

After the Fire: The Politics of Ashes

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Two fires are kindled at the threshold of the metaphysical era, and both are extinguished, almost simultaneously, as soon as metaphysics exhausts itself (or else gets exhausted, tired, fatigued with itself) in its final Nietzschean inversion. The political reality of the twenty-first century is, as a whole, a comet tail of these ancient blazes that, until recently, seemed to be older than time itself, gave the impression of being eternal, undying, inextinguishable. How to find one's bearings among the cinders and ashes of what the flames consumed? How to make sense—if make sense we must—of the burnt and smoldering remains, the traces of catastrophes, as much as of hopes and revolutionary desires, littering the horizons of the political today?



Plato presents the readers of the *Republic* with a choice between distinct, yet parallel, onto-political paradigms:

- (a) The politics of being and truth is analogized to the blinding image of the Sun, which, as a blazing condition of possibility for vision as well as for growth and generation, draws philosophically inclined souls toward itself. Heliocentric politics is, in an important sense, a politics without politics, ideally independent of rhetorical artifice and free of multiple perspectives, a politics of λόγος void of πόλεμος and, hence, bordering on ethics (not by chance, the analog of the Sun is the idea of the good). It is, at the same time, an apocalyptic politics of the final standoff between the one, i.e.,

between the philosopher-king, as well as those courageous enough to follow him on the path toward the oneness of the blazing truth, and the multitudes that are under the sway of skillful orators.

- (b) The politics of illusion enchants the many with the magic of the spectacle, illuminated by the light of another fire, φῶς δὲ . . . πυρὸς, burning high up in the expanse of the cave, wherein they are trapped. The road, along which passes an endless procession of appearances, stretches in the space between the prisoners and the fire, μεταξὺ δὲ τοῦ πυρὸς καὶ τῶν δεσμοτῶν (514b), that similarly lies at the source of political visibility and, indeed, phenomenality. Nothing would have been given to sight; neither shadows nor silhouettes would have come alive, mesmerizing the spectators, were it not for the artificial illumination emanating from this fire, which is, according to its promethean provenance, the emblem of artifice itself, of persuasive rhetoric, and, finally, of politics.

As always, an intricate play of differences that mirror or echo one another *ad infinitum* is at stake in the meticulously planned political theater of *The Republic*. At least as early as Heraclitus, the Sun was interpreted as a form of fire,¹ and it is this immense celestial blaze that finds its fading reflection in the fire of the cave, burning high above the prisoners' heads. Just as, spatially, the intervals between the respective fires, what they illuminate, and the spectators parallel one another, so, conceptually, an extended analogy emerges, where, on the one hand, the Sun, with its powers or potentialities (ἡλίου δυνάμει) evocative of the good, exceeds the realm of being and visibility, and, on the other, the fire of the cave, imitating solar potentialities, albeit detectable only in eidetic light, fails to touch upon anything in being. At the extremes of metaphysics, both fires burn without burning out and seem to require nothing to fuel them and no material supports for their maintenance. They are the poles, between which, for millennia after Plato, political thought and action will have unfolded.

We are, then, faced with a choice between two distinct pyropolitical models, sources of luminosity and warmth, but also threats of fatal conflagration, in various ways promising to blind, if not to destroy, those who

1. Martin Heidegger and Eugen Fink, *The Heraclitus Seminar*, trans. Charles H. Seibert (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1993), p. 43.

approach them. For Plato, political movement *par excellence* is the risky act of turning from one fire to another, a literal re-revolution, in the course of which the philosophical soul exposes itself to the more abundant light and warmth of the eidetic Sun, often at the expense of the material fire, not to mention the bodily comforts and physical life it bestows. Metaphysical politics has always unfolded in the shadow of this hyperbolic choice between the two fires: between the otherworldly ideal of truth (e.g., the revolutionary demand for freedom and equality) and the crushing exigencies of the everyday (e.g., Machiavellianism and *Realpolitik* in their multiple shades and forms); between the extraordinary and the mundane; between the exception and the rule. In turn, the simplest version of politics after metaphysics consists in eliminating the transcendent pole in the opposition and embracing the immanence of the here-below as the only viable realm of human activity and, indeed, of life, which lacks an “outside.” The consequences of this move are not difficult to conjecture, for, in the absence of the possibilities of transcendence, one witnesses the rise of a politics without ideals and without idealism, a purely pragmatic politics, sober and free of myths and illusions. A sunless, situational, managerial politics that precludes the possibility of turning elsewhere and of dreaming up, in this revolutionary gyration, the utopia of the otherwise-than-being.

But, to probe a little deeper, one might ask: What happens to the Platonic staging of onto-political reality, once its fundamental metaphysical pole, itself narrated in the form of a myth, has been undercut? It would be rather naïve to assume that the political theater of the cave remains unchanged after the analogy regulating the distances between its component parts that include the fire, the “puppets,” and the spectators has collapsed. What sustains the tension between the various aspects of the political spectacle in the cave is the supplementary tension between the inside and the outside, immanence and transcendence, the light of the fire and that of the Sun. But if the carefully calibrated distances necessary for the politics of illusion, which now appears to be the only plausible politics, are erased, then nothing prevents the fire of the cave from devouring, instead of illuminating from afar, the artifacts it had previously enlivened. Henceforth, denied the redemptive promise and the light of the politics of truth, postmetaphysical subjects will not be able to take solace in the bare spectacle of politics either, since what used to be featured in it has been reduced to ash. “Wavering between the profit and the loss,” as T. S. Eliot has masterfully expressed it in *Ash Wednesday*, they will rather dwell

in “[t]he dreamcrossed twilight,” dreaming up the end of all dreams and political myths.²



“Between profit and loss” is the new configuration of distances that are no longer purely spatial and that become discernible, perhaps for the first time, in the politics of what remains after the great metaphysical fires have gone out. After the blazes, we are left with the ashes of transcendence and with scorched immanence—with the irreversible loss of ideals and the destruction of ideality, mediated through the massive devastation of material existence. Ideality is ruined along with the materiality, on which it imprinted itself, just as a fire dies out when the dry wood that fueled it turns into ash. Whether such losses translate into the promise of a new beginning (and, hence, a new politics) remains to be seen. A more pressing question is about the place of the ashes of politics within or outside the framework of Western metaphysics. Is the eclipse of the Platonic Sun a temporary occurrence, obeying the rhythmic movement of being’s donation and withdrawal, self-presentation and retreat, or is it a sign of what we may call “the absolute extinguishing”? Does it wholly exceed or is it inscribed in the calculative and sacrificial logic of metaphysics? How does the ensuing de-politicization, expressed, first and foremost, in the de-idealization of politics, dovetail with a certain end of metaphysics, on the one hand, and the replacement of fire with the by-products of combustion, on the other?

At stake in this set of questions is the complex alignment of the history of being, the history of the political, and the natural-artificial history of fire. In the thought of Heraclitus, which, as we shall see, still welded together these three histories, κόσμος was conceived of as everlasting fire, kindling in measures (μέτρα) and going out in measures (Fr. 30).³ In accordance with this cosmology, are we living through the measured going out of cosmic fire that, obeying its rhythmic vacillations, promises to be re-kindled soon? Or, conversely, has fire lost its metaphysical attribute “everlasting,”

2. T. S. Eliot, “Ash-Wednesday,” in *Collected Poems, 1909–1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1936), pp. 83ff. For an astute philosophical reading of this poem, see Marcia Cavalcante-Schuback, “Still/Encore,” in *Existential Utopia: New Perspectives on Utopian Thought*, ed. Michael Marder and Patricia Vieira (New York: Continuum, 2012).

3. G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1963), p. 199.

and so, too, its uncanny capacity for regeneration? If the latter is the case, then what is the fate of the measures inherent in fire and, especially, of solar fire as the measure of time?⁴ Does the invalidation of the metaphysical measure leave us with what is by definition immeasurable, excessive, and extreme? Or, does it hold out the promise of a new measure that could be born out of our own finitude and the immanence of human existence? And, above all, are we to place our hopes in the Phoenix-like capacities of metaphysical flames that, even from the position of utter destitution and non-being, support the myth of rebirth, regeneration, and rekindling?

The seductive power of mythology that accretes around the character of the Phoenix is undeniable. In political terms, the ashes of metaphysical ideals seem perpetually ready to take shape again at any given moment, gathering themselves into the unity of essence from their dispersion, re-activating, phenomenologically speaking, the “founding” event of the ideals’ enunciation, and transcending the course of ordinary history. A case in point here is the re-animation and rehabilitation of the notion of freedom—long rendered formal and meaningless in the West where, after paving the way for capitalism, it has been systematically deployed for the purposes of waging war by successive American administrations—which is now taking place in the Arab world, in a wave of rebellions against autocratic regimes. It is hardly justifiable, however, to interpret this cross-section of history in the making in terms of the measured kindling of the fire that has gone out in the West, the migration of world-spirit from Berlin to Cairo, or the enflaming of the same (*essentially* the same) political passions in a different geographical locale and temporal framework. The alluring nature of the above interpretation hides what may well turn out to be the new political-metaphysical strategy, namely, to transform undeniable weakness (the weakening of metaphysics, the decline of political energy, the going out of Platonic fires, etc.) into a clandestine source of strength and the chance for a continued domination by the West faced with the irreversible tendencies toward de-centering, global decline, and overall crisis. Rather than learning to live with and among the ashes of metaphysics, accepting its finality and finitude, the political harnessing of the myth of the Phoenix erects, once again, the phantomatic edifice predicated on the entwined images of the setting/rising Sun and the phallus re-vivified

4. Heidegger and Fink, *The Heraclitus Seminar*, p. 37.

after its ejaculatory collapse.⁵ Instead of the fetishistic belief that “the sun never sets over the British Empire,” the global sunset of the West is transformed into a novel form of imperialism. A political “rebellion against the Phoenix”⁶ is, thus, increasingly, the order of the day.

With this rebellion in mind, the task of postmetaphysical politics is to envision existence and co-existence without resurrecting the ideals of the past from the ashes, to which they have been reduced. At the material limits of idealization, after the fire, brilliantly explained by Hegel as “the ideality made manifest, the manifested process of destruction,”⁷ has completed its work, there remains something nonidealizable: the traces of this manifest process *and* of the materiality it destroyed: the dispersed ashes wherein fires can no longer flare up. The great dialectical confrontation of spirit and matter does not culminate in sublimated matter, penetrated, transformed, and elevated by the power of spirit. Rather, it ends, as both deconstruction and negative dialectics acknowledge, with the nonidealizable refuse that offers absolute resistance to the flaming power of spirit. At the end of the single catastrophe that is world history—the history of a unified world as the world *of* spirit, of a flaming ideality—there is nothing more to burn or to throw into the sacrificial pyre, which rages behind, lights up, and propels every vision of “progress.” The ashes left over from this history form a singular register of the victims, whether human or nonhuman, that bore the brunt of “ideality made manifest” on their very bodies and that were used as the materials for fueling the fiery self-manifestation of spirit. Neither prisoners of the spectacle, deceived by the fire of the cave, nor proponents of the heliocentric politics of Ideas, they were the unwilling participants in a third kind of conflagration, thrust to the hither side of the distinction between truth and falsity: the tortured underside of world history and of spirit’s progressive march through the world.

In the faint grey light of the ashes, in “the dreamcrossed twilight” of world history, political phenomenology itself needs to be rethought. Since the pre-Socratics and, especially, since Heraclitus, political order and apparent being have been understood as one and the same. Κόσμος connotes,

5. Sigmund Freud, “The Acquisition and Control of Fire,” in *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis and Other Works*, Standard Edition, ed. James Starchey et al. (London: Vintage Classics, 2001), 22:191.

6. Jacques Derrida, *Cinders*, trans. Ned Lukacher (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1991), p. 59.

7. G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature: Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences, Part II*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004), p. 116.

at once, an ordered arrangement and a shining-forth, a just and adjusted, well-regulated, harmonious, “measured” order, which in its brilliance gives itself to sight. When Heraclitus specifies κόσμος as a kind of fire, he indirectly touches upon its phenomenological core, as much as on its dialectical nature expressed in the orderly harmonization of opposites in the unity of kindling and being quenched, need and satiety. There is, however, nothing measured and orderly about the ashes with their tendency toward dispersion, precluding the possibility of being gathered again so effectively that they supply deconstruction with one of the most evocative metaphors for dissemination.⁸ There is, moreover, no sense of justice for all those and all that served as fuel for the pyre of world history; no satiety or quenching of need even when the process of combustion has reached its end or its limit; no brilliant light emanating from the remains that challenge the power of the spectacle. At the end of metaphysics, when everything has been consumed, the light of the ashes themselves replaces the shining-forth of phenomena, while the fading afterglow of fire gives way to the obscure trace of its victims.



The regular and rhythmic extinguishing of fire in Heraclitus, the withdrawal of being in Heidegger, and the retreat of the political in Schmitt raise the question of the remains that, more often than not, are recuperated and re-inserted into the logic of the “positive” concept thriving on its own calculated negations.⁹ The alternative to this cunning of reason is the inversion of perspective that would allow the dominant concept to be viewed from the vantage point of its absolute displacement (ἄρρυθμος, *arrhythmia*) and would permit us to inquire into the meaning of fire, being, and the political from the postmetaphysical threshold of their irrecoverable loss. Instead of asking, “What is the political?” and teasing out, as Schmitt did, the architectonics of the concept from differences structured into oppositional formations, the postmetaphysical query is, “What remains of politics?” (which, as one should never forget, includes a further question, “*Whose* remains are strewn on the battlefield?”). After political theologies and political mythologies have imagined all the possible variations on the

8. Derrida, *Cinders*, p. 39.

9. On the overall theory of Being as “remains,” cf. Santiago Zabala, *The Remains of Being: Hermeneutic Ontology after Metaphysics* (New York: Columbia UP, 2009).

Platonic politics of illusion and of truth, it is now time to take stock of what is left in their wake.

Although the shape of the answer is still abstruse (and it is far from certain that this opacity will be ever lifted), it has been already suggested that what remains of the great pyropolitical experiments of the past are the ashes, or, to put it more abstractly, difference devoid of oppositionality, dis-organized and anarchic. Let us try to compile an ethical register, an index of these remains that would point, at the same time, to the closure—bereft of either completion or satisfaction—of metaphysical paradigms and to the fate of those who fell victim to the violence these paradigms have unleashed.

Jean-Louis Chrétien's exegesis of the theological significance of fire in St. Ambrose discusses, among other things, how sparks of the divine blaze ignite in human beings the will and the desire for the good.¹⁰ Jesus of Nazareth, who, as the proto- or archi-revolutionary has come to "throw fire onto the earth," imparts this divine blaze that burns without consuming anything to all those prepared to receive it. Will and desire, (that is to say: psychic interiority in its entirety) are but a trace of divine fire that bestows the gift of subjectivity upon its recipients and, in virtually all political theological accounts, figures as the cause behind revolutionary political action and the *pouvoir constituant* this action performatively wields. What the political theology of revolutions inherits from Christianity is a belief in the contagious inflammation of individual wills, amounting to the flaring up of the collective (or general) will that, at the height of its universal aspirations, intends to change not only a given political regime but also the world as such. And what it adopts from Platonism is the adherence to the politics of truth as the metaphysical ideal, igniting with its undying fire the first sparks of the revolution.

As soon as they are de-idealized, historicized, recalled to their materiality, the theological and political-theological fires prove to be finite. The process of secularization might well represent, as many have come to believe, the "measured" going out of the theological fire, which conserves its self-identity even in the midst of its becoming-other-to-itself. But even if this hypothesis is correct and secularism is, indeed, the other face of Christianity, psychic interiority (the will and desire) no longer harbors the fire of its Ambrosian-Augustinian provenance; at the extreme, the psyche

10. Jean-Louis Chrétien, *L'intelligence du feu: réponses humaines à une parole de Jésus* (Paris: Bayard, 2003), p. 66.

as such has been reduced to ash. The “will in ashes” can, to be sure, signify disinterest and apathy, passivity and reluctance to embrace revolutionary change, but it can also indicate a radical re-making of the subject and an overcoming of the metaphysical prejudice that sovereignty resides either in the withdrawn and autonomous interiority or in the exteriorization and determination of the subject by means of decisive action. The will in ashes is the apex of nihilism but also a turning point in the subject’s relation to itself, to the world, and to others.

The heteronomous sources of the will and of desire, born of divine inflammation, are palpable in the genealogy of the subject, even if the permutations of these psychic forces in modernity, up to and including the rationalization of the will, lead us to the conclusion that psychic fire—or the psyche *qua* fire, received from elsewhere—has gone out. Confirming this outcome, to which they have greatly contributed, the predominant theories of subjectivity in political theory and economics construe subjects as utility-maximizing units, whereas the dissenting versions that insist on the heteronomous constitution of psychic life are, at best, confined to ethical thought, for example, that of Emmanuel Levinas. With the fire of the will has gone out the faith in the possibilities of transcendence and, more precisely, in the revolutionary politics of truth. And if the other pole of Plato’s metaphysical pyropolitics, namely, the politics of the spectacle, replete with the *stagings* of debates, parliamentary procedures, electoral victories and defeats, still fascinates the spectators, it does so by inertia, as a temporary diversion befitting apathetic, nihilistic, and indifferent subjects, who are concerned with nothing but the chances of their physical survival. Everything that does not fit the format of calculative rationality is immediately dismissed as “obscurantism” and “mysticism,” or, in the words of Novalis in “Christendom or Europe”: “If somewhere an old superstitious belief in a higher world and such-like reared its head, the alarm was sounded at once on all sides, and whenever possible the dangerous spark was suffocated in the ashes of philosophy and wit.”¹¹

The “ashes of philosophy and wit” are not at all separate from the mythical sparks that suffocate in their midst; on the contrary, they are the by-products of the fires of superstition that have consumed themselves in the rationalized form of thinking. To reduce the qualitatively different to ashes is not so much to reduce to the same as to equalize, to form

11. Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Margaret Mahoney Stoljar (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), p. 145.

a loose, a priori disseminated community of what has been touched and transformed by fire. Postmetaphysical politics inherits this vision of the common from the communitarian dimension of the theological and political-theological blazes that boast the “unifying power,” *le pouvoir unitif*, of fire.¹² Confronted with fire, everything is, at least potentially, combustible, aggregated in the community of what can burn and what can spread the burning, as though by contagion. The hopes of revolutionaries, especially in the context of Russian Bolshevism, have traditionally privileged this facet of pyropolitics with its desire that the sparks of change would spread from the already “enlightened” and burning vanguard of the working class to the rest of the *body politic*.

Imagine, now, the future perfect of this political theology, i.e., what will have occurred once revolutionary fire engulfed and devoured everything in its path. A different kind of community will have emerged, one where equality will have been translatable into the ashes left over after the great fires of metaphysics. This community, to the extent that we can imagine it, will have included, aside from human beings, all of organic and inorganic nature that has borne the insignia of “ideality made manifest” and that, today, in the age of “biofuels,” is subject to the possibility of being literally incinerated more so than ever before. Whenever the blazing politics of truth has attempted to melt and to mold material existence to its ideals, the unintended effect has been the upsurge of a certain ontological solidarity among the non-idealizable residue of its activity. It is, perhaps, in this vein that we should interpret the Marxist idea of communism as a “classless society” (*klassenlos Gesellschaft*), or, better yet, the “unclassifiable society” of difference without oppositionality, where all conceptual and hierarchical distinctions have been burnt beyond recognition; in short, the society of and in ashes.



The unclassifiable society is the horizon of our postmetaphysical future, the future, where, in the words of Derrida, “ash awaits us”¹³ and where the only possible self-recognition will suggest to us that we are both not-yet and always-already ash. (The Russian verb *ispepelit*—to turn into ashes, or, more precisely, to draw ashes out of that which is to be burnt—hints at

12. Chrétien, *L'intelligence du feu*, p. 101.

13. Jacques Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, trans. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham UP, 2005), p. 20.

the deconstructive precedence of the outcome or the trace of the combustion process merely drawn out of the thing by the fire that engulfs it.) By no means does the absence of conceptual and hierarchical distinctions, be they quantitative or qualitative, from the unclassifiable society signal the leveling of its members to elements that are essentially the same, homogenous, or interchangeable. As Derrida notes elsewhere, ash is “this irreplaceable place, . . . where the singular imprint, like a signature, barely distinguishes itself from the impression.” “And,” he continues, “this is the condition of singularity, of the idiom, of the secret, testimony.”¹⁴ Ash, then, is the figureless figure of singularity, the product of concrete judgments, rendered through the analysis of “discerning fire” (πύρ φρονεῖν), and untranslatable into the language of predication. If the singularity of ash keeps itself secret, this is because it refrains from presenting itself in and through λόγος and, thereby, invalidates phenomenology at its root. But this very secret is consistent with a singular testimony, the register of unspeakable destitution that is inevitably betrayed when it is expressed or illuminated from the outside, with a light that is foreign to it. This is why, finally, cinders and ashes are not absolutely nothing but, rather, “nothing that can be in the world,”¹⁵ provided that “world” is grasped in its onto-phenomenological sense either as the world of spirit, wherein spirit feels at home, or as the structures of meaning Dasein weaves around itself in the multiplicity of its practical concerns. Nothing “in the world,” ashes are meaningless within the everyday matrix of sense, unrepresentable and unrepresentable in the bright light of λόγος. But they are, at the same time, the only things that survive, that outlive life itself, and that persist outside the bygone world, wholly consumed by fire. The meaning of ashes, if there is one, lies, precisely, in their meaninglessness and in their absolute withdrawal from the sphere of phenomenality.

Politically, the obscure testimony of the ashes is the record of defeats, forming the underside of history, which is normally written by the victorious ones. Giving a messianic twist to pyropolitics, Walter Benjamin concludes that “[t]he only writer of history with the gift of setting alight the sparks of hope in the past is the one who is convinced of this: that not even the dead will be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious. And

14. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 99.

15. Derrida, *Cinders*, p. 73.

this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.”¹⁶ The question, however, is whether or not it is too late to speak of fire and of “the sparks of hope” *after* the victims have been reduced to ash in the blaze of progress and world history. Assuming that the dead, who are neither “safe from the enemy” nor, more generally, immunized from further violence by the fact of their having already died, could speak—assuming that they could voice and present themselves on the historical scene, if only to affirm their essential non-appearance on it—they would do so in the voice of Shakespeare’s Cleopatra, who, in the final confrontation with Caesar, refuses to be illuminated by the victor’s light. From the depths of her “wounding shame,” she withdraws her presence from the triumphant Caesar. There is, for her, something worse than defeat (“It smites me/Beneath the fall I have”), namely, the spectacle of the defeated, where the victim would “show the cinders of my spirits/Through th’ashes of my chance.”¹⁷ The economy of this unthinkable violence, greater than death itself, is remarkable: standing in the victor’s light, the victim is victimized again, in excess of the initial trauma, by being forced to show cinders *through* ashes, to present the remains of the extinguished spirit, along with the totality of the past that has led to defeat, in the ashen light of the future in ruins, the “chance” already reduced to ashes. Through the filter of ashes, whatever is left of life (its cinders) is reconstructed as if it has, from the outset, teleologically pointed to and culminated in the victor’s triumph. The spectacle of the defeated, dragged into the sphere of phenomenality, is the ultimate historical violence that befalls every temporal modality of the victims’ life, death, and after-life in and as ashes.

And yet, Cleopatra prohibits the spectacularization of her defeat, affirming the fiery core of her being, as much as the political meaning of her suicide. Her words gravitate toward the Platonic politics of truth, the final embrace of the ideality of spirit as fire: “I am fire and air; my other elements/I give to baser life.”¹⁸ It seems, *prima facie*, that death here assumes its metaphysical function as the act of purifying spirit by way of ridding it of its material substratum (“baser life”). But, on closer reading, it becomes obvious that there is no space for transcendence within elemental

16. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), Thesis VI, p. 255.

17. William Shakespeare, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, in *The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 1033.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 1035.

immanence—only a rupture between the ideal elements of fire and air and the “other elements” that veer on the side of materiality. This rupture takes place within life itself, separates the “baser” modalities of the latter from the more noble ones, and follows the political logic Carl Schmitt outlined in a different context, “life struggles not with death, spirit not with spiritlessness [*und der Geist nicht mit der Geistlosigkeit*]; spirit struggles with spirit, life with life...”¹⁹ The separation of concepts from themselves is possible only as long as the spirit is burning and, divided against itself, maintains the tension of oppositionality that defines the political as such. If Cleopatra rejects her own appearance in the glorious light of Caesar, it is because she can still muster enough spiritual resources to be a source of her own light and meaning, of the heat of motivation and truth, opposed to those of Caesar. “I am fire and air” reclaims the sovereignty of the speaker, who, like the glorious Sun-King, embodies the solar blaze and interiorizes the conditions of possibility for appearing and truth. In fact, this simple statement translates the Christian “I am the truth; I am the light” into the (pagan, some would say) language of the elements. But, above all, it rebels against the vision of cinders through ashes, the finality of victimization, and the extinguishing of antagonisms that have kept the spirit of the political intact.

Shakespeare’s Cleopatra does not merely reject the futurelessness of ashes and cinders, however. She passes, in a quasi-dialectical fashion, through the screen of ashes only to be reborn as pure fire thanks to the vision of her dead lover, Antonio—“methinks I hear / Antonio call”²⁰—and thanks to her decision to take her own life. The Phoenix that materializes from the ashes and that reawakens ideality and the politics of spirit bears a deadly force in the midst of its newly gained life.²¹ This is, also, the case in every return to a metaphysical unity from the dispersed plurality of the ashes: the Phoenix spreads the seeds of death, whence it has issued, all around itself, while affirming itself as the eternal figure. Politically, the most spectacular example of such rebirth is the self-representation

19. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, exp. ed., trans. George Schwab (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 96.

20. Shakespeare, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, p. 1034.

21. Such, for Hegel, is the fate of nature impregnated with spirit, for “the goal of nature is to kill itself—as Phoenix to burn itself, in order to emerge rejuvenated as spirit from this exteriority.” Quoted in David Farrell Krell, *Contagion: Sexuality, Disease, and Death in German Idealism and Romanticism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1998), p. 163.

of the State of Israel as the Phoenix risen from the metonymic ashes of Auschwitz. In a perverse demonstration of victimhood, via a testimony that breaks the secret and violates the nonphenomenality of the ashes, the spectacularization of Auschwitz (in Hollywood and in other outlets of mass culture) is a tool for legitimating the death-bearing politics of perhaps the only state in the world that conceives of itself as a Phoenix. Here the two Platonic fires rage as one: the spectacle of past victimization reinforces the theo-metaphysical politics of truth, eager to decimate the diverse perspectives and existences not sanctioned by it. To paraphrase Schmitt, then, in the battle against the Phoenix, life struggles with a living death, and spirit with spiritless spirit.



The leitmotif of fire in Heidegger's reading of the poetry of Georg Trakl in *On the Way to Language* gained notoriety largely due to Derrida's patient deconstruction of this text in *Of Spirit*. It is in Trakl that Heidegger discovers the definition of spirit as a flame, i.e., as the luminous condition of possibility for phenomenality, for the totality of all that is present, and for concrete life conceived as pain: "Spirit is flame. It glows and shines. Its shining takes place in the beholding look. To such a vision is given the advent of all that shines, where all that is, is present. This flaming vision is pain. . . . The spirit which bears the gift of a 'great soul' is pain; pain is the animator. . . . Everything that is alive, is painful."²² Unlike the disembodied Platonic vision of ideas, lit by a transcendent fire, or the spectacularization of appearances, illuminated by the fire of the cave, this third kind of vision—the "flaming vision," *flammende Anschauen*—is inseparable from the corporeality of those who see, insofar as this vision is pain, *Schmerz*. The postmetaphysical transition in the poetry and thinking of Trakl and Heidegger takes place, precisely, the moment when the distances between the seer, the seen, and the animating vision collapse, that is to say, when the fire burns in us and burns us, inflicts pain.

The influence of Ernst Jünger on Heidegger is, of course, unmistakable in this foregrounding of pain. Nevertheless, the extreme dangerousness of spirit—and of pyropolitics associated with it—lies not so much in pain *proper* as in the confluence of spirit's enabling and disabling facets: "... flame is the ek-stasis that lightens and calls forth radiance, but which

22. Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1982), p. 181.

may go on consuming and reduce all to the white of ashes [*alles in das Weiße der Asche verzehren kann*].”²³ The possibility that everything, i.e., the totality shining and glowing in the collective flaming vision of spirit, would be destroyed is inherent in the radiant self-presentation of this totality. If materialized, the possibility of total destruction would convert the brilliance of spirit into the whiteness of ashes, where the “all” is “nothing” or next to nothing, a trace of past flames, that falls apart. The modal verb *kann* is highly significant here: for Heidegger, as for Trakl, reduction to ash is only a futural possibility, an event that *may* happen, given the “internal duplicity of *Geist*” that “affects all the thinking up to and including that of ash.”²⁴ But for Paul Celan and Derrida—the other pair of thinker-poets—the catastrophe of *Geist* has already occurred, leaving behind the ashes as the only heritage of the past inflammations of spirit. In Celan’s dense language, the past, that which is behind (*hinter*) our shaken being is the ash-aureole, *Aschenglorie*: “Ash-aureole behind/your shaken knotted/hands at the Threeways.”²⁵ This “aureole,” or literally this “glory,” surrounding and haunting every act and every gesture of “your shaken knotted/hands” is the white of ashes Heidegger had anticipated with some measure of anxiety. It is an after-effect of metaphysical burning brilliance that illuminated, brought into being, and destroyed whatever fell in its spotlight.

In keeping with the tradition of political theology, however, glory is the mark of sovereignty, and its brilliance—a necessary attribute of divine and monarchical power.²⁶ In the burning light of the sovereign’s glory, everything comes into being, is allowed to show itself as itself, but also runs the risk of being destroyed. Power and phenomenological ontology, making be and letting appear, are virtually indistinguishable, when it comes to the political theology of glory, and it is no wonder that both fade once glory has been reduced to ashes. One of the meanings of the glory *of* and *in* ashes

23. *Ibid.*, p. 179, translation slightly modified.

24. Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 97.

25. Paul Celan, “Aschenglorie,” in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, ed. and trans. John Felstiner (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2001), p. 261. For a close reading of this poem see Derrida’s “Politics and Poetics of Witnessing,” in *Sovereignties in Question*, pp. 65–96.

26. Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa and Matteo Mandarini (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2011).

is the proliferation of meanings and interpretations after the decline of the blazing politics of truth that emanated from the glow of sovereignty. This extinguishing of the one truth, with its life-giving and death-bearing flame, does not, as one would expect, prompt the spectacularization of perspectival truths, valorizing the other extreme of metaphysics. Instead, it finally opens up the space for a testimony that keeps its secret, that withdraws from its very donation, and that is incapable of exercising formal power, not even the power of enunciation. By the time the reader arrives at the end of “Aschenglorie,” the paradox of this secret testimony of the ashes themselves, emitting their light that does not bedazzle, that is devoid of brilliance, and that promises to break the spell of myths and metaphysics, reaches its crescendo: “No one/bears witness for the/witness.”²⁷ There is no higher light or fire to illuminate the testimony of the witness; the obscure testament of the victims can be rendered only in the glory of and in ashes that, aureole-like, surrounds them.

At this point, we must part with Derrida’s reading of both Celan and Heidegger on the question of the ashes for two reasons. First, the otherwise perceptive and infinitely patient analysis of Celan’s poem in “The Poetics and Politics of Witnessing” still finds itself under the sway of the metaphysical idea of testimony and truth. When Derrida writes that “[a]sh . . . annihilates or threatens to annihilate even the *possibility* of bearing witness to annihilation,”²⁸ he implicitly ties this possibility to the politics of truth, from the perspective of which ash and its type of light are almost nothing. The lack of uniform, evenly spread, and brilliant light of Ideas does not connote a complete absence of light, however dim it may be. The victims’ aureole of ash is far from an absolutely idiosyncratic testimony that isolates each victim, including those who are no longer alive, in the solipsism of their unique, interminable suffering. The ashes, in and of themselves (which is to say: outside of themselves), in their sheer non-identity with themselves, are shared in their multiplicity, in their falling apart into a nonessential and untotalizable plurality of traces. Only in this barely describable condition do they non-communicatively transmit their secret testimony.

Second, with regard to Heidegger’s terror in the face of “white of ash,” Derrida justifiably concludes that “[e]vil is not on the side of matter or of the sensible matter generally opposed to spirit. Evil is spiritual, it is

27. Celan, “Aschenglorie,” p. 261.

28. Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, p. 69.

also *Geist* . . .” But this insight into the inner division within spirit, reminiscent of Schmitt’s statement “spirit struggles with spirit, [etc.]” leads Derrida, at the end of this intriguing paragraph in *Of Spirit*, to a rather misguided question, “Is ash the Good or the Evil of spirit?”²⁹ The question is misguided because a system of valuations from the vantage point of spirit no longer matters when ash turns not only into a destiny that “awaits us,” a catastrophe infinitely deferred and one that differs from world history, but also into the event that has always already happened. It is, as Shakespeare’s Cleopatra and Celan’s poetry imply, an act of the greatest violence to cast ash into the light that is not its own, to view the victim in the glorious brightness of the victor’s triumph. The prospective consideration of ashes as the future of spirit’s flame has been foreclosed at the end of metaphysics, when, on the contrary, this flame appears as the distant past of the ashes. Given the fundamental shift in temporal orientation, the differences of and in the ashes, constitutive of what we have called “the unclassifiable society,” are to be transvalued in such a thorough fashion that the categories “good” and “evil,” but also the “one” and the “many,” may become outmoded as a result of this transvaluation.



The catalogue of the kinds of fire, illustrating the “perpetual motion of the elements,” in Plato’s *Timaeus* reads, retrospectively, in light of post-metaphysical thought, as a mapping out of the subsequent history of metaphysics. “[W]e must observe,” says Timaeus, “that there are many kinds of fire: for example, there is flame; and the kind issuing from flame, which does not burn but supplies light to the eyes; and the kind which, when the flame is quenched, is left behind among the embers [τοῖς διαπύροις καταλειπόμενον αὐτοῦ]” (58c). The flame’s gradual diminution and “division” is the thread running through the typology, whereby fire first becomes innocuous as mere light (and—why not?—as the eidetic corollary of light: pure θεωρία) and, on the heels of the separation between its specular and thermal functions, is quenched, persisting in a weaker form “among the embers.” The withdrawal of being and the retreat of politics parallel this going out of the flame, which is never finally and completely extinguished but which continues to dwell among the embers—διάπυρος—where fire (πυρ) literally divides (δια) against itself. Were the political and ontological histories of metaphysics to end the way this classificatory scheme

29. Derrida, *Of Spirit*, p. 97.

tacitly anticipates, the possibility of new inflammations of spirit and political revolutions would not have been diminished but, rather, would have gained strength under the camouflage of weakness. Fire's division against itself and apparent withdrawal, in its confinement to embers, allows it to persist essentially unchanged. (As though in corroboration of this duplicity, the Greek word *διάπυρος* speculatively combines in itself two opposite meanings: a diminished burning activity of the embers and an ardent, fiery, inflamed nature.) A version of Heraclitean thought remains potent across the rhythmic withdrawals and intensifications of fire—but also of politics and being—that keeps itself thanks to dividing against itself, loses its identity dialectically to recapture it on a higher plane. And the Platonic differentiation between two onto-political fires at the origins of metaphysics is but a fold in the history of fire's division against itself.

The divisions in question are not only ontological but also inherently political, because, through them, difference is organized into oppositional formations, even if the front lines between the opposed camps pass within the same entity (fire, spirit, life). The ashes, on the other hand, fall apart and get scattered rather than being divided, since theirs is a difference rid of oppositionality (this, in a shorthand, is what Derrida terms a “politics of friendship”), a light devoid of brilliance, and a witnessing without *λόγος*. There is no phenomenology of the ashes that emit their white light, indiscernible to the eyes that have grown accustomed to the glow of metaphysics, and there is no place for traditional politics in their midst, unless one considers what remains of the political in them, be it the traces of revolutionary fires, sovereign glory, and hopes for a better world, or the victims' unsatisfied demands for justice. To the ashes belongs the anarchy of the unclassifiable society, where the flame is neither quenched nor ready to be reignited again, where fire fails to establish a new identity across its difference to itself, where everything has been burnt beyond recognition and has thus slipped away from the reach of metaphysical hierarchies.