

The End of Meaning

The End of Meaning:
Studies in Catastrophe

By

Matthew Gumpert

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P U B L I S H I N G

The End of Meaning: Studies in Catastrophe,
by Matthew Gumpert

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To my parents, Esther and Gary

Der Ausdruck “hermeneutisch” leitet sich vom griechischen Zeitwort *hermēneuein* her. Dies bezieht sich auf das Hauptwort *hermēneus*, das man mit dem Namen des Gottes *Hermēs* zusammenbringen kann in einem Spiel des Denkens, das verbindlicher ist als die Strenge der Wissenschaft. Hermes ist der Götterbote. Er bringt die Botschaft des Geschickes; *hermēneuein* ist jenes Darlegen, das Kunde bringt, insofern es auf eine Botschaft zu hören vermag.¹

—Martin Heidegger, “Aus einem Gespräch von der Sprache: Zwischen einem Japaner und einem Fragenden” (121)

¹ “The expression ‘hermeneutic’ derives from the Greek verb *hermēneuein*. That verb is related to the noun *hermēneus*, which is referable to the name of the god Hermes by a playful thinking that is more compelling than the rigor of science. Hermes is the divine messenger. He brings the message of destiny; *hermēneuein* is that exposition which brings tidings because it can listen to a message” (“A Dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer” 29; trans. Hertz).

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PRELIMINARY TECHNICAL REMARKS

1. All translations are by author unless otherwise noted.
2. For all texts in a foreign language I supply both the original and translated versions wherever I deem the difference between the two to be significant.
3. In general I supply both the original and translated versions of the titles of works, except where it has become standard practice to refer to the work by either its original or translated form.
4. All classical Greek definitions are taken from H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, unless otherwise stated. Referred to as “Liddell and Scott.” All Latin definitions are from Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, unless otherwise stated. Referred to as “Lewis and Short.”
5. As a rule Greek words are transliterated; but the most familiar terms which have entered into general usage are given in their standard English translated forms (e.g., *Clotho*, not *Klōtho*).
6. All citations from Homer are from the translations by Richmond Lattimore, unless otherwise stated. Unless they appear as part of a citation from Lattimore, the names of the most prominent Homeric characters appear in their more familiar Latinized forms (e.g., *Achilles*, not *Achilleus*).
7. All references to Sappho’s poetry follow the standard Lobel-Page numbering from the *Poetarum Lesbiorum Fragmenta*, edited by Edgar Lobel and Denys L. Page.
8. Throughout this book I use *Classical* to refer to a particular historical period, that which follows the Archaic and precedes the Hellenistic. I use *classical*, on the other hand, generically, as the equivalent of *ancient Greek and/or Roman*.

9. All references to the Bible are from the Authorized (King James) Version.

10. All pre-modern (classical, medieval, early modern) works are referred to by standard notations for chapters, sections, or line numbers (and in the case of dramatic works, acts, scenes, and line numbers) irrespective of edition; modern works are generally referred to by page numbers belonging to specific editions or translations.

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PRETEXT:
NOTES ON 9/11



Sean Adair, *Hijacked United Airlines Flight 175 Flies toward World Trade Center, South Tower*. 11 September 2001. © REUTERS/Sean Adair.

It's the end of the world as we know it.
 It's the end of the world as we know it.
 It's the end of the world as we know it and
 I feel fine.
 —R.E.M., “It’s the End of the World as
 We Know It (And I Feel Fine)”

Catastrophe as Accident: The Revelation of the Sign

Catastrophe arrives, traditionally, in the manner of an *accident*: from the Latin *accidens*, meaning *accident* or *chance*;¹ from *accido*, *to fall out, come to pass, happen, occur*.² The accident is, in short, *that which happens to us*: it comes from without, and takes us by surprise.³ “We are passive with respect to the disaster,” writes Blanchot in *The Writing of*

¹ This is, in fact, the second definition of the noun *accidens* in Lewis and Short’s *A Latin Dictionary*, the first being the “*accidental, nonessential quality* of any thing, *to sumbebēkos*.” *Sumbebēkos* is standard Greek, within the philosophical tradition, for the attribute of an object as distinct from its essence. That these two significations belong to the same signifier is, it goes without saying, *no accident*. And yet one is presented here, in fact, with a hierarchy of significations that is itself contingent upon the distinction between the *essential* (first definition) and the *accidental* (second definition). One of the aims of this essay is to suggest that this hierarchy ought to be reversed, and that what has traditionally been considered essential to the accident is in fact an accidental feature of its essence. It is because the attributes of an object are considered to *befall* it, in the manner of an accident (second definition), that they can be considered *accidents* (first definition) in the first place, and receive the name thereof.

² One runs here into the same hierarchy of meanings as in the noun; this is already a figurative extension of *accido*’s primary and literal meaning, which, according to Lewis and Short, is “*to fall upon or down upon a thing, to reach it by falling*.” In this sense the *accident* is intrinsically *catastrophic*: from *katastrōphē*, an *overturning*.

³ The following explanatory note is attached to Lewis and Short’s entry on *accido*: “The distinction between the syn. *evenio*, *accido*, and *contingo* is this: *evenio*, i.e. *ex-venio*, is used of either fortunate or unfortunate events: *accido*, of occurrences which take us by surprise; hence it is used either of an indifferent, or, which is its general use, of an unfortunate occurrence: *contingo*, i.e. *contango*, indicates that an event accords with one’s wishes; and hence is generally used of fortunate events. As Isid. says, *Differ. 1: Contingunt bona: accidunt mala: eveniunt utraque*.” The reference to the medieval theologian and encyclopedist Isidore of Seville’s *Differentiarum libri*, or *Books of Differences*, reminds us that it is difficult to separate the *indifferent* nature of an event from its *maleficent* character; it is *because* an event is indifferent that it appears maleficent; notwithstanding the existence of *happy accidents* (the very phrase suggesting a marked or exceptional version of an otherwise unmarked and therefore essential category).

Disaster, “but the disaster is perhaps passivity” (3; trans. Smock).⁴ To experience catastrophe is to enter into the condition of passivity. This passivity is directly linked to the externality of the catastrophe: that it appears to arrive from outside the system. That we are not just *passive with respect to* the catastrophe, but *surprised by it*, follows necessarily, I have said, from this externality, but also from the peculiar relation of catastrophe to temporality: for it is not enough to say that the catastrophe happens *swiftly* or *suddenly*: the catastrophe, rather, is *a suspension of temporality itself*. As accident, the catastrophe is a *rupture* in the ordinary scheme of things, or one of the many modalities thereof: an *irruption*, an *eruption*, a *disruption*; let us say, finally, an *interruption*.⁵

Passivity, like surprise, is an attribute of ignorance. But in the experience of catastrophe, ignorance, paradoxically, is a form of knowledge. The catastrophe is not that which exposes the limits of human knowledge; it is the evacuation or transcendence of knowledge; the access to a knowledge beyond knowledge: an *ecstatic* event. In its irruptive or eruptive aspect, the catastrophe takes on the form of a luminous presence: that which was external is now internal; *that* which arrived—or was sent—from without, is now within, is now here, is now present. But what is this *that*? *What* is made present, *what* is revealed, in the advent of the catastrophe? The catastrophe is utterly meaningless, it lies beyond the realm of human apprehension and control. And yet it is precisely because accidents seem to happen for no determinable reason that, by the very same token, they seem to point to a reason, one beyond our fathoming. And so catastrophe becomes a sign of the transcendent; it belongs to the genre of the revelatory, or the *apocalyptic*. The revelatory is that which appears to surpass the semiotic: for in it the evacuation of all meaning coincides with its absolute plenitude.

Before the second plane made its appearance on the scene, the attack on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001 seemed, for many, to possess this revelatory quality of the accident. Just another morning in Manhattan, cleaved by the irruption—sudden, inexplicable, absurd—of violence on an unimaginable scale.⁶ (Later, too, even after explanations

⁴ All translations, in this essay and throughout this volume, are by author unless otherwise noted.

⁵ *Rupture*: according to *Webster's Third New International Dictionary Unabridged*, from the Latin *ruptura*, meaning *fracture* or *break*; from *ruptus*, past participle of *rumpere*, *to break*. The different modalities of *rupture* listed here are visible, like a series of leitmotifs, throughout this study.

⁶ In an article that appeared in the *New York Times* on the occasion of the first anniversary of the attack on the World Trade Center, National Security Adviser

had been offered and intentionalities determined, the public and the press continued to speak of 9/11 in epiphanic terms: as the unleashing of an unholy evil upon the land, an invasion of the sacred territory of the nation by an invisible enemy, a transcendent violence severing past from present.⁷) That 9/11 was the spectacular work of a murderous intentionality, and the realization of a carefully scripted plot, is immaterial here: what is important is that it possesses the form of an accident; indeed, that it was a successful plot was due, in no small part, to the fact that it was carefully designed to look like an accident. I am speaking, of course, of the first plane. The second plane, whose trajectory so neatly mirrors that of the first, thereby makes a mockery of its accidentality.

All great catastrophes present this form: that of a sudden suspension of everyday life. Catastrophe is that which wakes us up from the dream, now revealed as counterfeit, of the ordinary. Pearl Harbor is remembered as a sudden *assault* upon a tranquil morning,⁸ and a wake-up call for a nation.⁹ The assassination of John F. Kennedy was experienced as an *interruption*:

Condoleeza Rice's recollections of the moment when she learned of the attack insist on the attribute of the accidental: "I was standing here, and when my aide said it—a plane struck the World Trade Center—I said, 'What a horrible accident' . . . So I called the president—he was in Florida—and he also thought what a terrible accident" (David E. Sanger, "Where They Were: Frozen in Memory, the First Moments of a Transformed World"). To have thought, with regard to the first plane, "that it was an accident" is a standard feature of this event's recollection, and recited now with almost formulaic piety. In Danielle Hyman's recollections as recorded on a memorial website entitled "Remember September 11, 2001" the accident is framed as a deflection or suspension of the linear sequentiality of an ordinary day: "That morning I drove my daughter to school since I was off from work, I dropped off my rent check—which was late (smile), and I went to the supermarket. I was in Western Beef in the Bronx on 149th Street [when] I heard everyone talking about the news of a plane having hit the World Trade Center. I thought to myself, that's awful and I thought it was an accident."

⁷ The allegorical interpretations of fundamentalist religious groups constitute simply the crudest and most literal version of this epiphanic reading. One website, entitled "Revelation 9," focuses on Revelation 9:11, asking: "Does this verse hold a timely warning to all mankind or is it simply a coincidence of numbers?"

⁸ In a paper presented 22 May 2009 at Kadir Has University, video artist Walid Raad noted the obsessive motif, in accounts of 9/11, of the idyllic weather prior to the attack, the perfect serenity of a blue sky. "But what kind of blue was it?" Raad asked, "Azure? Indigo? Cerulean?" ("Sweet Talk").

⁹ Captain John E. Lacouture, USN (Ret), an Assistant Engineer on the USS *Blue* at Pearl Harbor, recalls being woken up with the phrase "Wake up, wake up! The Japanese are attacking Pearl Harbor!" in his ear ("Oral Histories of the Pearl Harbor Attack, 7 December 1941: Captain John E. Lacouture, USN").

the unencumbered passage of just another November day in Dallas, Texas, the stately procession of a motorcade across Dealey Plaza—cut short by the bullet of the assassin.¹⁰

But in a number of significant respects 9/11 is different from these prior catastrophes with which it is reflexively compared.¹¹ Pearl Harbor and the assassination of Kennedy represented classic assaults upon targets either strategic or synecdochic (or both), by way of extraordinary instruments whose express purpose is the destruction of human life. Part of what made 9/11 so traumatic, in contrast, was that its target was the *ordinary* citizen (the term *terrorism* has been reserved, precisely, for a form of violence that refuses to make distinctions between *extraordinary* and *ordinary* citizens, between legitimate and illegitimate targets) or, if one will, an *ordinary* building, and even more significantly, that it

¹⁰ December 7, 1941; November 22, 1962; September 11, 2001: the holy trinity of catastrophe in the American collective consciousness. Drawing parallels between Pearl Harbor, the assassination of JFK, and the attack on the WTC is now practically *de rigueur*. David Sanger begins his article on Condoleeza Rice thus: “Sometimes a single, awful event can stop and shake a nation so thoroughly that, years later, all its citizens can recall precisely where they were and what they were doing when they heard the news. Dec. 7, 1941, was such a day. So was Nov. 22, 1963. Now there is Sept. 11, 2001.” Andrea Brown’s interview of survivors of Pearl Harbor in the *Colorado Springs Gazette* on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of 9/11 emphasizes the parallels between the events: “Then roaring planes tore across the sunny skies, turning the tranquil day into a nightmare of death and destruction . . . ‘We were not expecting that,’ Elmo Clark said. Those words could describe the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, but these men refer to another ill-fated day, one that came 60 years earlier: Dec. 7, 1941, the day the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor . . . Clark was an 18-year-old teletype operator at Hickam Field in Honolulu when he was ‘bombed out of bed’ on that clear morning in 1941. He was just as startled on Sept. 11, 2001, when his wife called him to come see the live news report on television. ‘My wife said, ‘Sweetie, you better look at this,’ Clark said.’ ‘From then on we were glued to the TV . . . The nation as a whole was in a state of shock. It was almost like when Kennedy was assassinated. Things came to a halt’ . . . Frank Mack, who dodged the bullets of Pearl Harbor . . . saw 9/11 as a wake-up call . . . Walt Himmelberg, who was wounded at Pearl Harbor, said 9/11 resurrected old feelings of fear and disbelief. ‘You see planes, you don’t know what’s happening,’ Himmelberg said. ‘One crashes and you think, ‘Oh my god, an accident.’ You see another one and you suddenly realize, ‘Man, are we starting another Pearl Harbor?’” (“Vets Compare, Contrast Pearl Harbor, 9/11”).

¹¹ Two other twentieth-century events, Hiroshima and the Holocaust, are also regularly invoked in discussions of 9/11, but not, for obvious reasons, with regard to their accidentality. The parallels with these events are considered later in this essay.

achieved the destruction of that target through the most *ordinary* of instruments: that of a passenger airplane, one that appeared to have somehow lost control or strayed off course. 9/11 was thus a catastrophe achieved specifically through the mode of the accident; for the accident is that fate, after all, reserved for the ordinary citizen, passive, ignorant, and taken by surprise (and overtaken by events).

But 9/11 was not only staged to look like an accident, but to expose that very act of staging; to reveal the accident itself (and by extension the accident in general) as a fraud. There were two planes on 9/11, after all, not one. All catastrophe, we have suggested, takes the form of a revelation; but 9/11 has this peculiarity, that it proffers two revelations, not one; the second revelation designed to reveal the duplicity of the first. 9/11, then, is both a catastrophe and a lesson in catastrophe, a meta-catastrophe; a dual or double event, one event and two events, a first event and a second event.

This second event is a reading of the first. In its revelation of the first event, which had appeared arbitrary, indifferent (remember Isidore of Seville on the accident in the *Books of Differences*), and meaningless (and thus transcendent in its meaning), as merely an event like any other—full of meaning in the most banal sense of the term, an effect of human intentionality and empirically verifiable causality, this reading (the reading that constitutes 9/11 itself) is a spectacular reminder of what we had already suspected: that all accidents are accidents only in appearance (their accidentality is an *accident* [*sumbebēkos*], we might say, borrowing the standard term, within the Greek philosophical tradition, for the attribute of an object as distinct from its essence), that *there are no accidents*. The most indifferent object may turn against us when we least expect it. (This brings us back to the traditional target of the terrorist, the *innocent victim*. The terrorist is uniformly condemned for his refusal to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate targets. We leave aside the question, for the time being, of what constitutes a legitimate target. But such condemnation presupposes a moral framework that the terrorist, by virtue of being one, refuses to acknowledge. Terrorism ought to be regarded, rather, as the return, in the name of various ideological causes, to a radically deterministic point of view, one which represents the very basis of Attic tragedy, and from which ethics, in our modern sense of the term, is specifically excluded. From this essentially tragic point of view, all of us are potential victims, regardless of our innocence or guilt. We are grist for the mill, as it were, of a higher cause. And if there are no accidents, it follows, necessarily, that there are no innocent victims.) The ordinariness of the ordinary object is a screen, behind which lurks a mysterious

causality, waiting to manifest itself. But this is as much to say that all *objects are accidents*, waiting, as it were, to happen. Indeed, all objects may be considered counterfeit signs, their banality a mere *accident*, one that masks a malevolent essentiality. This is, then, the epiphany of the second plane: that *the event itself* (for that is what the first plane had seemed to be, the very image of that which simply happens, that which simply arrives¹²) *is an accident*; or, in more apocalyptic terms, that *the event itself is a catastrophe*.

In Paul Virilio's *The Accident of Art*, Sylvère Lotringer, referring to Virilio's 2003 exhibition "Unknown Quantity" at the Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain, which contains footage of various catastrophes from Chernobyl to 9/11, and which Virilio himself calls a "blueprint" for a future "Museum of Accidents," asks if it is truly possible to exhibit the accident, because that which is "most horrifying may not even be perceptible" (93; trans. Taormina). This collection of essays is, in some ways, a testament to that statement, focusing on catastrophe as the trivial, the banal, the everyday (Blanchot, again from *The Writing of the Disaster*: "The disaster: stress upon minutiae, sovereignty of the accidental" [3]). Virilio, however, regards this contagion of the accidental as a uniquely contemporary phenomenon, an integral and necessary by-product of a culture based on *speed*: which is to say, *technology* (or the "acceleration of substance" [99]) and *information* (or "instantaneous communication" [98]). Virilio's argument may be reduced, finally, to this rather trivial proposition: the faster things move, the more likely they are to crash. Accompanied by this corollary: the more likely things are to crash, the more we tend to assume they will, and the less surprised we are when they do: "When you work on speed, you work on accidents. Why? Because there is a loss of control. What is speed, what is acceleration? A loss of control and emotions just as much as a loss of transportation. A plane crashes out of control and crashes more surely the faster it is going" (98). It is difficult to disagree with Virilio's thesis, which amounts, in the end, to a rather old-fashioned critique of the tyranny of technology over the human, an argument cogently and convincingly popularized by films such as the *Matrix* series, and before that the *Terminator* series, and before that Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

To define technology thus, as a progressive acceleration, whether of substance or sense, is a dangerously narrow and literal approach; one that proves, I believe, fatally myopic. (One would have thought it a difficult approach to adopt, in any case, after Heidegger's *The Question concerning*

¹² From the Latin *evenire*, *to happen, to come out*; from *ex, out + venire, to come*.

Technology.) This is ironic, because Virilio's thesis is so explicitly tied to a rigorously historical progression. This is a regular feature of Virilio's methodology. Thus in *Crepuscular Dawn* Virilio argues that different historical eras have different "horizons of expectations" when it comes to catastrophe: since the eighteenth century we have moved from the expectation of "The Great Revolution," to that of "The Great War," and now to "The Great Accident" (176-77; trans. Taormina). Like many of Virilio's assertions, this is too self-evident to be truly interesting; transposed out of its narrow, historicizing framework, however, it is illuminating. Is it possible that we have *always* lived in the Age of the Accident? Isn't this the hidden truth so spectacularly revealed by the events of 9/11? "Accidents," Lotringer asserts in *The Accident of Art*, "*used to be considered an exception, something that shouldn't have happened and would take everyone by surprise. You see them on the contrary as something substantial, even rigorously necessary*" (98; italics mine). But this is precisely wrong: accidents *used to be considered the norm*, something that could happen to anyone, anywhere, anytime. That is the underlying principle at work in classical tragedy; a principle Sophocles' Oedipus learns only when it is too late. That accidents are both substantial and rigorously necessary is something the Greeks knew well; it is we who have forgotten it. Human beings, the Greeks understood, have always been at the mercy of forces infinitely larger than and moving infinitely faster than them.

Virilio makes a crucial distinction in *The Accident of Art* between what he calls the *symbolic* and the *integral accident*, and offers the following diachronic account tracing a trajectory from the former to the latter:

We can no longer ignore the fact that in the 20th century we have gone from a symbolic local accident—the "Titanic" sinking somewhere in the North Atlantic, taking fifteen hundred people to the bottom—to a global accident like Chernobyl, or even what is taking place in genetics or elsewhere. We used to have *in situ* accidents, accidents that had particular, specific impacts; but now there are general accidents, in other words *integral* accidents, accidents that integrate other accidents just as Chernobyl continuously integrated the phenomenon of contamination . . . With Chernobyl we had—but we could just as well use the example of the World Trade Center—a major accident. Why? Because it is a temporal accident . . . And I would insist on this: interactivity is to information (in the fundamental sense of the word information) as radioactivity is to nature. (99-100)

Even a cursory glance at any work of Attic tragedy ought to be enough to suggest how specious this distinction is, like the historical narrative upon

which it depends. For tragedy is founded precisely upon the *integral* or *general* or *temporal* accident as Virilio defines it here. Oedipus' murder of Laius in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* is both rigorously *in situ* and yet inexorably general, an accident that integrates other accidents. What destroys Oedipus, likewise, is the *interactivity* of *information*, which is regarded, through an archaic logic of purity and pollution, as a kind of natural radioactivity (and indeed, at the end of the *Oedipus*, the fallen Oedipus is as radioactive as a piece of plutonium, and must be cast forth with dispatch from the polis). Lotringer asserts: "The accident is no longer local, it is global and permanent, like the sinister satellites that keep orbiting the planet, or the drunken driver whom you quote . . . 'I am an accident waiting to happen.' Accidents are bound to happen and the only question is when and where" (99). But what are the ancient gods, or the causal forces they themselves obey, but *sinister satellites orbiting the planet*? And what is Oedipus, to continue with the example of Classical tragedy, but *an accident waiting to happen*, an accident that happens on the road to Thebes, when Oedipus collides with Laius?

Virilio's work on the accident constitutes, in the end, a surprisingly conservative jeremiad on the wages to be paid for our technological sins. In today's world of "continuous catastrophic information" (106), Virilio argues, what were formerly local events, exceptions to the rule, "have to be connected" to reach "a prospective knowledge of the threat": that "of our own power, of our arrogance" (106). Virilio expresses outrage at the hubris that constituted the building (as opposed to the destruction) of the World Trade Center: "It was extraordinary," he says "to build twelve hundred feet without a structure [that is to say, with no cement core; an omission that, he assures us, would not have been permitted in France], with a single steel weave. But this performance came at the price of an unprecedented catastrophe" (107).¹³ Long before September 11, it was well known that the Twin Towers swayed violently in high winds. Sensors attached to the towers recorded the sounds they emitted in storms. "You can hear the suffering," Virilio comments. This suffering is, for Virilio, the new revelation of the accident. "Aristotle," Lotringer asserts, "thought that 'substance' was absolute and the accident relative. For you it is the reverse"; to which Virilio replies, rather more cautiously: "The accident reveals substance. We could replace the word reveal with the word

¹³ In this scenario one can discern, despite Virilio's assertion of the modernity of the global accident, the shadow of another fallen tower built out of hubris: "And they said, Go, to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make a name, lest we be scattered abroad across the face of the whole earth" (Genesis 11:4).

apocalypse. The apocalypse is a revelation.¹⁴ The accident is,” therefore, “the apocalypse of substance, in other words, its revelation” (107).

But surely this is not a new revelation; indeed, it is, I would suggest, a proper formulation of the Aristotelian position. Virilio sees the writing of disaster (to borrow again from Blanchot) as the signature of a new age; I would suggest it has always been the revelation of substance itself. Substance, I am arguing, for Aristotle as for Virilio, is that which must be tormented into revealing the truth. Indeed, the exigency of hermeneutics in the West is founded on precisely this, essentially Aristotelian premise. We live in a world of things, according to Aristotle, things whose very difference, the one from the other, is a pure accident; a recurrent catastrophe suffered by substance itself. The thing, for Aristotle, is thus a semiotic entity, and a revelatory substance: a veiled sign whose true identity must be teased out or tortured into actuality.

A brief return to Aristotle is perhaps in order. For Aristotle, one will recall, the accident is that which does not belong to the *essence* of a thing. “Essential attributes,” Aristotle asserts in book 1, chapter 4 of the *Posterior Analytics*, are above all “such as belong to their subject as elements in an essential nature” (73a34-35; trans. Mure). Attributes that do not fulfill this condition Aristotle calls “accidents or ‘coincidents’” (73b4). Aristotle continues in book 1, chapter 4 of the *Posterior Analytics*: “that is essential which is not predicated of a subject other than itself . . . whereas substance . . . is not what it is in virtue of being something else besides. Things, then, not predicated of a subject I call *essential* [*kath’ auta*]; things predicated of a subject I call *accidental* [*sumbebēkota*]” (73b5-10). This formulation is echoed in book 7, chapter 4 of the *Metaphysics*, when Aristotle asserts: “The essence of each thing is to be what is said to be *propter se*” (1029b14; trans. Ross).

We live, then, in a world of predication: a world in which objects are individuated or categorized with regard to their external attributes or accidents. Such predicates, Aristotle indicates in chapter 4 of the *Categories*, include expressions of “quantity, quality, relation, place, time, position, state, action, or affection” (1b25-26; trans. Edghill). But substance itself, Aristotle asserts in chapter 5 of the *Categories*, substance “in the truest and primary and most definite sense of the word, is that which is neither predicable of a subject nor present in a subject; for instance, the individual man or horse” (2a11-13). (The categories which we predicate of true substance, or within which we include it, are for

¹⁴ *Apocalypse*: from the Greek *apokaluptō*; in Liddell and Scott, to *disclose*, to *reveal*.

Aristotle substances only in a secondary sense.) It is because the attributes of an object are considered to *befall* it in the manner of an *accident* (in the common parlance), that they can be considered *accidents* (in the philosophical sense, i.e., *attributes*) in the first place. Thus, for Aristotle, the blueness of a chair, or the position of a bird (or an airplane) in flight, is an accident. Things are what they are, or the way they are (which is to say, they belong to certain categories, they are distinct from one another), by way of accidents: infinitesimal catastrophes. Imagine, now, a world without distinctions, without categories, without predicates, without signs: a world without accidents. It is a fantasy that has seduced many a philosopher in the West; as it has many a paranoid schizophrenic, many a conspiracy theorist, and many a terrorist; for in the realm of paranoia, conspiracy, and terrorism, as in the noumenal realm of the metaphysician, there are no accidents.

But where, in the realm of the accident, to locate the essence of things? That this is, for Aristotle, a revelatory question, is what Virilio seems to have forgotten; for it is, according to Aristotle, in the nature of things not to *be*, but to *become*; to reveal their nature through a process of actualization, or *entelechy* (*entelekheia*). All substance, Aristotle asserts in book 8, chapter 2 of the *Metaphysics*, can be said to exist in three ways: “one kind of it as matter, another as form or actuality, while the third kind is that which is composed of these two” (1043a28-29). By matter Aristotle refers, in book 8, chapter 1, to “that which, not being a ‘this’ actually, is potentially a ‘this’” (1042a27-28). Of course in objects as we know them, form and matter are combined: “the proximate matter and the form are one and the same thing, the one potentially, and the other actually . . . for each thing is a unity, and the potential and the actual are somehow one” (8.6, 1045b17-21).

That it is in the nature of all things to attain full being by moving from potentiality to actuality is, one can see, not only a teleological principle, but an apocalyptic one. In book 2, chapter 1 of *On the Soul* (*De anima*), Aristotle clarifies this principle: “We are in the habit of recognizing, as one determinate kind of what is, substance, and that in several senses, (a) in the sense of matter or that which in itself is not ‘a this,’ and (b) in the sense of form or essence, which is that precisely in virtue of which a thing is called ‘a this,’ and thirdly (c) in the sense of that which is compounded of both (a) and (b). Now matter is *potentiality* [*dunamis*], form *actuality* [*entelekheia*]; of the latter there are two grades related to one another as e.g. knowledge to the exercise of knowledge” (412a6-11; trans. Smith). *Entelechy* (often translated as *actualization* or *fulfillment*) is Aristotle’s term for that full being which exists potentially in all objects, and which

drives the actualization of that potential. 9/11 looks as if it were designed precisely to demonstrate, in decisive fashion, the principle of *entelechy*; for it is only with the second plane that the potential of the first may be said to be actualized. In the cataclysmic spectacle that is 9/11 the apocalyptic nature of all such actualization is revealed.

Catastrophe as Interruption: The Ecstasy of the Sign

We live out our lives as a sequence or syntax of ordinary events. What 9/11 appeared to reveal is the terrifying aspect of the event as incision, as rupture, as *asyndeton*.¹⁵ (These are above all the attributes of the first plane, with which the dual events of 9/11 are often identified; for the first plane is to the events of 9/11 as 9/11, understood as unitary event, is to everything else. The second plane did not have this incisive force; on the contrary, it functioned to suture what the first plane had severed.) An idyllic sky torn by the trajectory of an errant plane; a tower cleaved in two; a past abruptly severed from a present; an *us* from a *them*.¹⁶ Through the force of this rupture, the very notions of temporality and territory appear to have been fractured (but therefore, we will see, necessarily reconfigured and reconstituted), surpassed, and thereby rendered obsolete. For many in America, and indeed around the world, the attack upon the World Trade Center seemed to be the end of our world as we knew it. (And yet 9/11 was thus, one can see, an event that precipitated a certain *we*, for a time, into existence, a coalition, all too ephemeral, as it proved, of individual or communal or national subjectivities.¹⁷)

¹⁵ According to Smyth's *Greek Grammar*: "Two or more sentences (or words) independent in form and thought, but juxtaposed, *i.e.* coordinated without any connective, are *asyndetic* (from *asundetion not bound together*), and such absence of connectives is *asyndeton*" (484).

¹⁶ The tropes of scission and segmentation in representations of the first moment of the attack on the WTC are recurrent; thus, from James Barron's essay commemorating the second anniversary of 9/11 on 11 September 2003, "Another 9/11, and the Nation Mourns Again": "At the White House, President Bush and his staff observed a moment of silence at 8:46 a.m., the time the first plane sliced into the north tower."

¹⁷ September 11 appears to have turned us all into Americans, at least in the initial wake of the attack; by which I mean to say that it revealed a camaraderie born, not out of kindred national identities, but common apocalyptic fantasies. Recall Jean-Marie Colombani's famous editorial that appeared in the French newspaper *Le Monde* the day after the attack: "We Are All Americans" ("Nous sommes tous Américains").

This was the cataclysm many had long been waiting for: an irruption of violence so sudden, and so spectacular, that it seemed to signal the passage from one world—our world, the world of meaning, beset by ambiguities and contradictions—to another: a realm beyond meaning, or marked by a meaning so transcendent as to have no discernable content. (And yet content soon returned with a vengeance: the end of one world is necessarily the beginning of another.) The event seemed thus to mark a *rupture* with history itself (or was it merely an *interruption*, an *interlude*, an *interpolation*, a *parenthesis*, like this one, albeit of cataclysmic proportions?).

Only moments after the attack, one began to hear the now familiar refrain: *things will never be the same after 9/11*.¹⁸ (Of course the event, even as it was happening, or by virtue of it happening, was already being drawn into history, tied to other events, other catastrophes, just as it, too, would lead to new events, new catastrophes—in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in England, in Spain. The logic of integration and interactivity referred to by Virilio is all too evident here, as we will see. Still, in the first moment the magnitude of this disaster seemed almost liberatory, rendering ordinary concerns and personal anxieties insignificant. In that moment, things seemed to be *clear*.) As in the case of other classic disasters before it (Pearl Harbor, JFK, Hiroshima, etc.), the events of September 11 appeared to put an end (for a time at least) to the interminable and trivial business of speculation and analysis.¹⁹ This is the insistent message of a speech President Bush delivers at the World Congress Center on 8 November 2001 (“President George W. Bush’s Day on November 8, 2001 in Atlanta and Washington”). We are, Bush declares, now “learning to live in a world that seems very different than it was on September the 10th”; we are, he continues a moment later, “a different country than we were on September the 10th, sadder and less innocent.”²⁰ Seven years after the attack, an

¹⁸ The trope remains ubiquitous. An article in the *Indianapolis Star* from 24 January 2004 reviewing the events of September 11 is entitled “The Day Everything Changed.” For the more parochial version, see the speech made by Senator Dianne Feinstein on the floor of the Senate on the second anniversary of the event, “Reflecting on 9/11—America Will Never Be the Same.”

¹⁹ I cite in passing here the title of a children’s book entitled *Things Will Never Be the Same*. A reader’s review of the book on Amazon’s website by Elaine Lesh Morgan concludes: “The book’s title comes from the last chapter in which the author remembers the impact on his family of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Children who remember 9/11 will identify with his feeling that ‘things will never be the same.’”

²⁰ In an article in the *New York Times* on the general mood of the American public during the 2008 presidential primaries, “Voters Show Darker Mood Than in 2000,” Kevin Sack writes: “Certainly, some Americans remain bullish. Charles K.

address delivered by Bush during the commemorative ceremony held at the site of the former WTC began thus: “Seven years ago, at this hour, a doomed airliner plunged from the sky, split the rock and steel of this building. And changed our world forever” (“Nation Remembers 9/11, Victims”). Such formulations suggest to what extent the motif of the *world changed utterly*²¹ depends on the trope of incision, again, but transferred to the temporal domain.

Was 9/11 truly the wake-up call that roused the American leviathan from its deep and delusory sleep of innocence? It seems improbable that a single event, even on the scale of 9/11, could be the catalyst transforming, overnight, that essential American birthright, optimism, into a darker and deeper wisdom. That the events of September 11 could appear to effect such a transformation suggests, rather, that America’s famous optimism has always been the other side of the coin of its equally persistent pessimism: that both its optimism and its pessimism are part and parcel of the same essentially *teleological* mindset. “No culture in the world,” writes Jonathan Raban, in an essay in the *Guardian* entitled “Pastor Bush,” has elevated ‘faith,’ in and of itself . . . to the status it enjoys in the United States: faith in God, or the future, or the seemingly impossible, which is the core of the American Dream.” But God, and the Future (and the Seemingly Impossible), I would suggest, are really the same thing when it comes to Americans, who may be said to *believe in* the former the same way they *believe in* the latter: as something that actually exists. America, after all, has always seen itself as a parthenogenetic nation, uncorrupted by history; born not of the traumas of the past but the possibilities of the future.²² Futurism is America’s true homegrown religion, and in this it is

Spencer, a 71-year-old investment adviser who lives in the Kansas City suburbs, said he was ‘unabashedly optimistic’ about the future facing his four grandchildren . . . But the more common theme, that of innocence lost, was voiced by Erwin L. Eppie, 54, and his wife, Fumiyo, 64, who were in Washington on Sept. 11, 2001, and saw the smoke rising from the Pentagon. ‘We said that day that our grandchildren will grow up in a different world, assuming the worst about people instead of the best . . .’”

²¹ A reference to the refrain of W. B. Yeats’ poem “Easter 1916.”

²² John L. O’Sullivan’s famous essay “The Great Nation of Futurity,” written in 1839, is perhaps the iconic statement of this futurist credo: “We have, in reality, but little connection with . . . past history . . . and still less with all antiquity, its glories, or its crimes. On the contrary, our national birth was the beginning of a new history, the formation and progress of an untried political system, which separates us from the past and connects us with the future only; and so far as regards the entire development of the natural rights of man, in moral, political, and national life, we may confidently assume that our country is destined to be the

distinct, to some extent, from other nations, whose sense of self-identity is almost always founded on the ritual resurrection of the past and the collective commemoration of historical trauma.²³

But let me be more precise: Americans do not merely believe in the future as something that *exists*, as in some abstract or inchoate state; they believe in the future as something that *exists now*. The American Dream is a fantasy of and in the *future perfect*, where setting out to do something is the same as having already done it.²⁴ Temporality, governed by such a conviction, is both *teleological* (that is, we do not simply move forward in time, time carries us to a specific destination) and *tautological* (because we have, in effect, *already* arrived there). While “faith in the future” may seem to be just another way of describing a persistent optimism that Americans like to believe, is one of their most endearing traits, it is more precisely an *apocalyptic* point of view: time understood both as a means to an *end*, and as a *revealing of that end* (*apokaluptō*: to disclose or unveil). America has always been an eschatological nation, wedded to destinies, manifest and esoteric. But the rise of evangelical faith in recent years, as well as evangelical politics (a politics based essentially in fear), suggests a cruder semioticization of history: the tendency to read events as *signs*

great nation of futurity” (426). On O’Sullivan’s vision of manifest destiny see Amy Kaplan’s *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (30-31).

²³ Hence the role played by collective celebrations of trauma in various national traditions, such as Holocaust Day in Israel, or the more generic “National Humiliation Day” recently proposed by the National People’s Congress in China. In a recent article in the *New York Review of Books* on China’s thin-skinned sense of national pride in the context of the 2008 Olympics, Orville Schell wrote: “As a result of the insulting terms of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, by which the West cravenly gave Germany’s concessions in China to Japan, an expression, *wuwang guochi*, ‘Never forget our national humiliation,’ became a common slogan in China. Indeed, to ignore China’s national failure came to be seen as unpatriotic. Since then, Chinese historians and ideological overseers have never ceased to mine China’s putative past sufferings ‘to serve the political, ideological, rhetorical, and/or emotional needs of the present,’ as the historian Paul Cohen has put it . . . In 2001, the National People’s Congress even passed a law proclaiming an official ‘National Humiliation Day.’ (However, so many historical dates were proposed that delegates could not agree on any one, and thus, no day was designated, although one of the leading candidates is now September 18, the day in 1931 that Japan began its invasion of Manchuria.)”

²⁴ A dream that depends on the logic of the *hermeneutic circle*, as described by Schleiermacher, in which, to one degree or another, setting out to understand something is, in effect, the same as having already understood it.

pointing to an unalterable future.²⁵ (Temporality, understood in these *apocalyptic* terms, is effectively a *genre* or a *form*; that, more precisely of *tragedy*: a discursive structure designed to reveal the ineluctability of its end, one in which the protagonist is complicit.)

The truth is, we are tired. We have been in that business—the business of reading signs—for a long time now. This is the business, as I refer to it throughout this volume, of *hermeneutics*. But what is it we are looking for, when we read? A reason to stop reading: the end of meaning; that is, both the cessation of a long search, and the fulfillment of its true purpose. It has been the fate of the West for most of its long history to be consumed in the act of waiting.²⁶ Like the jaded citizens of Constantine Cavafy’s, “Waiting for the Barbarians,” we always suspected the barbarians were at the gate. It had served our purposes to know they were out there. Indeed, we had looked forward to their coming, not just with a sense of dread, but with something approaching relief. (Blanchot: “The disaster takes care of everything” [3].) The order of our lives, like those of Cavafy’s generic polis, had been founded entirely on teleological and, indeed, eschatological principles.

What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?

The barbarians are due here today.

Why isn't anything happening in the senate?
Why do the senators sit there without legislating?

Because the barbarians are coming today.
What laws can the senators make now?
Once the barbarians are here, they'll do the legislating . . .

Why this sudden restlessness, this confusion?
(How serious people's faces have become.)
Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,
everyone going home so lost in thought?

²⁵ Hence the prodigious success of Christian sci-fi thrillers like Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins’ *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth’s Last Days* (1995). Meanwhile, the color-coded Homeland Security Warning System, implemented post-9/11 (and phased out in 2011) obliges Americans to live in a permanent state of vigilance; as if the apocalypse is always about to happen.

²⁶ Blanchot: “When the disaster comes upon us, it does not come. The disaster is in its imminence, but since the future, as we conceive of it in the order of lived time, belongs to the disaster, the disaster has already withdrawn or dissuaded it; there is no future for the disaster, just as there is no time or space for its accomplishment” (1-2).

Because night has fallen and the barbarians have not come.
 And some who have just returned from the border say
 there are no barbarians any longer.

And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
 They were, those people, a kind of solution. (17-18; trans. Keeley)

But the catastrophe that arrived was not the one we had been waiting for. It may be that the true catastrophe of 9/11, as in the polis of Cavafy, is that there was no catastrophe. What if there is nothing to wait for?

Consider the testimony of one of these citizens of the polis, ecstatic at the prospect of the barbarians, no longer at the gate, but already inside the city. The relief that the wait is over is palpable. Oriana Fallaci's apoplectic diatribe, *The Rage and the Pride*, written in the weeks following the attack on the WTC, rests on the premise that the categorical and hermeneutical imperatives are irreconcilable, and indeed that the first always supplants the second. A bad piece of writing: bad ideas, badly written. But Fallaci makes a convenient virtue of this badness, posing as a prophet in the desert, too righteously angry to measure her words or weigh her ideas. Now is not the time for critical dispassion but for arms: "like a soldier who jumps out of the trench and launches himself against the enemy," Fallaci recalls in the preface, "I jumped on my typewriter [an image that gives one pause] and started doing the only thing I could do: write" (20). In Fallaci's own description of the genesis of *The Rage and the Pride*, writing is a form of action, more physical than intellectual; as if writing and thinking, or writing and reading, were mutually exclusive acts. If the text remains, necessarily, a semiotic enterprise, it is on the order of an exclamation or interjection: a spit in the face (57), or an "unrestrainable cry" (21), or a "scream of rage and pride" (22).

Despite this apparent rejection of the interpretive gesture, *The Rage and the Pride* remains, in the end, a very traditional *reading* of catastrophe: one founded on the inherently contradictory proposition that the time for reading is over. Catastrophe is represented in this text as a sudden rupture with the past. Fallaci portrays her own decision to write, similarly, as a rupture with a personal *status quo* of silence (a moral and therefore eloquent *status quo*): "there are moments in Life when keeping silent becomes a fault, and speaking an obligation. A civic duty, a moral challenge, a categorical imperative from which we cannot escape. Thus, eighteen days after the New York apocalypse, I broke my silence. . . And now I interrupt (I do not break, I interrupt) my exile with this small-book" (17-18). This interruption is parallel to that effected by the attack itself; but that this attack is itself a mere interruption of the *status quo* (like her