
Modernity and the Planes of Historicity

In 1528 Duke William IV of Bavaria ordered a series of historical paintings which were to be hung in his newly built summer house at the Royal Stud. Thematically Christian-Humanist, they depicted a series of biblical events, as well as a series of episodes from classical Antiquity. Most well known and justly celebrated of these paintings is Albrecht Altdorfer's *Alexanderschlacht*.¹

Upon an area of one and a half square meters, Altdorfer reveals to us the cosmic panorama of a decisive battle of world-historical significance, the Battle of Issus, which in 333 B.C. opened the epoch of Hellenism, as we say today. With a mastery previously unknown, Altdorfer was able to depict thousand upon thousand of individual warriors as complete armies; he shows us the clash of armored squadrons of horse and foot soldiers armed with spears; the victorious line of attack of the Macedonians, with Alexander far out at the head; the confusion and disintegration which overtook the Persians; and the expectant bearing of the Greek battle-reserves, which will then complete the victory.

A careful examination of the painting enables us to reconstruct the entire course of the battle. For Altdorfer had in this image delineated a history, in the way that *Historie* at that time could mean both image and narrative (*Geschichte*). To be as accurate as possible, the artist, or rather the court historiographer advising him, had consulted Curtius Rufus to ascertain the (supposedly) exact number of combatants, dead and taken prisoner. These figures can be found inscribed upon the banners of the relevant armies, including the number of dead, who

remain in the painting among the living, perhaps even bearing the banner under which they are about to fall, mortally wounded. Altdorfer made conscious use of anachronism so that he could faithfully represent the course of the completed battle.

There is another element of anachronism which today is certainly much more apparent to us. Viewing the painting in the Pinakothek, we think we see before us the last knights of Maximilian or the serf-army at the Battle of Pavia. From their feet to their turbans, most of the Persians resemble the Turks who, in the same year the picture was painted (1529), unsuccessfully laid siege to Vienna. In other words, the event that Altdorfer captured was for him at once historical and contemporary. Alexander and Maximilian, for whom Altdorfer had prepared drawings, merge in an exemplary manner; the space of historical experience enjoys the profundity of generational unity. The state of contemporary military technology still did not in principle offer any obstacle to the representation of the Battle of Issus as a current event. Machiavelli had only just devoted an entire chapter of his *Discourses* to the thesis that modern firearms had had little impact on the conduct of wars. The belief that the invention of the gun eclipsed the exemplary power of Antiquity was quite erroneous, argued Machiavelli. Those who followed the Ancients could only smile at such a view. The present and the past were enclosed within a common historical plane.

Temporal difference was not more or less arbitrarily eliminated; it was not, as such, at all apparent. The proof of this is there to see in the painting of the *Alexanderschlacht*. Altdorfer, who wished to statistically corroborate represented history (*Historie*) by specifying the combatants in ten numbered columns, has done without one figure: the year. His battle thus is not only contemporary; it simultaneously appears to be timeless.

When Friedrich Schlegel came across the painting almost three hundred years later, he was seized “upon sighting this marvel,” as he wrote, by a boundless “astonishment.” Schlegel praised the work in long sparkling cascades of words, recognizing in it “the greatest feat of the age of chivalry.” He had thus gained a critical-historical distance with respect to Altdorfer’s masterpiece. Schlegel was able to distinguish the painting from his own time, as well as from that of the Antiquity it strove to represent. For him, history had in this way gained a specifically temporal dimension, which is clearly absent for Altdorfer.

Formulated schematically, there was for Schlegel, in the three hundred years separating him from Altdorfer, more time (or perhaps a different mode of time) than appeared to have passed for Altdorfer in the eighteen hundred years or so that lay between the Battle of Issus and his painting.

What had happened in these three hundred years that separate our two witnesses, Altdorfer and Schlegel? What new quality had historical time gained that occupies this period from about 1500 to 1800? If we are to answer these questions, this period must be conceived not simply as elapsed time, but rather as a period with its own specific characteristics.

Stating my thesis simply, in these centuries there occurs a temporalization (*Verzeitlichung*) of history, at the end of which there is the peculiar form of acceleration which characterizes modernity. We are thus concerned with the specificity of the so-called *frühen Neuzeit*—the period in which modernity is formed. We will restrict ourselves to the perspective we possess from the onetime future of past generations or, more pithily, from a former future.

I

First, we should clarify the sense of presence and achronological pungency that we have discovered in Altdorfer's painting. Let us try to regard the picture with the eye of one of his contemporaries. For a Christian, the victory of Alexander over the Persians signifies the transition from the second to the third world empire, whereby the Holy Roman Empire constitutes the fourth and last. Heavenly and cosmic forces were participants in such a battle, finding their place in Altdorfer's painting as Sun and Moon, powers of Light and Darkness respectively attributed to the two kings, Alexander and Maximilian: the sun appears over a ship whose mast assumes the form of a cross. This battle, in which the Persian army was destined for defeat, was no ordinary one; rather, it was one of the few events between the beginning of the world and its end that also prefigured the fall of the Holy Roman Empire. Analogous events were expected to occur with the coming of the End of the World. Altdorfer's image had, in other words, an eschatological status. The *Alexanderschlacht* was timeless as the prelude, figure, or archetype of the final struggle between Christ

and Antichrist; those participating in it were contemporaries of those who lived in expectation of the Last Judgment.

Until well into the sixteenth century, the history of Christianity is a history of expectations, or more exactly, the constant anticipation of the End of the World on the one hand and the continual deferment of the End on the other. While the materiality of such expectations varied from one situation to another, the basic figure of the End remained constant. The mythical investment of the Apocalypse could be adapted to a given situation, and even noncanonical prophecies presented little variation from the figures that were supposed to appear at the Judgment, such as the Emperor of Peace (*Engelspäpste*), or harbingers of the Antichrist, such as Gog and Magog who, according to oriental tradition (a tradition also then current in the West), remained confined to the Caucasus by Alexander until the time came for their irruption. However the image of the End of the World was varied, the role of the Holy Roman Empire remained a permanent feature: as long as it existed, the final Fall was deferred. The Emperor was the *katechon* of the Antichrist.

All of these figures appeared to enter historical reality in the epoch of the Reformation. Luther saw the Antichrist in possession of the "holy throne," and for him Rome was the "Whore of Babylon"; Catholics saw Luther as the Antichrist; peasant unrest and the growing sectarian militancy of diverse sections of the declining Church appeared to foreshadow the last civil war preceding the Fall. Finally, the Turks who stormed Vienna in the year of Altdorfer's painting appeared as the unchained people of Gog.

Altdorfer, who had assisted in the expulsion of the Jews from Regensburg and had connections with the astrologer Grünpeck, certainly knew the signs. As city architect he applied himself, while working on his painting, to strengthening the fortifications so that they would be secure against the Turks. "If we fight off the Turks," said Luther at the time, "so is Daniel's prophecy fulfilled, and the Final Judgment will be at the door."² The Reformation as a movement of religious renewal carried with it all the signs of the End of the World.

Luther frequently referred to the fact that the Fall was to be expected in the coming year, or even in the current one. But as he once added (and recorded for us in his table talk), for the sake of the chosen, God would shorten the final days, "toward which the world was speeding, since almost all of the new century had been forced into the space

of one decade.”³ Luther believed that the events of the new century had been concentrated in the decade since the Reichstag at Worms, at the end of which, as we know, the *Alexanderschlacht* was painted. The compression of time indicated that the End of the World was approaching with great rapidity, even if the actual date remained concealed.

Let us stop for a moment and look forward over the three hundred years whose structural change in temporality is the subject of this essay. On 10 May 1793 Robespierre, in his famous speech on the Revolutionary Constitution, proclaimed:

The time has come to call upon each to realize his own destiny. The progress of human Reason has laid the basis for this great Revolution, and the particular duty of hastening it has fallen to you.⁴

Robespierre’s providential phraseology cannot hide the fact that, compared with our point of departure, there has been an inversion in the horizon of expectations. For Luther, the compression of time is a visible sign that, according to God’s will, the Final Judgment is imminent, that the world is about to end. For Robespierre, the acceleration of time is a task of men leading to an epoch of freedom and happiness, the golden future. Both positions, insofar as the French Revolution descended from the Reformation, mark the beginning and end of our period. Let us try to relate them in terms of visions of the future.

A ruling principle (*Herrschaftsprinzip*) of the Roman Church was that all visionaries had to be brought under its control. Proclaiming a vision of the future presupposed that it had first received the authorization of the Church (as decided at the Fifth Lateran Council, 1512–1517). The ban on the Joachimite theory of the Third Empire; the fate of Joan of Arc, whose determined affirmation of an unlicensed vision led to the stake; the death by fire of Savonarola: all serve as examples of the fate awaiting prophets whose visions were postbiblical in character. The stability of the Church was not to be endangered; its unity, like the existence of the empire itself, was a guarantee of order until the End of the World came.

Correspondingly, the future of the world and its end were made part of the history of the Church; newly inflamed prophets necessarily exposed themselves to verdicts of heresy. The Church utilized the imminent-but-future End of the World as a means of stabilization, finding an equilibrium between the threat of the End on the one hand

and the hope of Parousia on the other.⁵ The unknown Eschaton must be understood as one of the Church's integrating factors, enabling its self-constitution as world and as institution. The Church is itself eschatological. But the moment the figures of the apocalypse are applied to concrete events or instances, the eschatology has disintegrative effects. The End of the World is only an integrating factor as long as its politico-historical meaning remains indeterminate.

The future as the possible End of the World is absorbed within time by the Church as a constituting element, and thus does not exist in a linear sense at the end point of time. Rather, the end of time can be experienced only because it is always-already sublimated in the Church. For just so long did the history of the Church remain the history of salvation.

The most basic assumptions of this tradition were destroyed by the Reformation. Neither Church nor worldly powers were capable of containing the energies which Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin unleashed upon the European world. In his old age, Luther himself doubted the possibility of peace; the Imperial Assemblies labored in vain, and he prayed that the final day would come, "asking only that it not be too soon, that there be a little time."⁶ The task of the empire in postponing the End of the World echoes through the plea of a man who saw no way out for this world. The empire had failed in its duty.

Shortly afterward, in 1555, the Religious Peace of Augsburg was signed so that "this praiseworthy nation be secured against an ever-threatening ruin," as it says in paragraph 25. The *Stände* agreed that a "stable, secure, unconditional, and eternally lasting peace was to be created." This was to hold even if (and while disputed, this was conclusive) the religious parties should arrive at no settlement and find no unity. Henceforth peace and religious duty were no longer identical: peace meant that the fronts of religious civil war were to be shut down, frozen in situ. Only with difficulty can we today assess quite how monstrous this imposition seemed at that time. The compromise, born of necessity, concealed within itself a new principle, that of "politics," which was to set itself in motion in the following century.

The politicians were concerned about the temporal, not the eternal, as the orthodox among all parties complained. "L'heresie n'est plus aujourd'huy en la Religion; elle est en l'Estat,"⁸ retorted a French lawyer and politician during the confessional civil war. Heresy no longer existed within religion; it was founded in the state. This is a

dangerous statement, if we repeat it today. In 1590, however, its meaning consisted in formulating orthodoxy as a question set in terms of the jurisdiction of the state (*Staatsrecht*). “Cuius regio, eius religio”⁹ is an early formula for the sovereignty of individual rulers, whatever their confessional tendency, over the religious parties within their domains. But it was only after the Thirty Years War had worn down the Germans that they were able to make the principle of religious indifference the basis for peace. Primarily begun as a religious war by the *Stände* of the Holy Roman Empire, the Thirty Years War ended with the peace negotiations of sovereigns, the status to which the territorial rulers had emancipated themselves. While in the West modern states arose from *guerre civile* and civil war, the religious war in Germany transformed itself—thanks to intervention—into a war between states, whose outcome paradoxically gave new life to the Holy Roman Empire. The renewed life was under new conditions, of course: the peace decrees of Münster and Osnabrück had validity, up until the French Revolution, as the legal (*völkerrechtlich*) basis of toleration. What consequences did the new arrangement of politics and religion have for the construction of the modern apprehension of time, and what displacement of the future had this process brought with it?

The experience won in a century of bloody struggles was, above all, that the religious wars did not herald the Final Judgment, at least not in the direct manner previously envisaged. Rather, peace became possible only when religious potential was used up or exhausted; that is, at the point where it was possible to politically restrict or neutralize it. And this disclosed a new and unorthodox future.

This process occurred slowly and had been laid down well in advance. The first shift can be found in the fact that by the fifteenth century, and in part earlier, the expected End of the World was increasingly prorogued. Nicolaus von Cues at one time placed it at the beginning of the eighteenth century; Melanchthon calculated that the final epoch would begin to wane with the passing of two thousand years from the birth of Christ. The last great papal prophecy in 1595, attributed to Malachias, extended by a factor of three the customary list of Popes, so that (reckoning according to the average duration of papal rule) the end of all time could be expected in 1992, at the earliest.

Second, astrology played a role that it is important not to underestimate; during the Renaissance it was at its peak, its effects however persisting undiminished until the natural sciences (which themselves

made their beginning thanks to it) slowly brought astrology into discredit. Newton himself prophesied around 1700 that papal rule would end in the year 2000. Astrological calculation of the future pushed eschatological expectations into a constantly receding future. Ultimately, expectations of the End were undermined by apparently natural determinants. A symbolic coincidence is that in the year of the Peace of Augsburg, 1555, Nostradamus published his *Centuries*. He did, of course, complete his visions with a prophecy of the End quite in keeping with the traditional spirit; the intervening period, however, was formulated in terms of an endless array of undatable, variable oracles, such that an immeasurably extended future was disclosed to the curious reader.

Third, with the paling of presentiments of the End, the Holy Roman Empire lost, in a manner distinct from that earlier, its eschatological function. Since the Peace of Westphalia, it had become clear at the very least that the preservation of peace had become the business of the European system of states. Bodin here played a role as historian which was as pathbreaking as his foundation of the concept of sovereignty. In separating out sacral, human, and natural history, Bodin transformed the question of the End of the World into a problem of astronomical and mathematical calculation. The End of the World became a datum within the cosmos, and eschatology was forced into a specially prepared natural history. Working within a cabalistic tradition, Bodin considered it quite possible that this world would end only after a cycle of 50,000 years. The Holy Roman Empire was thus stripped of its sacred task. Human history, considered as such, had no goal, according to Bodin, but rather was a domain of probability and human prudence. The maintenance of peace was the task of the state, not the mission of an empire. If there were any land with a claim to the succession of imperial power it was the Turkish Empire, which spread itself over three continents. The setting free of a *historia humana* which turned away from sacral history, and the legitimation of a modern state capable of subduing salvation-oriented religious factions, are for Bodin one and the same.

This leads to a fourth point. The genesis of the absolutist state is accompanied by a sporadic struggle against all manner of religious and political predictions. The state enforced a monopoly on the control of the future by suppressing apocalyptic and astrological readings of the future. In doing so, it assumed a function of the old Church for

anti-Church objectives. Henry VIII, Edward VI, and Elizabeth I all proscribed in strong terms any prediction of this nature. Disobedient prophets could expect lifelong imprisonment. Henry III of France and Richelieu followed the English example so that they could stop up once and for all the source of a steady stream of religious presentiments. Grotius, who as an émigré from religious persecution published *De jure belli et pacis* in 1625, considered the wish to fulfill predictions, *voluntatem implendi vaticinia*, as one of the unjust sources of war. He added the warning: "Protect yourselves, overbearing theologians; protect yourselves, politicians, from overbearing theologians."¹⁰ All in all, it is possible to say that a rigorous politics had succeeded in gradually eliminating from the domain of political consideration and decision making the robust religious expectations of the future that had flourished after the decline of the Church.

This was also apparent in England, where during the Puritan Revolution the old expectations, expressed in prophetic terms, were prevalent once more. But the last great predictive struggle carried out on a political plane, which occurred in 1650 and concerned the monarchy's return (or failure to return) was already being conducted in terms of a critical philology. The republican astrologer Lilly proved that his Cavalier enemies had falsely quoted from their sources. And if Cromwell made his intentions for the coming year popularly available in the form of an almanac, this is to be attributed more to his cold realism than to a belief in revelations. The last widespread millennial prophecy in Germany arose during the Thirty Years War: Bartholomäus Holzhauser's commentary on the apocalypse, which gave the world only a few decades more.

The basic lines of prediction were always limited, although they were formulated creatively well into the seventeenth century. After this point, straightforward copies, such as the *Europäischen Staatswahr-sager*, which sought to apply old texts to the Silesian War, become more numerous. The last attempt to revive the theory of the four monarchies was printed in 1728. It was an epilogue.

The course of the seventeenth century is characterized by the destruction of interpretations of the future, however they were motivated. Where it had the power, the state persecuted their utterance, such as in the Cevennes uprising, ultimately driving them into private, local, folkloristic circles or secret associations. Parallel to this developed a literary feud conducted by humanists and skeptics against oracles and

associated superstitions. The first well-known people to become involved were Montaigne and Bacon, who revealed the psychology of prophecy in penetrating essays, well before their contemporaries. There appeared also in Germany in 1632 a *Schriftmäßiges Bedenken von Gesichten*.¹¹ The most significant critique of prophecy was made by Spinoza in 1670. He not only denounced visions as the customary subterfuge of contemporary factions which were either subversive or merely ambitious, but he also went a step further and sought to unmask canonical prophecy as the victim of primitive powers of self-delusion. Fontenelle's *History of Oracles*, published in 1686, represents a peak of stylistic elegance in this literary feud; compared with its confident, rational, underplayed formulas, the scorn Voltaire pours upon prophets is simply the scorn of the victor.

The facility with which anticipations of devout Christians or predictions of all kinds could be transformed into political action had disappeared by 1650. Political calculation and humanist reservations marked out a new plane for the future. Neither the One Big End of the World nor the several smaller ones could apparently affect the course of human affairs. Instead of the anticipated millennium, a new and different perspective of time had opened up.

Here we touch on a fifth point. It was now possible to look back on the past as "medieval" (*mittelalterlich*). The triad of Antiquity, Middle Ages, and Modernity had been available since the advent of Humanism. But these have only fully come into use and have organized the whole of history quite gradually since the second half of the seventeenth century. Since then, one has lived in Modernity and been conscious of so doing. Naturally, this varies according to nation and *Stand*, but it was a knowledge that could be conceived as the crisis of European thought, to use Paul Hazard's phrase.¹²

II

While until now we have traced the containment, undermining, destruction, or channeling of millennial expectations, the question arises of the actual conceptions of the future that insert themselves into the space occupied by the waning future. It is possible to identify two types, which relate to each other as well as refer back to the expectations of salvation: rational prognosis and the philosophy of historical process (*Geschichtsphilosophie*).

The conceptual counter to prevailing prophecy was the rational forecast, the prognosis. The delicate art of political calculation was first developed in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy and then brought to a peak of finesse during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the cabinets of the European courts. As a motto for this art, we will repeat a classical quotation from Aristotle, which was used by Guicciardini when introducing it into political literature: "De futuris contingentibus non est determinata veritas." ("For future events the truth is indeterminate.") There are people, says Guicciardini, who write treatises on the course of the future. Perhaps such tracts are good to read, but "since each conclusion in these considerations is developed from a previous one, the whole construction collapses if only one is false."¹³

This insight, which Guicciardini had gained in Italy, the land where modern politics originated, led to a particular attitude. The future became a domain of finite possibilities, arranged according to their greater or lesser probability. It is the same plane that Bodin disclosed for the operation of *historia humana*. Weighing the probability of forthcoming or nonoccurring events in the first instance eliminated a conception of the future that was taken for granted by the religious factions: the certainty that the Last Judgment would enforce a simple alternative between Good and Evil through the establishment of a sole principle of behavior.

For a politician, on the other hand, the only remaining moral judgment related to measuring the greater or lesser evil. It was in this sense that Richelieu stated that nothing was more important for a government than foresight: only in this manner was one able to avoid evils that, once encountered, were increasingly difficult to elude. The second consequence of such a position was preparedness for possible surprise, for it was generally not this or that possibility that would be realized, but a third, fourth, and so on. Daily encounters with such uncertainty emphasized the need for enhanced foresight, and Richelieu's claim that it is more important to think of the future than of the present assumes its proper meaning only when viewed in this light.¹⁴ One might suggest that this is the political forerunner of life insurance, which has gained ground, along with the calculability of life expectancy, since the turn of the eighteenth century.

While prophecy transgressed the bounds of calculable experience, prognosis remained within the dimensions of the political situation.

The prognosis is a conscious element (*Moment*) of political action. It is related to events whose novelty it releases. The prognosis itself, then, continually radiates time in a generally predictable but actually uncertain fashion.

Prognosis produces the time within which and out of which it weaves, whereas apocalyptic prophecy destroys time through its fixation on the End. From the point of view of prophecy, events are merely symbols of that which is already known. A disappointed prophet cannot doubt the truth of his own predictions. Since these are variable, they can be renewed at any time. Moreover, with every disappointment, the certainty of approaching fulfillment increases. An erroneous prognosis, by contrast, cannot even be repeated as an error, remaining as it does conditioned by specific assumptions.

Rational prognosis assigns itself to intrinsic possibilities, but through this produces an excess of potential controls on the world. Time is always reflected in a surprising fashion in the prognosis; the constant similitude of eschatological expectation is dissolved by the continued novelty of time running away with itself and prognostic attempts to contain it. In terms of temporal structure, then, prognosis can be seen to be the integrating factor of the state that transgresses the limited future of the world to which it has been entrusted.

Let us take a favorite example from classical diplomacy: the first partition of Poland. The manner in which, and not the reason that it was done, can easily be traced to Frederick the Great. Frederick lived, after the embittering struggles of the Seven Years War, with a dual fear. First, there was the fear of Austrian revenge. To reduce the chances of this possibility, he concluded an alliance with Russia. In doing this, however, he bound himself to a power which he perceived as the greater or more general danger in the long run, and not merely in terms of Russia's rising population. Both prognostications, the short-term Austrian and the long-term Russian, now entered into political action in a fashion that altered the conditions of the prognosis, that is, altered the immediate situation. The existence of a Greek Orthodox population in Poland provided the Russians with a constant pretext for intervention on the grounds of religious protection. The Russian envoy, Repnin, ruled like a governor-general in Warsaw and directly supervised the meetings of the Polish National Assembly. Unpopular representatives were soon dispatched to Siberia. Poland declined *de facto* into the status of a Russian province, and the bloody civil war

promoted by Russia resulted in the intensification of Russian control. This growing threat in the East brought the long-term threat dangerously close. At the same time, Frederick's own objective of integrating West Prussia with his state vanished into unattainable remoteness. In 1770, the situation worsened. Russia was about to swallow up not only Poland but Romania as well, bringing war to Frederick's gates. Austria had no desire to tolerate the situation. It saw in the annexation of Romania a *casus belli*. Thus Frederick, as the ally of Russia, was in addition bound to the second of the feared evils, a war against Austria, which he did not want. The solution to this dilemma, discovered by Frederick in 1772, is quite startling.

As soon as Frederick learned (before the Russians could know) that the Austrians shrank from the prospect of war, he forced Russia, through the pressure of his obligation to assist them in the event of war, to dispense with the annexation of Romania. In compensation, Russia received the eastern part of Poland, which in any case it already ruled; in return, Prussia and Austria gained West Prussia and Galicia—significant territories, but which, more importantly, were thereby removed from Russian influence. Instead of smoothing the way westward for his intimidating ally in the course of war, Frederick had preserved his peace and had strategically blocked Russian intrusion into the bargain. Frederick had made a double gain out of what had seemed mutually contradictory elements.

Such flexible play with a limited (but within these limits almost infinite) number of varied possibilities was clearly possible only in a particular historical situation. What is the nature of this historical plane in which the refinement of absolutist politics could develop? The future was a known quantity insofar as the number of politically active forces remained restricted to the number of rulers. Behind each ruler stood an army and a population of known dimensions whose potential economic power and monetary circulation could be estimated by cameralistic means. In this plane, history was comparatively static, and Leibniz's statement that "the whole of the coming world is present and prefigured in that of the present"¹⁵ can here be applied to politics. In the domain of a politics constituted by the actions of sovereign rulers, though only in this domain, nothing particularly new could happen.

Characteristic of this is the ultimate boundary within which political calculation operated. Hume, who himself made long-term, contingent

prognoses, once said that a doctor forecast with confidence no more than two weeks in advance, and a politician a few years at most.¹⁶ A glance at contemporary diplomatic papers confirms this judgment. Certainly there were constant elements which often became components of an increasingly hypothetical future. Character, for instance, was such a constant; it could be estimated, relying, for instance, on the corruptibility of a minister. But above all, the assumed life span of a governing ruler was a permanent feature of the political calculus of probability. The uttermost future that the Venetian envoy in Paris predicted in 1648 for the coming half-century was his certainty that there would be a War of Spanish Succession: it did indeed take place exactly fifty years later. The fact that most of the wars conducted among European rulers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were wars of succession clearly demonstrates the manner in which the dimensions of historical time were measured by natural, human qualities. But all the same, there remained, as our Venetian envoy reported, "space for the play of time and future, for not all that could occur actually does take place."¹⁷ We have only to recall how the death of the Tsarina in 1762 altered the course of the war.

Based as it was on the life and character of acting personages, the European republic of rulers could still understand history in natural terms. It is not surprising that the ancient pattern of cycles put back in circulation by Machiavelli found such general support. This experience of history, founded as it was on repeatability, bound prospective futures to the past.

This certainly makes clear that the distance separating the early modern political consciousness of time from that of Christian eschatology was nowhere as great as it might seem. *Sub specie aeternitatis* nothing novel can emerge, whether the future is viewed in terms of faith or sober calculation. A politician could become more clever or even cunning; he could refine his technique; he could become wiser or more farsighted: but history would hold for him no new, unknown future regions. The reoccupation of a prophesied future by a predicted future had not yet fundamentally ruptured the plane of Christian expectations. That is what harnesses the republic of rulers to the Middle Ages, even if it no longer conceives of itself as Christian.

It was the philosophy of historical process which first detached early modernity from its past and at the same time inaugurated our modernity with a new future. A consciousness of time and the future

begins to develop in the shadows of absolutist politics, first in secret, later openly, audaciously combining politics and prophecy. There enters into the philosophy of progress a typical eighteenth-century mixture of rational prediction and salvational expectation. Progress unfolded to the degree that the state and its prognostics were never able to satisfy soteriological demands which persisted within a state whose existence depended on the elimination of millenarian expectations.

What was new about the expectations of the future that typified progress? The prorogued End of the World had been constituted by the Church and then projected in the form of a static time capable of being experienced as a tradition. Political prognostication also had a static temporal structure insofar as it operated in terms of natural magnitudes whose potential repeatability formed the cyclical character of its history. The prognosis implies a diagnosis which introduces the past into the future. This always-already guaranteed futurity of the past effected the closure and bounding of the sphere of action available to the state. To the extent that the past can only be experienced insofar as it contains an element of that which is to come (and vice versa), the political existence of the state remains trapped within a temporal structure that can be understood as static movement. Progress opened up a future that transcended the hitherto predictable, natural space of time and experience, and thence—propelled by its own dynamic—provoked new, transnatural, and long-term prognoses.

The future of this progress is characterized by two main features: first, the increasing speed with which it approaches us, and second, its unknown quality. “Unknown” because this accelerated time, i.e., our history, abbreviated the space of experiences, robbed them of their constancy, and continually brought into play new, unknown factors, so that even the actuality or complexity of these unknown quantities could not be ascertained. This began to be apparent well before the French Revolution.

The bearer of the modern philosophy of historical process was the citizen emancipated from absolutist subjection and the tutelage of the Church: the *prophète philosophe*, as he was once strikingly characterized in the eighteenth century. Present at the baptism of the prophetic philosopher in the role of godfather was a combination of political calculation and speculation on a future liberated from Christian religion. Lessing has described this type for us: he often “takes well-judged prospects of the future,” but he nonetheless resembles the visionary,

“for he cannot wait for the future. He wants this future to come more quickly, and he himself wants to accelerate it . . . for what has he to gain if that which he recognizes as the better is actually not to be realized as the better within his lifetime?”¹⁸ This self-accelerating temporality robs the present of the possibility of being experienced as the present, and escapes into a future within which the currently unapprehensible present has to be captured by historical philosophy. In other words, in the eighteenth century, the acceleration of time that had previously belonged to eschatology became obligatory for worldly invention, before technology completely opened up a space of experience adequate to this acceleration.

At first, however, there emerged within this acceleration a retardation which promoted the alternation of Revolution and Reaction in historical time. That which was conceived before the Revolution as *katechon* itself became a stimulus to revolution. Reaction, still employed in the eighteenth century as a mechanical category, came to function as a movement which sought to halt it. Revolution, at first derived from the natural movement of the stars and thus introduced into the natural rhythm of history as a cyclical metaphor, henceforth attained an irreversible direction. It appears to unchain a yearned-for future while the nature of this future robs the present of materiality and actuality; thus, while continually seeking to banish and destroy Reaction, it succeeds only in reproducing it: modern Revolution remains ever affected by its opposite, Reaction.

This alternation of Revolution and Reaction, which supposedly is to lead to a final paradise, has to be understood as a futureless future, because the reproduction and necessarily inevitable supersession of the contradiction brings about an evil endlessness. In the pursuit of this evil endlessness, as Hegel said, the consciousness of the agent is trapped in a finite “not yet” possessing the structure of a perennial imperative (*Sollen*). It has been possible since Hegel’s time to convey into historical reality fictions such as the thousand-year *Reich* or the classless society. This fixation on an end-state by participating actors turns out to be the subterfuge of a historical process, robbing them of their judgment. There is a need, therefore, of historical prognostication that goes beyond the rational prognoses of the politicians and, as the legitimate offspring of historical philosophy, can moderate the historical-philosophical design.

There is evidence of this before the French Revolution. Predictions of the 1789 Revolution are numerous, although only a few look forward to a succeeding epoch and its nature. Rousseau was one of the greatest forecasters, whether it was a matter of forecasting the perpetual state of crisis or registering the subjugation of Europe by the Russians and of the Russians by the Asians. Voltaire, who never tired of assessing *la belle révolution* in more colorless and thus more favorable terms, consequently denounced his opponents as false prophets who had lapsed into the habits of earlier times.

We will not examine here the variety of wishful or forced prognoses with the aid of which the Enlightenment built up its self-confidence. Among them, however, is to be found one of the greatest predictions, which has remained in the shadows of anonymity and geographical camouflage up to the present. This concerns a prediction for the year 1774, apparently made for Sweden but aimed also at France. It was thrown up by the classical literature on civil war, ancient theories of despotism and historical cycles, and the critique of enlightened absolutism, but its point of departure is modern. The author is Diderot, who wrote:

Under despotism the people, embittered by their lengthy sorrows, will miss no opportunity to reappropriate their rights. But since there is neither goal nor plan, slavery relapses in an instant into anarchy. Within the heart of this general tumult there can be heard but one cry: "Freedom!" But how can this valuable thing be secured? Nobody knows. And soon the people are divided into various factions, eaten up with contradictory interests. . . . After a short while there are only two factions within the state; they distinguish themselves by two names, under which all necessarily have to include themselves: "Royalist" and "Antiroyalist." This is the moment of violent commotion. The moment of plotting and conspiracy. . . . In this, royalism serves as a subterfuge as much as antiroyalism. Both are masks for ambition and covetousness. The nation now is merely an entity dependent upon a collection of criminals and corrupt persons. In this situation only one man and a suitable moment are needed for an entirely unexpected result to emerge. If the moment comes, the man emerges. . . . He speaks to the people, who until this moment believe themselves all: You are nothing. And they say: We are nothing. And he speaks to them: I am the Lord. And they speak as if out of one mouth: You are the Lord. And he says to them: Here are the conditions according to which I am prepared to subject you. And they say: We accept them. . . . What

will succeed this revolution? No one knows. *Quelle sera la suite de cette révolution? On l'ignore.*¹⁹

Diderot reveals a process that was to remain hidden from most of his contemporaries. He proposed a long-term prognosis, assuming the certainty of the as yet unknown beginning of the revolution; and further disclosed the dual watchwords of Good and Evil, Freedom and Slavery, tracing them to the dialectic of liberty; and thence derived the unexpected result. This expressed in modern terminology the full scope of the classical model. But Diderot went further. For, how the process should later proceed remained murky. He therefore formulated the same question that Toqueville was again to take up, and which remains for us to answer today.

In closing, let us glance once again at Altdorfer's painting, which has led us from Reformation to Revolution. That augured man, Napoleon, carried the picture off to Paris in 1800 and hung it in his bathroom at Saint-Cloud. Napoleon was never a man of taste, but the *Alexanderschlacht* was his favorite painting, and he wanted it in his inner sanctum. Did he sense the manner in which the history of the Occident was present in this painting? It is possible. Napoleon saw himself as a parallel to the great Alexander, and more. The power of tradition was so strong that the long-lost, salvational-historical task of the Holy Roman Empire shimmered through the supposedly new beginning of the 1789 Revolution. Napoleon, who had definitively destroyed the Holy Roman Empire, afterward married the daughter of the last emperor, just as two thousand years earlier Alexander had married the daughter of Darius, likewise in a premeditated second marriage. Napoleon made his son king of Rome.

When he was overthrown, Napoleon said that this marriage was the only true mistake he had ever made, that is, to have resumed a tradition that the Revolution, with himself at its head, appeared to have destroyed. Was it really a failure? While still at the peak of his power, Napoleon saw it differently: "Even my son will find it necessary to be my son, in order to be able to be, in all tranquility, my successor."²⁰