

# Jacques Ellul's Apocalypse in Poetry and Exegesis

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Although not published until 1997, Jacques Ellul's book-length poem, *Oratorio: The Four Horseman of the Apocalypse* was written in the 1960s (publisher's jacket copy), and thus it seems to antedate the composition of his 1975 exegetical work, *The Apocalypse: Architecture in Movement*. Both works center on the relationship of the human word to God's Word and the struggle of the best speech amidst babble and falsehood; together they throw great emphasis on the centrality of these themes in Ellul's thought. The poem presents in a white-hot fusion the dialectical ideas, including those regarding the word and communication, which become a basis of Ellul's exegesis of the Apocalypse of John.

We can see this in two essential and related elements of *Oratorio*: the image of the mendicant, and the idea of the presence of the end in the beginning and throughout history. In Ellul's poem, the wandering beggar *is* the Word of God in the world, powerless unless it is received, constantly appealing for love. Similarly, the end that is already present in history *is* the Word that needs and begs to be heard. This idea of the end in the beginning, which is Ellul's radical eschatology, is expressed both in the mendicant and in the very structure of *Oratorio*, which in turn mirrors the structure of the Apocalypse as Ellul analyzes it. Both poems—for so Ellul terms the Apocalypse—use a symmetrical form to symbolize that the basic structure of history is the hidden presence of the Eternal in Time, which makes an appeal, as the mendicant does, eschewing power until a response of love shall be given.

Throughout *Oratorio* the mendicant appears in various guises and is particularly expressive of the humility and humiliation of the word, which is everything—creation and

salvation—yet which is nothing if not received. The wandering beggar who constantly knocks, constantly appeals, is made fundamentally identical by Ellul's poetry with the hiddenness of eternity in time and of glory in failure. For Ellul, the end which is in the beginning is not a goal or place but a living, overlooked person always coming toward us. The obscurity of Ellul's beggar combines in a single image the Second Person, and poetry, and the intellectual, around the theme that powerlessness is love's only power, because the word is its only possible means.

The figure of a poor wanderer appears in the poem variously as beggar, as pilgrim, as an absent outcast merely implied by a human sob or plea, and even as the white horseman of the Apocalypse. The white horseman is for Ellul the word of God, and in "Part One" of *Oratorio* this horseman speaks and calls himself a pilgrim, becomes a pilgrim:

And I will be the hand stretched out for alms  
the gaze of the defeated one begging to live  
the step of the condemned man who stumbles and pleads  
and I will be the cry of all people dying... (19)

This is echoed at the end of "Part Two: The Horse of War", where the white horseman suddenly appears again, must wander all the roads, and becomes a beggar who "knocks at your door, trying your refusal". As "Part Two" concludes, the poet transforms this "vagabond of the end of the world" back into "the white horseman [who] triumphs in his misery". (60)

In the opening of "Part Five", the poem's last part, this vagabond figure is the pilgrim, as earlier, but here he is also, for the first time, the Wandering Jew:

Trudge, O pilgrim, all through the aged times of history  
Haggard, O Wandering Jew, trudge through the newborn times....

Can you find any other trace in the dreary past  
than the horses' iron prints engraved in the clay  
the broken bones of the Farnese marbles  
and the printed witnesses of a divided word? (81)

In this figure Ellul converges Christ the Word with humanity seen *in* Christ. That is, humanity is here symbolized in its best possible representative within the reality of the broken world: the one who hungers and thirsts for justice and truth, the one who relentlessly searches and appeals, the one who is truly poor. For Ellul's poem, Christ is well depicted as the Wandering Jew, the one forbidden to rest, as in the legend, and forced to walk undyingly through the painful world. Although Ellul transforms the legend such that the Wandering Jew is not cursed by Christ but *is* Christ, nevertheless the Wandering Jew remains also exactly the figure of the legend: the Word of God in submitting to what man has decided, submits all human beings to it, by enduring it in powerless love and refusing to end it by power. Thus, as we shall see, the Wandering Jew as Christ, at the poem's end, is a symbol deepening the vision of the very beginning of *Oratorio*.

At first "Part Five" sounds the dark note of the triumph of the three horsemen who bring tribulations ("The horses' gallop has ringed life in / there is nothing beyond their seduction / war and blood-passion...// Power that pleases our desiccated heart" [81-82]). Then, the second section of "Part Five" is an appeal; the beggar is reduced to his sob:

O Lord Sabaoth of the subtle ear, discern this sob  
this moan suffocating in these tumbled ruins and rolling barrages  
this sob, this moan of the human heart and all creation...

But you don't bridle the wandering horses and put an end to the adventure  
Why do you wait so long to judge, disappointing so much hope (87)

In the fourth section of "Part Five", God speaks, and addresses himself to the sorrowing, yearning voice that has sung the previous sections, calling the singer a "Seer / Voyant" (89). God speaks and includes this seer among those "to whom this fog," human history, "serves only in that it divulges the single Light". God says,

Listen to them singing—I hear and grasp the song better than you—  
"what good is this retinue and array

what good is this glory  
what good are these twistings and turnings  
when a name, a single name, satisfies our memories  
when a day, a single day, satisfies our love?" (91)

Here we find a meta-poetry, in which Ellul imagines God quoting but transforming to a greater clarity and a greater music all that his poem and his life's work have seen and expressed. In this way the poet and intellectual are taken up and affirmed in the powerless power of the word.

"Part Five", and thus *Oratorio* as a whole, ends in a one-page section that returns to the

homeless beggar [who] roams the borders of History  
and raps at the door seeking alms  
the beggar the presence unacceptable at all times  
raps at every door, a tireless knocking  
and stretches out a hand for grace, bread, a piece of fruit,  
mysterious pulsing sun (94)

These lines, which are nearly but not quite the last in *Oratorio*, lay strong emphasis on an Ellulian cluster of themes: human exclusion, the basic and underlying glory of existence, and the duty of the one who must bear witness and ask for love, must ask that there be love. It is history—human exclusion—that seems impregnable. *Oratorio* gives full attention to the nightmare of history, and following it, *The Apocalypse: Architecture in Movement* affirms that "the world is going to belong to the autonomy of humans". But also as in *Oratorio*, this is because of "the decision of God to adopt...the way of nonpower, of incognito, of humility, of the renunciation of his power in order to be nothing more than love." (79; translation altered) In face of human autonomous recalcitrance, "the sole victory of God is the fact of his word... He has no other weapon" (109), and "without this Word of man ['who bears witness'], there is no Word of God either. The Word of God falls in the void if there is not an ear to hear it. And the Lord evokes that ear..." (103) Hearing and responsiveness are key, for the "end" is not a time or a goal

but a person who acts and communicates. Ellul calls God the one who “comes, but he embraces all, the totality of time and events”, and states that

The future is not an emptiness of time, indeterminate, unknown: the future is that which *comes*; it is filled (like our past) with the presence and action of the one who traverses this future *toward us* from the end of time. [101-102]

This concept of one who comes and who embraces the totality of time and events, expressed conceptually in the later exegetical work, is already present in every aspect of *Oratorio*'s form, whether we examine the details of its verse or its overall structure. Looking first of all at the verse, we see Ellul immediately start with the end in the beginning. The opening eight lines present an origin story with the timelessness of archetypal myth, but express it in a way that is also a concrete, if allusive, analysis of the historical genesis of human violence and the way it is interlaced with an ever-present activist hope of peace. The opening lines, like the whole poem, portray this interlace as the structure of time and history and of any ordinary earthly moment in our lives. The first two lines set out the end and beginning of human existence and the history that connects them:

Blood poured out when history was closed  
and the beginning of the world was a clenched fist... (9)

This asserts that violence, and perhaps sacrifice, was in the beginning of history, and also at the end. The moment “when history was closed” was and is “the beginning of the world.” When history became exclusion supported with violence, the result was spilled blood...and this is human history. The beginning of our world was the clenched fist of exclusion, threat, and violence, and so it remains. The syntax makes the “whens” of beginning and end the same. If this “when” seems momentarily to belong to a timeless myth-time, and if it seems to determine a

fate, that doesn't last long, not even to the end of the sentence, for the continuation is something unexpected, an irruption of freedom and beauty into the scene:

Blood poured out when history was closed  
and the beginning of the world was a clenched fist,  
uncontrollable measure of the delight of loving  
where freedom alone opens its rose...

No sooner do we learn that the beginning was already the disastrous end, the mutual destructive violence of beings closed to each other, than we find out that this very same reality was a measure of love's delight, where lonely freedom dwells and opens a rose. The rose, symbol of beauty, sexuality, freshness, and renewal, is made a symbol of the same history that has just received the opposite characterization. With the rose, the verb tense abruptly, "illogically" switches to the present. Freedom causes the beginning and end to be transformed in the now; their fear and horror are subsumed in the opening rose and the delights of love.

Thus, end and beginning are so fused that they are revealed to be one thing. Ellul's full opening passage continues this procedure and confirms this reading:

Blood poured out when history was closed  
and the beginning of the world was a clenched fist,  
uncontrollable measure of the delight of loving  
where freedom alone opens its rose

and freedom alone demanded total love.  
Love alone was free and the blood flowed  
before creation—from which nothing had been excluded—  
sang for its first and its final recourse.

Here we find that freedom was alone in the beginning, that it alone can open the rose of creativity, that it demanded total love. This idea has two elements. Firstly, a demand requires a scope for action. Time, history, and progress are implied: a direction and meaning for time. Time and history are given as possibility, and their use for love is enjoined. Love demands a work of

transformation, by which the beginning and end of clenched fist and spilled blood will no longer be the beginning and the end. Ellul's line, "et la liberté seule exigeait tout amour" means that freedom both demanded to be loved and demanded of all things that they love. The second element is expressed in the verb, "exigeait", "demanded": the past tense now returns, showing that freedom's "now" has transformed the past, creating a new origin from which a going-forward is now possible.

"Love alone was free" begins a second sentence, occupying lines 6 to 8. The personified freedom that was acting in lines 4 and 5 is revealed to be "Love". Ellul fits his sentence into the three verse lines in such a way as to convey that the spilled blood was also, and first, Love's blood, and it flowed temporally before and spatially in view of the creation. Thus, the word "creation" is made to mean at once the human creation of violently spilled blood and an anterior, more fundamental creation that subsumes it, a creation in which the spilled blood is already transformed into Love's self-sacrifice. Love was free, the lines tell us, and its blood poured "before" creation, that is, in its view. But the syntactical jolt at the turn of lines 7 and 8 stresses the sense of "prior to": Love was alone, and was free and gave its blood *prior to* the moment when creation sang for deliverance from the violent history it had just constituted itself as.

Turning from particular verses to the poem's totality, we find that Ellul has given *Oratorio* a symmetrical form, consonant with his visionary sense of the perennial total presence of the end in the beginning, with the disregarded word being the real presence of freedom, life, and peace. The poetic form he creates resembles the one he perceives in the Apocalypse as analyzed in *The Apocalypse: Architecture in Movement*. That book's major point concerning structure is that the Apocalypse is best understood from the center outward, five sections arranged around the third, central section, which he calls the "keystone", Apocalypse 8-14:5.

Ellul finds that the Apocalypse is a progressive narrative and argument, a vision of history, but simultaneously, through its symmetrical aspect, it expresses the eternal. He finds this dual structure to be one with the poem's meaning. He writes that,

The Apocalypse does not describe a moment of history but reveals for us the permanent depth of the historical: it is, then, one could say, a discernment of the Eternal in Time, of the action of the End in the Present... (24)

The structure of *Oratorio*, developed years earlier, is strictly symmetrical and embodies this same meaning. The book is in five parts, the central three parts concerning the three horsemen of the Apocalypse (6:3-8) that in Ellul's view are destructive yet constrained to be ultimately beneficent by God's plan. The central section, "Part Three: The Black Horse", is the longest and most complex and concerns the horse that Ellul aligns closely with his analysis of technique, politics, the state, and human self-deception and self-aggrandizement. It is flanked by "Part Two: The Horse of War" and "Part Four: Death", which mirror. This structure corresponds to the poem's vision of history, which can be summarized in three points: 1) War is the most horrible expression of death, but not the whole of it. 2) Death is the ultimate reality of human works; it is their end but also stands at their origin and is constantly present within them. 3) The basic reality of death is the rejection of God, the self-assertive pride endemic to human works. The poem's symmetrical structure places the last point, the basic one, in the central position.

On either side of these three parts lie "Part One: The Word of God", in which the Word is largely represented as the white horseman of Apocalypse 16:2 and 19:11, and "Part Five", untitled, which can be characterized by a phrase from it: "morning comes, / borne by the First, the horseman of the dawn". These two parts, like Parts Two and Four, mirror each other. In Part One, the Word of God must set out on its painful course through human history. In Part Five, there is a more complete revealing of the Word's permanent success *and* agony, and of its way of

existing for us in history. Part Five focuses on the accomplishment of what is announced as plan in Part One and becomes crisis and death in Parts Two, Three, and Four. It's important to keep in mind, though, the constant and extreme paradoxical interminglings of Ellul's verse. Anyone will be bewildered who expects a pure presentation in each section of one stage, the discourse then moving on to the next stage. There is scarcely an exultant line that does not contain its charge of deathliness and desperate challenge; there is scarcely a cry of despair that does not imply hope and the redeeming if hidden action of divine love.

True poetry always comes up against the inexpressible, and perhaps most essentially here, where the task is to see the hidden in the obtrusive, the eternal in time. *Oratorio's* final stanza sings a visionary future in which suddenly the three terrifying horses gallop away and vanish and the permanently present reality always advancing toward us is indeed fully here:

All you who so often felt their hatred  
and shivered at their hoof beats, you frail catkins of the green ash tree,  
    look—look, the morning comes,  
borne by the First, the horseman of the dawn  
at last known by all who come to open and to close  
    the black doors of fate  
to give the Beggar's glory back into his hands. (94)

This great final passage can be compared with lines from *The Apocalypse: Architecture in Movement* that describe God's ever-present eternity in concepts that catch up the poem's glancing and profound images of nature—the fruit, the mysterious pulsing sun, the spring catkins of the ash tree likened to human beings and to the coming of dawn and of a beautiful horse:

The eternity of God is not an immobility; it is a perpetual beginning, a newness always being born, an absence of custom, necessity, destiny; an absence of repetition.... And eternity is a spring gushing with non-predetermined instants, always fresh, new, surprising.... That is what our text calls Life...a love that does not wear out,...always as full, as stirring, as surprising as on the first day. (216; translation altered)