astrolo-

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gers, or whether in search of arcane knowledge that would reveal the secrets of existence, those who practiced these arts often embraced their craft with a passion and commitment that replicated the religious experience. In many ways, magic, astrology, alchemy, and hermeticism functioned as forms of religion. They sought to deny—or accept—the terror of history by recognizing the inexorable, fatal, and sometimes beneficial, influence of the stars, and by seeking to manage that influence through amulets, incantations, and arcane lore.

Finally, witchcraft or, more accurately, the witch craze that swept Europe from the late Middle Ages to the late seventeenth century, was a popular phenomenon. Rooted in rural beliefs but defined by learned discourse, the alleged practice of witchcraft transgressed social and educational boundaries. It linked the rarefied culture of the elite with folk traditions. As inscribed in the dominant culture by normative texts—most notably the *Malleus Malificarum* (or *The Hammer of Witches*)—the persecution and execution of witches, a large number of them older women, created a convenient outlet for the fears and anxieties of most people in early modern Europe. Fed by misogyny and kindled by a context of dramatic social, economic, cultural, and political changes, the identification, hunting, burning, and hanging of witches diverted the attention of most of the population from the harsh realities of the world and squarely placed blame on witches for the misfortunes of the age. The witch then joined a long list of scapegoats—the Jew, the leper, the Muslim, the heretic, the homosexual, and others on the margins of society—who, at one time or another, played (and continue to play) the role of victim in the unfolding of human history.

In chapter 3, “The World of Matter,” I examine the material embrace of the world (from the accumulation of capital and property to the long philosophical tradition that

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emphasizes the tangible in the universe and human life). There are myriad aspects to explore here. The material world held (and holds) a powerful grip on untold numbers of individuals. The reaction of many in Western Europe to the onslaught of the Black Death, as told in graphic detail by Boccaccio and others, is just one example of the way in which the embracing of revelry, intoxication, and debauchery as a choice against the misfortunes of historical events has played a role in human existence. The Marquis de Sade's writings and his actual life provide a window into alternate ways of seeing and escaping history.

Festivals, Carnival, and sports, so often used in unhealthy ways to assert one's national identity and patriotism, are some of the forms of escape chosen by many in society in the face of despair. Bacchic celebrations, even with their deeply religious elements, were another way to confront the weight of history through sensorial escape. A study of Carnival and Carnavalesque celebrations through time is an excellent example of the role of the body and of celebration in human history. Similarly, sexuality, in its many varieties, has been an important way of disarming the terror of history. Utopias constructed around sexual promiscuity and myths of plentiful eating and no work, as in the land of Cockaigne, for example, have played and continue to play a significant role in human experience.

These models were not limited to just the fantasies of some writers or the imagination of starving peasants. They had actual counterparts in utopian experiments in antiquity (Plato's attempt to establish a community in Sicily along the lines of his *Republic*), in early modern Europe (Campanella's experiments; the Jesuit utopian establishments in Paraguay), and in our contemporary world (the Oneonta experiments, Skinnerian communities, and other such millenarian attempts).

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The United States was crawling with utopian communities in the nineteenth century, and some of these have survived into the present. Such exercises *against* history are quite common in the Western experience.

In chapter 4, “The Lure of Beauty and Knowledge,” I emphasize culture, that is, cultural production and aesthetic concerns as a response to historical crisis. So is, in a sense, this book. Writing, art, music are creative forms of sublimating uncertainties about one’s life and historical role. Not all artists seek to escape history. Some seek to validate it, but certainly a large number have sought to deny history through the production of the beautiful, the shocking, the offensive. Writers, existentialist writers most notably, sought to abolish and to deny the teleologies and certainties of the historical process, and wrote as a response to real crises—World War I, World War II, the rise of industrial society. Baudelaire’s dictum (quoted earlier) expresses perfectly that blending of material escape (the state of permanent intoxication) with aesthetic longings. This could range from the uncompromising or depressing options offered by Camus and Kafka to the solace of romance (from Chretien de Troyes’s imagined Arthurian court to Sir Walter Scott’s or Dumas’ novels). Science fiction and fantasy are good examples of the way in which literature, film, and art often seek to provide a more controlled universe in opposition to the existing harsh reality of the world. In Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and J. K. Rowlings’ books, the clear distinction between good and evil, though rooted in historical allusions, always provides for a comforting denouement. Who has not escaped the troubles of everyday life in the pages of the *Silmarillion*, *The Lord of the Rings*, or in an imagined Narnia or Hogwarts?

To these three overarching themes—forms of religious experiences, the embrace of the material, and aesthetic escape—

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we can add subsidiary sub-themes (to be woven into the narrative): violence (scapegoating, the witch craze, the theatricality of punishment in the form of inquisitorial autos-de-fé or public executions), Eros, and romantic imaginings. Yet I insist once again in my refusal to make any universalist claims. Rather, one of my arguments is that although human beings everywhere face more or less the same challenges from history, the ways in which the angst of the human condition has been, and is, addressed remains always grounded in specific cultural contexts and individual experiences, and that these responses change—in their outward manifestations—over time. In writing this, I realize the trap into which I have willingly walked. While individuals and communities seek to escape history, they often do so in forms and from within contexts that are deeply historical in nature. In some respects, not too far removed from certain aspects of Marx's view of the past, history is continually subverting itself. History thus has to be seen as part of a dialectical process, something like Marx's class struggle. Unlike Marx, I see the conflict as arising from our desire to abolish history and our inability to do so. Unlike Marx, I do not ever expect the end of class struggle or the advent of utopia, whether religious, material, or aesthetic. Unlike Marx, I do not see a future in which history comes to an end: the Golden Country of Orwell's *1984*. The future, I fear, may be as dark as the present.

This does not mean that there is no forward movement, no progress. Technical progress there has been. In fact, the explosion in technology is so intense that it accelerates time all around us. Nor does this mean that we should throw our hands into the air and give up. All to the contrary, it is only a greater incentive to fight on.

Focusing on examples that show extreme human responses to disasters, these vignettes will be drawn from all

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historical periods, but with emphasis on the ancient world, the Middle Ages, and early modern Europe. Some of the mystery religions or cults—Bacchic celebrations, the maintenance of an official scapegoat in Classical Athens—serve as apt counterpoints to the usual emphasis on reason with which we identify Golden Age Athens. As to the Middle Ages and the early modern period, some of the best-known forms of millenarian agitation and heterodox religious practices provide fertile ground for my exploration. I am thinking in particular of the heady mixture of religion and social unrest that characterized the English peasant risings of 1381 and the Hussite wars. The great German peasant uprising in the early sixteenth century and its aftermath would yield abundant material. Yet, our contemporary world also deserves attention. The collective suicide of the Heaven's Gate cult members in San Diego, more than two decades ago, also provides a vivid and dramatic example of the denial of history, or, at least, of specific normative types of history.

In this vein, utopian texts such as Campanella's *The City of the Sun* (which can be placed within a revolutionary social context in early modern Calabria), or descriptions of Carnival and its counterpart, inquisitorial trials, serve to draw together forms of exalted religiosity, a culture of violence, and social inversion. Some mystical texts, such as *The Little Flowers*, may prove very useful as well. Along those lines, the life of Francis of Assisi provides us a wonderful example of the individual who seeks to confront changes in the social and economic contexts in which he lived. Francis' response to questions of property, salvation, the material world, nature, and man's relation to God went beyond the experiences of a lone individual. His example ignited a radical reinterpretation of the Gospel's message of poverty and Christianity's social responsibility, leading to new radical ways of seeing the

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world among the Fraticelli and other radical Franciscans from shortly after Francis' death in 1226 into the early modern period.

I would also like to draw on other lesser-known examples. I am thinking in particular of the movement known as Sebastianism in Portugal and parts of the Portuguese empire. The idea that King Sebastián would return from the battlefields of North Africa, where he was killed or lost, to lead Portugal to an apocalyptic and redemptive destiny—leading to the end of history—had immense repercussions in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century political life. Echoes of these millenarian ideas appear in the rebellion of the Canudos in late nineteenth-century Brazil (in the state of Bahía), a wonderful story worth retelling and explicating. One could go on providing examples and identifying avenues for research, but the time has come to discuss these matters in some detail.