

## A Primer for Annihilation (Introduction)

Nothing really matters to me. — Queen

What accounts for the popularity of ABC's hit series *Lost*, a story of marooned survivors on a mystical island haunted by dark forces, with mysterious computerized bunkers running underneath, at the same time that a biblical hue is cast over events? Have you wondered why the *New Battlestar Galactica* couches the futuristic quest of the last remaining humans in mythological language that harks back to the Greek gods? Why are the cylons (machines created by humans, some human enough to bear children) devout believers? Why are so many of the humans faithless cynics? Is the success of the *Matrix* trilogy a consequence of the marriage of myth, Bible, and science?

In other words, what explains the emergence of a litany of films and programs that interweave science and metaphysics at a time when the divide between secular and religious America has never seemed wider? Why these strange new mutations and conflations?

The trend is not limited to TV and the movies. Contemporary novelists have joined the chorus. The success of Margaret Atwood's scientific-metaphysical *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* is partly derived from her deft rethinking of cosmic questions in the context of nature transformed by science. She is not alone. Science-fiction writer Neal Stephenson returns to the Enlightenment (offering us a three-volume, almost 3,000-page fictitious history with the titles *Quicksilver*, *Confusion*, and *System World*) in order to revisit the connections between science and alchemy, religion and commerce. Why reconsider what the Enlightenment tore asunder? Fantasy writer Neil Gaiman's hugely successful *American Gods* situates a Jungian character named Shadow in a battle among Norse gods for America's soul. Does he see continuity between this book and his next, *Anansi Boys*, which he introduces with the epigraph "God is Dead. Meet the kids"? Is *American Gods* meant to be read as the tale of America after the death of the Christian God, and *Anansi Boys* as a depiction of an emerging soul weaned on the milk of a pantheistic or polytheistic America?

We see similar themes in popular music. Singer-songwriter Tori Amos has linked her album *Scarlet's Walk* to Gaiman's *American Gods*. Is the connection an appreciation of a mutual struggle for shared ends? Or take such songs from the Brit pop-rockers Coldplay as "The Scientist," "speed of sound," and "x and y." What do we make of their ruminations concerning the limitations of science, the nature of time, space, and darkness, and the tensions between the claims of reason and the claims of the heart? What it is about our time and place that has propelled Coldplay, among many others, to rethink mind-body dualism? Do these speculations on science bear any relation to

lead singer Chris Martin and his buddies' fascination with the apocalyptic Johnny Cash? Life is stranger than fiction. Chris and his wife Gwyneth Paltrow named their first child Apple and their second Moses. Eat the fruit and get to the Promised Land—is that the idea?

In this thinking about the decay of the old gods and the emergence of new ones, Christianity has come under scrutiny. Why the fascination with the cross among artists who loathe the God who kills his son (or the man-god who kills himself)? Why do these same artists call for self-erasure and self-forgetting through art as a means to overcome our prosaic present, as a means of achieving an ecstatic, orgiastic, reckless nothingness? What stirs in the soul of a young man and woman when drawn to the cultural artifacts created by these singers, novelists, filmmakers? To put it another way, why does Dave Matthews offer us an album titled *Some Devil*, Tori Amos *Original Sinsuality*, Sarah MacLachlan and Evanescence *Fallen*, James Blunt *Return to Bedlam*, Van Morrison *Pay the Devil*, or Bruce Springsteen *Devils and Dust*—to name but a few? What is NAS up to by appropriating the suffering Christ in *God's Son* and *Street Disciple*. What's up with Busta Rhymes's apocalyptic *Extinction Level Event* and DMX's *It's Dark and Hell is Hot*? This is not even to mention—if we tread back into the mists of pop-culture time—such acts as Black Sabbath, Metallica, Marilyn Manson, Iron Maiden, Judas Priest, Possessed, Napalm Death, and a host of other artists who liked, for example, to suck the blood of chickens on stage while promoting the virtues of necrophilia.

Turn the tube back on. A strange new world of good and evil is emerging that calls into question the very distinction be-

tween good and evil. HBO deserves special mention here. *The Sopranos* depicts a world of austerity and lavishness, law and lawlessness, good and evil, that is obfuscated and conflated. In *Carnivale*, a nomadic constellation of misfits travels aimlessly through an America in which occult forces and odd configurations of the natural are a matter of course, and in which they eventually confront a Russian immigrant turned minister, turned Antichrist. *Deadwood* presents us with shady characters searching for gold in a world bereft of government, law, and religion. Then there is the polygamist *Big Love*. One simply waits for the obverse, a show about one wife and several husbands. Think of the possibilities!

This is the world of fantasy, you might say. It does not bear on “reality.” But are we not in the midst of a quarrel about the nature of reality itself? Why do so many of us watch—and fantasize about participating in—“reality shows” that expose us to extremes and often appeal to the worst in us, celebrating what we once called vice and exposing the naïveté and inefficacy of virtue? What do we find so attractive about the painful-pleasure aroused when a conniving malcontent is voted off the island (*Survivor*) or out of the house (*Big Brother*)? Or when a partner’s propensity to infidelity is exposed on *Temptation Island*? Why do we huddle before the television set to contemplate spectacular feats of transformation when, say, the “reality” of a treadmill is staring us in the face? If you’re a tad overweight, snuggle up with a bag of chips and watch *The Big Loser*. If the whole body needs an overhaul, then try *Extreme Makeover*. If only a little grooming is needed, then *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* is for you—hard to pass up a show about gay men teaching men to be men. Need some wheels for the new look? Try *Pimp My*

*Ride* or *American Chopper*. Perhaps you are also in need of a new soulmate to go along with the new props? Try *The Bachelor* or *The Bachelorette*. A high-flying job to go with the new accoutrements is surely necessary to complete the fantasy, so just imagine yourself on *The Apprentice*. Or if you're on the way out of the old job, imagine what you might do to *My Big Obnoxious Boss*. If corporate America is not your style, then maybe *American Idol* is your road to stardom; that you also get to vote via text message makes the fantasy all the more intimate and special. If religion is needed to go along with fame, then a few episodes of *Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County* should suffice. If the suburbs are obnoxiously bourgeois, then *The 1900 House* or *The Manor House* might do the trick. Or just cut to the chase: live the celebrity life itself with *The Osbornes*, *The Ashlee Simpson Show*, *Britney and Kevin*, or Paris Hilton and Nicole Ritchie in *The Simple Life*. "All the world's a stage / And all the men and women merely players."

No, do not make the mistake of thinking about all this as mere entertainment. These shows speak to, and capitalize on, our culture's questions and contradictions about the nature of reality. We believe that gender is a social construction at the same time that we want to assert the distinction between and the uniqueness of the male and the female. We want desperately to see ourselves as the product of our own wills at the same time that we want to see ourselves as natural beings beyond the distorting and alienating effects of civilization. This conflict is captured succinctly in our current fascination with "a return to nature," pursued by means that thwart the very communion we so desperately seek. Stop for a moment to appreciate the irony of a young student so riddled by contradictions that he drives

an X-Terra, wears North Face gear, sports Timberland shoes, eats organic, and hikes up a mountain with GPS in hand. Ours is an age that identifies with the artistry of a Jackson Pollock, who threw paint onto a canvas to remind us of the distance between ourselves and what we create. No recognizable form or shape is visible in the work of a Pollock, only an array of colors that speak to the chaos within and beyond.

We could say that all of this amounts merely to a skillful exploitation of those millenarian sensibilities which are always aroused by the passing of a century. Or perhaps America just happens to be the land of both science and enthusiastic religion, and its popular culture simply taps into those assumptions and prejudices for profit. All of this fuss about the end times is therefore of no import and no interest.

I don't think so; in this book, I will argue that there is more at work here than a conventional exploitation of our fears and hopes. The ever-expanding depictions of, ruminations about, and preoccupations with apocalyptic themes we find throughout today's popular culture are, I believe, consequences of our commitment to and dependence upon Enlightenment theology and science. They are not the fruit of a *battle* between the secular and the religious, as we are often told, but a consequence of the curious *affinity* between our secularism and our religiosity. America's dissolution is characterized by a conflation that exposes the shared roots of Enlightenment science and religion. Both are human responses to the Void. Permit me to explain.

the american enlightenment

Conceived within a contentious marriage between Protestant Christianity and the Newtonian Enlightenment, America has evolved into a creature that now looks almost entirely different from its parents. In due course every child steps outside the bounds of parental jurisdiction. Freedom and equality demand no less. In doing so, America has turned against its parents as if enacting a fated role in a Greek tragedy. America inherits and thus depends upon a genetic code, features, and dispositions it now loathes and sees as distinct from itself. The nurturing hand that gives sustenance now looks increasingly like an oppressor. Children return to devour their parents. Such is the nature of our apocalypse.

At first, nothing could seem further from the truth. Chiefly in its Protestant, evangelical, and enthusiastic forms, Christianity has swept across the American landscape so that it now has numerous adherents at the center of our shared political and social lives. And science permeates every aspect of our daily lives; it is embraced by all of us, whether or not we wittingly choose to do so. One might therefore say that the battle between religion and science spells our doom. The problem is in the marriage, not in its constituent parts.

Yet science and religion as they predominate in America are, in fact, bedfellows. American Protestantism has emerged out of the belief that God transcends the bounds of human reason and morality. It is a theological rejection of the baptism of Greek philosophy by biblical revelation, the presiding authorities in that sacramental act being St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. Beginning with William of Ockham (who

developed a doctrine called Nominalism), and coming to fruition in the writings of John Calvin and Martin Luther, salvation came to be regarded in the Protestant mind as an act of the will undertaken in the face of an inscrutable universe that is itself beyond good and evil. We cannot circumscribe an omnipotent God within the bounds of nature. Given the inefficacy of reason and the dubiousness of passion, we rely on will—a commitment, a leap of faith, a belief in some revelatory experience that allows us to reach for the divine—for our salvation. A clash of wills, individual and collective, not of civilizations, defines our milieu.

Ockham's scientific counterpart is Renè Descartes, best known for his assertion "Cogito ergo sum," or "I think therefore I am" (in his *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason in the Search for Truth in the Sciences*). Concluding that the universe cannot be known through common sense and experience, Descartes nonetheless affirms that he is a thinking being, simply as an act of will. Will is therefore *prior* to thinking—although his dictum suggests the obverse. Descartes guides our thoughts by a method—the scientific method. In so doing, he follows the lead provided by Nominalism, in which truth is a determination of mind. We cannot have indubitable knowledge of things in themselves. Mind imposes form on matter. Descartes' mind/soul and body dichotomy teaches us to divide human experience into facts (bodies in motion) and values (the things of the soul), or physics (matter) and metaphysics (spirit). The first part of each dichotomy is concerned with knowledge, the second is not. Our current fascination with a return to nature—the pressing desire to embrace something genuine as a refuge from an artificial world, or the craving for

authenticity, understood as that which stands opposed to the alienating forces of civilization—grows out of this disjunction between the self and nature posited by both Enlightenment theology and Enlightenment science.

The search for an Archimedean point in a universe of chaos and flux—whether this search is to be achieved via a simple commitment of the will or via reason—breeds dogma. It works this way: Enlightened Protestantism severs the connection between reason and the soul. If reason and deliberation no longer serve the spirit, then only the irrational or a-rational can. Unwittingly, Protestantism in this way allies itself with the psychotherapeutic unconscious, and even the occult. In the face of nothing, the individual flatly affirms belief. We do not connect with God by works, and certainly not by reason. Rather, we do so by the moment in time when we *will* such a connection, an experience that transforms our nature and brings us into communion with divine eternity. In this way, the Enlightenment breeds a cult of “experiences.” Belief in the sovereignty of the revelatory moment undermines forms, rituals, history, and tradition. Jesus becomes entirely personal.

This is why Americans increasingly refer to themselves as “spiritual,” as opposed to “religious.” For in the doctrine of Enlightened Protestantism, the individual becomes the locus of transcendent experience. Indeed, the willful individual assumes a sovereignty that makes the context of his actions, including time, place, and circumstances, increasingly unimportant, and finally a hindrance that must be overcome in the service of a freedom of infinite possibilities. Evangelical and enthusiastic religions of the “self” become the norm. The Enlightenment is, in fact, the very source of religious fundamen-

talism. The age of reason is by its very nature also the age of unreason.

Science too emerges at, and as, its own Archimedean point. The thinking self is the bright new light that eradicates the darkness of superstition, religiosity, and fanaticism. Instead of random Providence or unruly Fortune, as in premodern times, human society in the age of Enlightenment is governed by what the authors of the Declaration of Independence call the "Laws of Nature and Nature's God." By various instruments and innovations, we capture and utilize the "forces" and "powers" that animate nature. We are Prometheans without punishment and without gods—self-anointed lords and masters of nature. Mathematics assumes its rightful place as the source of intelligibility by providing a language that is not subject to the vagaries of common speech and opinion. Statistics, polls, surveys, and probabilities become the reigning authorities. All other claims to knowledge are brushed off as myths, fantasies, mystifications—in a word, as subjective. Yet this ridicule of the transcendent fuels eruptions of the soul that make little room for reason. Reason demands more than reason can bear.

In fact, the dogmatic character of Enlightenment religion and science precipitates a metamorphosis that calls into question the authority of religion and science. If the divine is a matter of personal experience (or taste, as we now say) then by what means does one adjudicate between respective tastes or experiences? The Bible? Who judges the truth of the Word if the truth is a matter of a personal interpretation, consisting in a personal communion with Jesus that is sovereign over competing doctrinal claims? How do we judge good and evil if an omnipotent God can put evil in the service of good and good in

the service of evil? When experience qua experience reigns, it is hardly possible to discriminate between experiences. Therefore, aesthetics replaces morals. Poesis asserts its sovereignty over logos. And the postmodern mind turns this distinction into a disjunction. This book respects the distinction, but questions the disjunction. We must once again begin with the poets.

Protestantism dissolves Protestantism. Science dissolves science. I do not deny the palpable benefits of science. When I am ill I seek a doctor, not a literary critic. The issue here is how science is understood and how that understanding affects our self-understanding as beings with longings, anxieties, joys, sorrows, and hopes. At the beginning of the twentieth century, relativity and quantum physics restored human perspective (contra the mechanistic deism that fascinated early-modern thinkers, such as Galileo and Newton) to its place at the center of all knowing. But this new understanding was achieved at the price of banishing the Absolute. We simultaneously claim to know that we don't know and to know what we know. Science has become at once hegemonic and parochial, universal and particular.

When we penetrate matter itself, we proceed by uncertainty and complementarity expressed in probabilities. Matter dissolves into energy. We speak of "powers" and "forces." Our technological prowess allows us to harness and release the creative and destructive powers that reside in the dark heart of nature. Indeed, we have become both creators and destroyers, authors of holocausts, holding the fates of entire peoples and the planet in our hands. Today the Enlightenment looks less and less enlightened—we are fascinated with chaos, dark matter, black holes, space. The great Void now grips our imagination, without Descartes' illusory security of the willful self. We seek

light in the darkness, hope in the abyss, trying to recreate something out of nothing. But wait—it is God who creates *ex nihilo*. Are we ready and able to claim divinity as our own creation? To create a new scientific metaphysics? A new metaphysical science? Are we ready for new gods? Are they possible?

### form and substance

In this book, I have chosen to tell the story of America's dissolution through artifacts of popular culture, each of which is emblematic of a feature of our Enlightenment—or, if you prefer, post-Enlightenment—struggle. There are numerous reasons for taking this route. One is that I wish to speak to students. Another is that popular culture concerns and affects us all—and perhaps especially those who are not equipped with the academic body armor that shelters professors from common sense. In addition, I have chosen not to burden this book with the apparatus of theological and philosophical scholarly jargon and citations characteristic of books emanating from within the academy. A concluding bibliographic essay exposes my debts.

My aim, in short, is to help us understand what our iPods are piping into our veins. We are what we ingest. I am not persuaded by those who peddle the idea that art has no meaning save what the observer brings to it. Morals and aesthetics are intrinsically connected. This connection poses a danger, namely, the transformation of art into philosophy. But to say that art is not philosophy does not mean it is not philosophical. In this book, I try to allow the artists to speak for themselves, and in so doing to provide access to the logic of their work without depriving their art of its meaning as art. I am interested in stories,

how they work, how they reveal and conceal, how they make us participants by requiring us to think a thought, as opposed to passive readers of a philosopher's statement of a thought. Poets really are, as Percy Shelley claimed, the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

*A Consumer's Guide to the Apocalypse* is divided into two parts, science and theology. I begin with science and the idea of a soul. Tom Wolfe's *I Am Charlotte Simmons* is a tale of a young woman from Sparta, North Carolina, who enrolls at one of America's elite universities, the fictitious Dupont. Charlotte loses herself as she is absorbed by a reckless and unforgiving social life. Within this larger narrative, Wolfe provides a truncated and provisional history of the science of the self as it has evolved from Darwin to contemporary neuroscience, which seems to leave no room for a self or soul at all. In providing this history, Wolfe juxtaposes Charlotte's fading self with classroom lessons about the self. Intellectually and morally Charlotte is pushed toward the abyss. At one moment, Charlotte even sees herself as nothing. Is this the logical result of a four-year college education today?

I next turn to Michael Frayn's award-winning play *Copenhagen*, a fictitious reconstruction of a controversial and mysterious conversation that did in fact take place between atomic physicists Werner Heisenberg and Niels Bohr in Copenhagen in 1941. Both men are responsible for what has come to be called the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics, which has two central principles: uncertainty and complementarity. Quantum mechanics has made possible the development of nuclear weapons. But Frayn's main task is not to revisit debates about the creation and use of the atomic bomb. Rather, his play

juxtaposes uncertainty and complementarity in physics with uncertainty and complementarity in human relations. We do not know ourselves fully; our motives are often concealed from us, as are those of others. We make use of another's perspective to better comprehend ourselves—we see and judge ourselves and others as beings being seen. Frayn puts into Heisenberg's mouth a question about the possibility of a "quantum ethics." At the limits of reason, Frayn's work implies, we discover that morality is theatrical and sentimental. Nor does Frayn ignore metaphysics. "Uncertainty" leaves room for a negative theology. A dark and cryptic God emerges. We hear the ghost of Hamlet.

We next move from materialistic reductionism to a view of science that points toward a cosmic and mysterious darkness. It is here that the British pop-rockers Coldplay take up the story. Coldplay's music is animated by mystery and set against a cosmic backdrop whose nature eludes the human mind. With Coldplay, we are lost in the cosmos. Coldplay even asks whether we are lost to ourselves. The heart may provide a compass and a destination—love. But for Coldplay, the mind will not leave the heart alone. We discover a tension between the demands of reason and science and the demands of love. For Coldplay, a resolution of these demands proves elusive. We stand before an abyss knowing and not knowing, vacillating between competing demands of our nature, in a universe of beauty and horror, creation and destruction. Are we awaiting new gods?

By the end of Part One, then, we shall have come full circle: from a dying soul to the possibility that science itself may unwittingly rehabilitate the creature it set out to destroy. The first part

of the book points to metaphysics, but it does not get us there. This is the task of Part Two, which begins with Dave Matthews and his band. Matthews's songs are lyrical meditations on the contradictory self he thinks we inherit from Christianity. The crucifixion is for Matthews emblematic of our psychological terror, which consists in a curious affinity between love and hate, pain and pleasure, life and death, and among will, resignation, and transcendence. Confusion and despair animate a quest that is simultaneously anti-Christian yet framed within Christian terms. Matthews's music is at odds with itself insofar as he wants to indict and execute the Father while making sense of the erotic violence represented by the cross. This journey takes Matthews to the demonic: behold his first and only solo album, *Some Devil*.

For Matthews, co-opting the Devil is the only means with which to respond to a God who, in the final analysis, is demonic. The distinction between good and evil collapses. Suffering, war, disease, famine provide evidence for the indictment. But how is one good by embodying evil? In the midst of this quandary Matthews searches for silence. He looks for love. He looks for nurture (there are intimations of a lost mother). And of course, he looks for plenty of sex along the way. He ends up courting suicide as the ultimate willful act of simultaneous affirmation and negation, the only act he can appropriate for himself in a meaningless and cruel universe. Matthews, in other words, peddles pious nihilism. He depicts for students the nothingness to which they are naturally drawn by the constricted intellectual and moral horizon of our present.

The same yearning for silence and transcendence informs Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*. His story is of a nameless char-

acter, numb as a consequence of his pursuit of perfection. In Palahniuk's effeminized commercial society, the image of perfection is precisely as the market delivers it—cosmetic and ephemeral. But a soul stirs. Unable to find the proper medications to alleviate the pain of his soul, our nameless protagonist visits "Men Remaining Men," a support group for those recovering from testicular cancer. They meet in the basement of the Trinity church. No-name also seeks relief in the basement of the Eucharist church among women with cancer. The choice of locations and genders is not accidental. Our nameless character eventually meets Tyler Durden, a character who exudes an attractive and self-destructive virility. Together, Tyler and no-name start a fight club in bar basements where they can release their anger and self-loathing. As we will see, this elaborate scheme of plots and subplots turns out to be Palahniuk's way of indicting God the Father and the legacy of the crucifixion. His indictment is different from Matthews's insofar as it requires an elucidation of the nature of God as a combination of perverse masculinity and femininity. Indeed, we are moving toward a feminine conclusion. Marla, the last character in the triumvirate, plays a role akin to Eve's in the Garden of Eden. Palahniuk marries a story of self-destruction with a narrative of creation.

Our story concludes with Tori Amos. Taking her bearings from the Gnostic Gospels, and working well before Dan Brown published *The Da Vinci Code*, Amos attempts to recover the forgotten prostitute Mary Magdalene in her battle against a patriarchal Christianity. She does not shun the Virgin Mary but unites her with the Magdalene to create a new image of the feminine that marries the sacred and the profane. Amos seeks

to retain her spirituality (the Virgin) along with her sexuality (the Magdalene). The union of Marys makes possible the re-union of body and soul, she implies, a division she believes was imposed by Christianity. Amos rejects the Christian incarnation in favor of a new incarnation. But Amos requires powers to subdue the Christian Father. With the help of a shaman, Amos finds the Dark Prince with whom she joins forces in a psychosexual experience. Her version of the apocalypse is characterized by a fascination with the feminine who possesses a demonic virility with which she slays the tyrant God. As with *Fight Club*, her discography concludes with a reinterpretation of Genesis along Gnostic lines. She recovers Sophia understood not as the cause of the human fall but as a heroine who emancipates us from Christianity's patriarchal tyranny.

Numerous other pop-culture artifacts could be examined in this way, but there is no question that each of these artists' works is well within the pop-culture mainstream. As such, together they shed light on how American culture has been decisively shaped by the legacy of Enlightenment theology and science.

In depicting a curious amalgamation of cosmic and human, physical and metaphysical, religious and scientific phenomena, I hope to expose the Nothing that lies at the origin of the Enlightenment, and to show the curious manner in which science and theology meet after a long history which explains them as fundamentally distinct.

In the end, I hope also to have illustrated and revealed the reasons for some of the central preoccupations about self and society in contemporary America. There is first and foremost a battle for eros. Emancipated sexuality and the obfuscation of

gender differences is a function of the Enlightenment's challenge to logos. Fascination with darkness, chaos, quantum physics, black holes, and dark matter in science; with the occult, orgiastic song and dance, gothic iconography, and body piercing in the realm of "spirituality"; and with deconstruction and the resurgence of the poetic over and above the rational in the humanities are manifestations of the essential darkness that the Enlightenment can no longer conceal. A kind of hyperrationality (especially in the social sciences) has taken the place of the judgment, deliberation, and ambiguity that is intrinsic to the very nature of justice. That hyperrationality makes flight to the poetic appealing and compelling. The middle ground is lost: logos is reduced to logic, and poesis to subjective and sentimental affirmations of the self.

In the pages that follow, my endeavor is to restore what has been torn asunder in order to arrive at a premodern or Platonic conclusion, in which poesis is not seen as the antithesis of techne, and logos is severed neither from poesis nor mythos. In other words, poetry is technique inspired by something that is *not* technique. The inspiration for the things we make (in its root, "poetry" literally means "to make") comes from a curious admixture of reason, intuition, and the myths that embody human activity. And for the same reason, the things we make tell us more about ourselves than we often realize.