



## Morbid Psyche and Apocalypse: Jaspers, Baudrillard, and Altizer

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**Abstract:** In *General Psychopathology*, Jaspers' philosophical hermeneutics of pathological conditions, melancholy, depression, and schizophrenia proposes the existence of a correlation between pathology and creativity, metaphysical and religious worldviews. This correlation provides the existential ground for his notion of critical liminality (boundary or limit situation) as sine qua non thresholds to the dialectics of the abysmal and the transcendent. Jean Baudrillard and Thomas J. J. Altizer propose a cultural hermeneutic and a radical apocalyptic theology, respectively, that both investigate the significance of postmodern depression. Postmodern depression lacks creativity. While Baudrillard interprets it as a symptom of our virtual reality of simulacra that has lost its flesh, Altizer reads in it the signs of the end of Western self-consciousness and, ultimately, the herald of apocalypse. Jaspers' hermeneutical correlation still stands: depression is a cipher for the critical liminality of our postmodern times, times of apocalyptic radical endings and new beginnings; a cipher and ground of a new axial age.

In this essay I investigate the relevance of psychic pathos, found in Jaspers' philosophical speculation on melancholy as boundary existential situation,<sup>1</sup> the apocalyptic depression deplored by Thomas Altizer,<sup>2</sup> and the melancholy of systems noted by Jean

Baudrillard.<sup>3</sup> Discerning the meaning of these three modes of being or interpretations will provide a privileged access to contemporary self-consciousness.

For Jaspers, mental morbidity is a paradoxical privileged locus of suffering and creativity, a boundary situation whose observation begins with case studies and develops into philosophical elaboration; for Altizer, the death of God is God's progressive self-kenosis into the world, hence the end of transcendence and the

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Jaspers, *General Psychopathology*, transl. Julius Hoenig and Marian W. Hamilton, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1964. Karl Jaspers, *Strindberg et van Gogh; Swedenborg—Hölderlin*, trans. Hélène Naef, Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1953.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Postmodern Melancholy* and *The Advent of the Nothing*, two unpublished manuscripts, cited and used with the author's permission.

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<sup>3</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997. [Henceforth cited as *SS*] Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*, trans. James Benedict, New York: Verso, 1993.

reign of immanence as the apocalyptic *coincidentia oppositorum*. Altizer detects a depressive mood or ontological boredom that is becoming the contemporary mood par excellence; this is not the existential dark mood, nor the Romantic melancholy, but a thinning out of consciousness, a growing emptiness that seems to correspond to a uniquely modern Nothing. He questions whether such uniquely modern human mood can still be redemptive, and what redemption may mean for late modernity. Baudrillard notes the postmodern "melancholy of systems" caused by the technological actualization of our poetic and theological metaphors, one that seems closed to any genuine deepening of self-consciousness.

Altizer, Baudrillard, and Jaspers are intrigued and disturbed by the potentialities of a psychic atmosphere: individual and collective pathologies are investigated as apocalyptically revealing or concealing, providing or forbidding access into the centre of being or of meaning—an interesting encounter occurs that illuminates the three different perspectives as follows.

#### Thomas Altizer and Jean Baudrillard

One aspect of the hermeneutic ground shared by Altizer, the apocalyptic theologian, and Baudrillard, the atheological theorist of culture, is concern for the ontological transformation suffered by postmodern self-consciousness. The inquiry unfolds into the metaphysics of a postmodern subjectivity that lives out intimately the death or absence of the Christian God, and shows some of the philosophical and cultural implications of this theological death in the crepuscular light of our times.

If the soul experiences the death or absence of God through what Ricoeur calls *meontological* moods—moods in which the void of nonbeing emerges—both Baudrillard and Altizer specify melancholy or depression as the postmodern mood par excellence. Altizer's theology celebrates this death as God's progressive kenosis into Creation, Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection; thus the fulfillment of the Incarnation is a total inversion of transcendence into immanence, a God *en abime*—an absolute *coincidentia oppositorum*. Naturally, this progressive event presupposes a turn toward interiority, since a prime locus of this *coincidentia oppositorum* is our torn consciousness.

Arguably, there is hardly a more significant mode of this, our paradoxical postmodern subjective body, than the meontological mood of melancholy. Indeed, in "Postmodernity and Guilt," an unpublished manuscript

andante coda to *The New Gospel of Christian Atheism*,<sup>4</sup> Altizer reflects on postmodern melancholic consciousness:

So it is that an ancient melancholy is passing into a truly new depression, a depression wholly beyond all possible individual enactment, and hence beyond all individual responsibility, but precisely thereby it is all comprehensive as melancholy cannot possibly be.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, in a remarkably similar vein, Baudrillard muses on the novum of postmodernity in the last chapter of *SS*, "On Nihilism":

It is this melancholia that is becoming our fundamental passion...Melancholia is the fundamental tonality of functional systems, of current systems of simulation, of programming and information. Melancholia is the inherent quality of the mode of the disappearance of meaning, of the mode of the volatilization of meaning in operational systems. And we are all melancholic. [*SS* 162]

If indeed depression is all comprehensive today and melancholia is becoming our fundamental passion, the passion of postmodernity par excellence, world philosophy must begin here, with the melancholic condition or, in Heidegger's terms, the contemporary ontological attunement to melancholy and profound boredom, one in which the dead God resurfaces in the soul.<sup>6</sup>

Thus our task will be to understand Altizer's all-comprehensive depression and Baudrillard's melancholic passion philosophically. Altizer's interrogation of the meaning of the prevalent contemporary mood as "a melancholy from which guilt is totally absent," and which is reduced to "a comprehensive depression," takes on anguished tones. Altizer observes an unexpected innocence, the innocence of the amnesiac murderer of God and self. As postmodern citizens we do not need to appeal to the memory pill, as we have already discarded our historical consciousness by pursuing the instant and

<sup>4</sup> Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The New Gospel of Christian Atheism*, Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Postmodernity and Guilt*, unpublished manuscript written in March 2005, quoted with permission of the author.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Awakening a Fundamental Attunement in our Philosophizing" in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1995, pp. 59–167.

vicarious satisfaction of virtual instantaneity and simultaneity. In revolting against the concept of sin and choosing instead the false freedom of the victim, postmodernity, living without the memory of its past history, becomes innocent: it loses its guilt, but, with it, memory as well, incurring loss of the unity of the self, its self-identity, its courage and self-responsibility; it loses Transcendence and becomes fully immanent.

In the absence of the melancholic torment of self-contradiction and guilt, the postmodern becomes indifferent or depressed. Now innocent through amnesia and indifference, the postmodern consciousness regresses, reduced back into a seed, or it simply dissolves, attaining—as Nietzsche's guilty consciousness dreamt—the easy bliss of the cow or the infant.<sup>7</sup> An apocalyptic theologian such as Altizer is profoundly disturbed by this guiltless consciousness that according to him reveals total inner emptiness and mutely witnesses to the end of self-consciousness and its history, a history that began with the agony of self-contradiction of guilt in Paul and Augustine. He distinguishes between melancholy as a condition marked principally by a sense of guilt, even a delirium of guilt, and the contemporary manifestation of depression or apathy, from which guilt is totally absent. As a fully dialectical theologian, Altizer can nonetheless discern in this apocalypse of self-consciousness—its dissolution into absolute emptiness—the womb, *chora*, of absolute fullness, which is the fullness of a new heaven and a new earth.

Although Baudrillard names the postmodern state of consciousness as melancholy, his description belies this and lets appear the undifferentiated mood of transparency or emptiness that Altizer calls depression, characterized by a guiltless innocence. He too sees this consciousness as being outside the dialectical life and polarity proper to self-consciousness.

Disappearance, aphanis, implosion, Fury of *Verschwindens*. Transpolitics is the elective sphere of the mode of disappearance (of the real, of meaning, of the stage, of history, of the social, of the individual). [I]n disappearance, in the desertlike, aleatory and indifferent form, there is no longer even pathos, the pathetic of nihilism—that mythical energy that is still the force of

nihilism, of radicality, of mythic denial, dramatic anticipation...It is simply disappearance. [SS 162]

Here, Baudrillard refers to a melancholy that is "incurable and beyond any dialectic" and, unlike Altizer, refrains from interpreting the inner transparency and void as the womb of the novum.

Altizer's lamentation in the face of postmodern depression qua guiltless innocence or amnesia, and Baudrillard's critique of the melancholic transparency of virtual eternity, respectively, have to do not with melancholy but, on the contrary, with the absence of melancholic madness, a default of the Other than reason, an impoverishing lack of polarity and the dialectics of life. Altizer laments in postmodernity precisely the absence of self-dividedness, which is the ground of self-contradiction and guilt, but also of profound sorrow and joy that only a deepening self-consciousness can make possible. Meanwhile, Baudrillard notes the loss of the body and emphasizes the transparency of postmodern consciousness: God's nature and dark basis, its incarnating power, has been lost, according to Baudrillard, in the disembodiment of virtual reality that de-realizes the ontology of the body. The body has been sacrificed for the sake of the promise of a disembodied freedom. In the desert of postmodern reality, bodies are transparent, they do not cast shadows; they are already dead, or demonic, deprived even of bloody vampiric urges.

Altizer views the divine kenosis as a Hegelian historical unfolding that originates with creation and ends with the Crucifixion-Resurrection. This last event is the parousia, the fullness of time, the all in all, in which Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Apocalypse coincide. The kenosis of God begun with Creation is now fulfilled: there is nothing left of the transcendent God, since God has completely emptied himself into the world. The world is now the divine dead body. Altizer's Creation is a cosmic Eucharistic sacrifice, God's total offering of himself to the world. This movement itself is also a fall into infinite abyss where God becomes his own Other: a perfect inversion and *coincidentia oppositorum*. If this is now occurring in the fullness of time, what can follow but a new heaven and a new earth, an absolute novum made possible only by this apocalyptic death of God? For Altizer the death of God is truly an historical enactment of God's own sacrifice, a Hegelian movement of the spirit toward its fulfillment actualized in total incarnation, which is total kenosis.

<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983, reprint 1996, p. 61.

As a Hegelian, Altizer follows the total kenosis of God into its Other without remainder as an apocalypse that is being fulfilled in postmodernity but was initiated *ab origine*. The apocalyptic *parousia* is kairotically fulfilled in the world of creation and time, where God is all in all but as a God *en abyme*, or as God's Other.

What is the ground and meaning of postmodern mood? Altizer interprets the guiltless depression as a sign of the end of self-consciousness; it thus appears as if in response to God's death or eclipse, consciousness withdraws. Baudrillard, in his turn, refers to the brave new world that has gradually replaced modernity with the nothing and can be named only apocalyptically—as a "post-" in the aftermath of the disappearance of our concepts of life and history.

As Baudrillard observes, due to the acceleration of technological advances, we are living now the actualization of our sublime and obsessive metaphors; from Descartes' mind in a vat of virtual computerized hyperreality to Hegel's spurious infinite of cloned eternity. Nietzsche was prophetic in his abhorrence of Platonism, and of the Platonism for the masses, Christianity. Like Schelling before him, as well as Kierkegaard, he recognized the dehumanizing potential inherent in idealism and rationalism; in any idea abstracted from the body, or as Schelling put it, "the unresisting ether of the concept," "lacking true life."<sup>8</sup> Baudrillard laments the literalism of the hermeneutics that grounds this actualization of our dreams and desires. Not being a theologian, but a theorist of culture with Marxist leanings, Baudrillard refuses to transcend in theological hope, philosophical paradox, or dialectics the desert of the postmodern hyperreality. Baudrillard would agree with Houellebecq's speculation in his own apocalyptic utopia, that we are living through the third (and last for us) metaphysical crisis or change of metaphysical paradigm—the first having been the advent of Christianity, and the second the medieval discovery of science that replaced the former—that is, from the human to the posthuman.<sup>9</sup> The postmodern shift in metaphysical paradigm ushers us out of the human world of polarity, of evil and freedom, of love and

death, and into a Hegelian spurious infinite of the technological eternity of the artificially human. Kierkegaard's nightmarish Hegelianism, in which the spirit has marched over the individual in the infamous leap of *Aufhebung*, is being actualized in the taking over of the world by the systems, the web spun by the spider of Socrates' reason, thus realizing Nietzsche's apocalyptic and prophetic warning against the irrationality of excessive rationality; as if the cunning of reason is fulfilling our innermost desire, that of self-transcendence, in a perverse way; as if a malign demiurge demonically playing God, is mockingly fulfilling our petitionary prayers and actualizing our dream literally: self-transcendence as a leaping over ourselves, a going beyond our humanity, our own jumping over the moon (pace Kierkegaard); or as if an ancient Greek divinity is punishing by saturation our hubris. The hellish punishment, paradoxically, is literal fulfillment as a mock fulfillment ensured by a literally minded demiurge, a lesser god, or by God's Other, that thus ends dream, longing, and desire. Baudrillard calls this the saturation of systems, whose offspring is melancholia:

Melancholia is the brutal affection that characterizes our saturated systems. Once the hope of balancing good and evil, true and false, indeed of confronting some values of the same order, once the more general hope of a relation of forces and a stake has vanished. Everywhere, always, the system is too strong, hegemonic. [SS 163]

Heidegger tried again and again to understand whether Schelling could find a place for both freedom and the system. In his commentary on Schelling's *Treatise on Freedom*, Heidegger discusses the will to a system of freedom and the "not-yet" of the Ground.<sup>10</sup> At

<sup>8</sup> F. W. J. von Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, trans. Andrew Bowie, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994, p. 146 and p. 143.

<sup>9</sup> Michel Houellebecq, *The Elementary Particles*, trans. Frank Wynne, New York: Vintage International, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, Athens: Ohio University Press, 1985. [Henceforth cited as *STE*] If the *will to system* appears only with modernity and reaches fulfillment in German Idealism, German Protestantism through Nicolaus Cusanus, Luther, Sebastian Frank, and Jacob Boehme and Albrecht Dürer had already inscribed itself on that path. In this process, Heidegger believes, "through German Protestantism in the Reformation not only Roman dogma was changed, but also the Roman-Oriental form of the Christian experience of Being was transformed" to accommodate a wider horizon (*STE* 31). System in its true sense as "the conscious joining of the jointure and coherence of Being itself" (*STE* 28) is the true task of philosophy, according to Heidegger, and "[t]he possibility of the system of knowledge and the will to system as a

the end of his questioning Heidegger concludes that "freedom's incomprehensibility consists in the fact that it resists comprehension since...freedom transposes us into the occurrence of Being, not in the mere representation of it" (*STE* 162). This is a clear affirmation of the fundamental impossibility of a system of freedom, or of comprehending the incomprehensible in a system of freedom, because it is the essential nature of freedom to evade conceptual encapsulation. The impossibility of "the jointure of Being" (as Heidegger defines system) to contain freedom affirms freedom as essentially disruptive and conceptually unknowable.

The demonic actualization of our hyper-rational visions in the web of systems appears to illustrate for us today the sin of erroneous or intentionally perverse interpretation, limited and literal, in the form of a man-made artifact, literally, a *paradis artificiel*, a paradise from which the tree of good and evil is absent and where the tree of life bears artificial or virtual fruit; a barren topos, a desert. Indeed, Baudrillard insists that the hyper real world of postmodernity situates itself outside the dialectical play of polarity, a beyondness that explains its dead and deadening nature; it is according to him, "a simulated transparency of all things...a simulacrum of the materialist or idealist realization of the world in hyperreality." The culmination of Baudrillard's vision of apocalyptic negation of apocalypse or simulacrum of the novum reaches its mock parousia with the metamorphosis of God: in the world of the virtual, "God is not dead, he has become hyperreal" (*SS* 159). Hyperreal God, outside polarity, nature, and life, the desert of reality or the spurious infinity of a *paradis artificiel*—is not that rather an actualization of Hell? Or is it beyond both Heaven and Hell? If the latter, then, is it a complete

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manner of rediscovering the human being are the essential characteristics of the modern period" (*STE* 29). System is made possible by and assures the predominance of the mathematical and the self-certainty of thinking as the law of being and criterion for truth (*STE* 30); but, equally importantly, system involves "freeing man to himself" understood as "a setting free of man in the middle of beings as a whole, that totality (God-world-man) [must be] understood and ordered in terms of a unity of a jointure and as such a unity," "the freeing of man to freedom in the middle of beings as a whole" (*STE* 32). But the will to a system of freedom appears as the will to comprehend the in-comprehensible. Heidegger's reflections on Schelling polarize around this heroic attempt, this cause manquée.

reversal or withdrawal out of creation and into the Absolute Indifference of the before-the-beginning? Indeed, Baudrillard explains it as the translation of the actual world into its simulation, which eliminates the mystery of Incarnation. By entering its mirrored image and assuming a virtual existence, postmodernity inhabits the land of the shadows and lives its own death eternally. One could conclude that Baudrillardian postmodernity is living through its damnation. The bodies have been judged and will not be raised.

What is ultimately lamented in Baudrillard's hyperreality is a paradoxical twofold: the actualization of human aspirations, dreams, and metaphors, on the one hand; on the other, the loss of the body. Both "transcend" the Incarnation. All Gnostic idealisms and rationalisms, as well as literal materialism, are refusals of Incarnation. The *Lebensphilosophies* and *Naturphilosophie* of a Boehme or a Schelling, of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, all manifest concern for the preservation of the Christian mystery of Incarnation and the sacredness of the person. Moreover, Boehme and Schelling consider Incarnation as the *telos* of God's manifestation.

Confronted with the postmodern mode of disappearance of both body and dream, Baudrillard identifies three historical modes of nihilism: the Romantic, the surrealist, and the postmodern. The distinctions are significant for the curve of the *Zeitgeist* toward an eschatological moment: the Romantic nihilism destroyed the order of appearances; the surrealist nihilism undid the order of meaning; postmodern nihilism has transparency and has to do with the order of disappearance and its paradoxical accelerated inertia. He describes the latter's entropic excess: "A destiny of inertia for a saturated world. The phenomena of inertia are accelerating (if one can say that). The arrested forms proliferate, and growth is arrested in excrescence. Such is also the secret of hypertelie, of what goes further than its own end" (*SS* 161).

The hypertelic nature of this reality or rather hyperreality points to a cancerous proliferation beyond oneself, to the saturation of the system of hyperreality; it is a system without precedent, at least in the ontological orders we have witnessed to date. Although Baudrillard likes to identify melancholia of the system as our fundamental passion, and writes about eschatological crisis, he denies postmodern nihilism the darkness and apocalypticism previously associated in our imagination with the final ending:

Nihilism no longer wears the dark, Wagnerian, Spenglerian, fuliginous colors of the end of the century. It no longer comes from a Weltanschauung of decadence nor from a metaphysical radicality born of the death of God and of all the consequences that must be taken from this death. Today's nihilism is one of transparency and it is in some sense more radical, more crucial than in its prior and historical forms, because this transparency, this irresolution is indissolubly that of the system, and that of all the theory that still pretends to analyze it. [SS 159]

The nihilism of transparency appears as more radical than the melancholic and apocalyptic nihilism that still lived in a world of meaning in the shadow of God, alive or dead. Baudrillard articulates the terror of a post-human universe whose metaphysics is still in the making; in the world of desert transparency, polarities have vanished. Hence, there is no apocalypse qua objective end of the world; neither apocalypse nor absolute novum, no new heaven or new earth; the reign is that of the same, indeed, Hegel's bad infinite actualized as infernal damnation. Clearly, Baudrillard's melancholia emerges in its hypostasis of indifference and inertia, or rather as the paradoxical acceleration of inertia on the model of cancerous proliferation, or of entropic systems with their baroque convolutions and implosions. Thus, Baudrillard is a postmodern Kierkegaard at war with the Hegelianism of the all-engulfing system, as he witnesses the end of the world of the Incarnation and the actual, the beginning in its place of the simulacra of life and the simulated eternity of the virtual and the hyperreal. He is a prophet of the spurious infinite, the eternity of the simulacra, whose perfect illustration is the last scene of Stanley Kubrick's *2001—A Space Odyssey*, suggesting the infinite regression and eternal damnation of the disembodied or virtually embodied space traveler.

For both Baudrillard and Altizer, postmodern consciousness lacks self-division and depth; the former describes it as transparency, the latter as empty and shallow innocence. But, interestingly, while both Altizer and Baudrillard witness to a total reversal occurring in postmodernity, this reversal occurs in opposite directions: for Altizer, once God's kenosis is complete and God has poured himself without remainder into creation, transcendence converts to pure immanence and God becomes God's Other. Thus, God becomes Other by translating from the virtual to the actual. Altizer's theological dialectics promises a new beginning, a new heaven and earth following the death of God. The postmodern apocalyptic fulfillment bears the seed of a new Creation. The all-comprehensive

*acedic* depression indicates the withdrawal of self-consciousness and its entering into concealment in the aftermath of the death of God. This concealment is not a Baudrillardian disappearing but, on the contrary, an intimate living out of the consciousness of the death of God; or rather, since God has been emptied into the world, it is God's Other as nothing and non-being actually inhabiting consciousness. If, as Schelling explained, God's self-negation always precedes as ground God's revelation, then postmodernity can expect, with Altizer and Schelling, a new heaven and a new earth.

In a move paradoxically similar but reversed, in Baudrillard's postmodernity God and Creation are translated from the actual to the virtual—to the hyperreality of the simulacra. Actual embodied existence kenotically empties itself into its own reflection, the mirror of the virtual, its own disembodied shadowless shadow. Thus it participates in nothing and nonbeing; not the nothing of primordial negation, but rather the nothing of the "slumber of all powers" of the Absolute Indifferent. For both thinkers, postmodern melancholia is not the delirium of the guilty conscience, since postmodern consciousness is pure, transparent, or far rather, unconscious of guilt and sin. It is essentially the phlegmatic condition that Kierkegaard liked to condemn as ethical evasion, lingering in the virtual by refusing to choose oneself and self-actualization in existence.