

## Apocalypticism: A Way Forward for Poetry

*The editors of this portfolio asked for a short introduction to my discussion of Joseph Donahue's and Pam Rehm's work and apocalyptic poetry. Why write an essay about apocalypticism in the work of two contemporary poets? Why insist that their work represents the way forward for American poetry?*

*Basically, this: sixteen years ago, the editors of apex of the M (Lew Daly, Alan Gilbert, Kristin Prevallet, and Pam Rehm) opened their inaugural issue with an editorial predicting the academic institutionalization of both traditional workshop poetry and Language poetry. This was not such a stretch, even at the time; but these were the only experimental or avant-garde writers making such a critique, and it earned them great scorn in some quarters. My suspicion is that they wrote the editorial in response to their growing disenchantment with so-called radical poetry, which wasn't remotely radical—at least not in the Christian apocalyptic sense that was then attracting their attention. The editorial was clearly meant as a provocation, but just as importantly as an indictment of secular models for contemporary writing, which typically resist and frequently deny the “unmediated” and “insurrectionary” love of the divine that the apex editors found in mystical and prophetic traditions, as well as romanticism. Apocalypse and other forms of sacred expression unbind love from material desire, freeing it to embrace the unknown and the unspeakable.*

*Here we are in 2010: the numbers of creative writing programs and the visibility of avant-garde poetics have increased (exponentially, even), and we are guided by the two groups identified in the editorial. The legacy of visionary poetry, which dominated experimental North American poetry at midcentury, has been neutralized. Charles Bernstein's criticism is representative of this neutralization. In his afterword*

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to Robin Blaser's *The Holy Forest*, for example he writes that "The Holy Forest is wholly secular, for only the secular allows the promise of an end to what Blake knew as the Totalizing Oppression of Morality." It's a grotesque claim, one that ignores the quality and meaning of Blaser's work, purging its spirituality to make it safe for academic consumption.<sup>1</sup>

Neither Language writing nor traditional workshops support visionary or vatic writing. But just as importantly, neither opposes such work. Instead, as the editors to the apex of the M understood sixteen years ago, these two sanctioned modes are symptoms of a pervasive allergy to the spirit that visionary work must seek to cure.

But how? This was the great question, in my mind, that drove the production of the apex of the M, surely among the most interesting poetry journals to be published in the last twenty years. And it's the question that compels me to turn my attention to the work of Joseph Donahue and Pam Rehm in what follows.

## §

What does it mean to say a poem is apocalyptic? Typically, it means that a poem, or its poet, suggests catastrophe or the quality of conclusion signified in Revelation, the final book of the New Testament. This can be a helpful designation, but not always. Allusions to Christian omega are inevitable in apocalyptic poetry, but there is something more at work even in the work of Blake, for instance, than the revelatory completion of sacred Christian history. Apocalypse is both genre and mode, and each is filled with power. Apocalyptic poetry, then, is language charged with the kerygmatic power to reveal sacred reality, in history and beyond it.

The peculiar power of a truly apocalyptic poetry is its expression of the vitality of a God all in all, beyond history but knowable somehow in it, who does not yet exist, but who pulsates a profound, irrefutable influence from an unforeseen future obliquely but entirely recognized in an exegetical totalization of language. Put another way: apocalyptic poetry is a power-load of words. Today, two poets writing such apocalyptic poetry are Joseph Donahue and Pam Rehm.

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1/ Blaser's work is manifestly religious, even to a casual reader. In the note at the end of "Great Companion: Dante Alighieri," he refers to himself as "[t]his aging Roman Catholic." Blaser may not have fit into the Vatican's conception of a Catholic, but he undoubtedly considered himself one.

Donahue and Rehm are different poets at root, even as they belong in the same company. Donahue has spent years mastering long serial poems that combine elements of mysticism, esotericism, protest, and the alienation of the urban experience. These features are exemplified in two early sequences—“Spectral Evidence” (1995) and “Christ Enters Manhattan” (1995)—but most especially in *Terra Lucida*, his still-in-process vatic cataclysm. This work places him in a lineage that includes Ezra Pound, H.D., Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, and especially Nathaniel Mackey as direct ancestors. Rehm also writes poems in sequence, albeit series typically shorter and more concerned with dilations and contractions of scenes of domestic mysticism than with the esoteric and apocryphal histories that legislate Donahue’s poetry. Rehm’s masters are Dickinson and Niedecker among poets, and the Gospel writers and epistolarians of the New Testament among others. I take her work principally to be an act of protest against the incarcerating concerns of the age, as well as a gesture of defiance in her insistence that poetry can be a kind of privacy, even as it is secured in a public space.

Apocalypse links these two poets together, giving their work its power. We can see these links in both poets through their connections to *apex of the M*, a literary journal that ran for six issues in the mid-1990s. Rehm was one of its founding editors, along with Lew Daly, Alan Gilbert, and Kristen Prevallet, all three of whom were enrolled at the time as graduate students in the Poetics Program at SUNY at Buffalo. (Rehm alone was not a student at Buffalo.) *Apex of the M* was an unusual journal to have emerged from this place at this time, which was then best known as one of the primary stations of then-emergent academic Language poetry, led by Charles Bernstein. In contrast to an approach shaped by both Marxism and poststructuralism, the editors of *apex of the M* wanted conspicuously to connect their enterprise to notions of the spirit, claiming in the provocative editorial that opened the inaugural issue, “Of primary importance in this shift [to move away from the current state of the art] is a commitment to heterogeneity and alterity, to the unknown and the unspeakable as material influx leading to love.” Defiantly romantic in tenor, the editors excoriated mainstream “workshop” poetry as “deplorable,” while insisting that avant-garde poets, by giving priority to language itself, had committed themselves “to the socially inept dead-end of autonomous forms.” “Why, then, should we

not resist equally,” asked the editors, “both the suburban vacuity of mainstream poetics and verse, and the avant-garde’s poetics of ‘language itself, with its forcefield-like purgation of radical alterity and nonlinguistic, material influx and receptivity from what we heed and write?” Instead of these, the editors called for a “radical transparency of language” that would resist solipsism and the erasure of the other by seeking a poetry of the “Conscious Ear,” one of Dickinson’s definitions of “spirit.”

The first issue of the journal included work by Bernadette Mayer, John Taggart, Mackey, and Will Alexander, alongside that of Elizabeth Willis, Peter Gizzi, and Benjamin Friedlander, all three of whom were also students in the Poetics Program. While I find the work in this issue of the journal—as well as that in the other five of its short run—compelling and interesting, it doesn’t as a whole approach the forcefulness of the editorials that appeared in the first three issues, each of which was stoked by the insurrectionary language of apocalypse. The first (and best) editorial concludes with this claim:

Only in direct proportion to the way in which speaking disarms us, making us irreplaceable on the path of an urgency by which we must each in our own way remain overcome, will the faint strains of an apocalypse of utterance guide all hierarchy and mediacy into place, overwhelmed by a spiritual force rendering them powerless against a destruction more irreversible than any fall, in the future of a suffusion almost immediately indistinguishable from peace.

Donahue had two poems published in the third issue of *apex of the M*, one of them—“Canto Escondito”—an early iteration of *Terra Lucida*. Donahue clearly took the editorial call of those first issues to heart; or, rather, they reflected what was already in his heart: “I remember very well and with a good deal of excitement the early issues of *apex*. I remember feeling, finally! Someone is saying it out loud! I don’t remember the particulars of the opening salvo, but essentially feeling in deep sympathy with it.” Rehm, for her part, had work included in the second issue of the journal. To the initial editorial, she contributed, “The quote, it’s either by H.D. or E.D. and maybe a sentence or two around it but nothing else.” She’s referring to a phrase by H.D., quoted in the editorial: “Our awareness leaves us defenceless,” which comes from section 29 of “The Walls Do Not

Fall.” In the way Donahue’s poetic authority arises from an ongoing, permutative questioning of revelation’s capacities, Rehm’s begins from a vulnerable openness arising from the awareness she vitalizes in her writing, typically through questioning and second-guessing.

## §

Donahue appears to have begun writing the sequence of poems in *Terra Lucida* as early as 1995, when “Canto Escondito” was published in *apex of the M*. Since then, he has published sections of the poem in a series of chapbooks, culminating in 2009 with the book publication of *Terra Lucida* by Talisman House. The title means “earth of light” or “land of light”; it comes from the work of Islamic scholar and self-declared visionary Henry Corbin, who used the name *terra lucida* in a few instances. Donahue most likely got his title from *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, where Corbin, speaking of the *mundus imaginis* (“a concrete spiritual world of archetype-Figures, apparitional Forms, Angels of species and of individuals”) declares that “in Manicheism there is the Earth of Light, *Terra lucida*, situated in the kingdom of light. It is governed by a divinity of eternal light, surrounded by twelve Splendors.” This realm is an actuality “vouchsafed to the visionary apperception of the active Imagination.” Corbin’s memorable term for qualifying the productions of the active imagination is *imaginal*. It’s a useful term to invoke in the light of the considerable esoteric, scriptural, and heretical lore Donahue brings to his poem. For Corbin, the *imaginal* signifies all that we come upon in the realm of “the Angel,” a transcendent dimension humans can enter only through the cultivation of vision: “Its growth is concomitant with a visionary apperception, giving shape to the supersensory perceptions and constituting that totality of ways of knowing that can be grouped under the term *hierognosis*.”

Consider this section from *Terra Lucida* as an example of the way in which glimpses of a hierognostic reality interfere with the shimmering sense of the ordinary, framed in this case by doubt and meditations on doubt on the one side, and by a description of early Christian heresy on the other:

A mortal is about to see  
the majesty of the throne ...

Though in the stream of clouds  
it may be only the foot of the throne,

or a snarl of white mist in the field  
in the first of the sunlight.

Nonetheless, an heretical beauty  
floods the ranks of a world.

The black still pours down  
but the peaks break free.

Branches aglow with a wet flame ...  
Sky, a deep violet, surges

behind the charcoal mountain  
where the rain is still falling

on a single gorge of brightness  
after the sudden storm of

the first night of my death.  
Angelic tormentors are silent.

The archive of what is stands open.  
While in the ruins of an orchard

with its stretch of tree-stumps  
like the broken guards

of a once sublime palace,  
birds lie quietly on the grass.

*Nonetheless, an heretical beauty / floods the ranks of a world.* An interesting pun whiffs from “ranks”: Donahue is invoking the ranks of the angelic hierarchy imagined by Dionysius, just as he is alluding to the rank and file of the world below. But isn’t there also a smell here, the

rank odor of the human world below, which, despite its stench, streams with a beauty emanating from God's eternal throne? In *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Gershom Scholem points out that "the earliest Jewish mysticism is throne-mysticism." Unlike the forms of absorbed contemplation elaborated in theosophical Kabbalah, throne mysticism is characterized by "perception of [God's] appearance on the throne, as described by Ezekiel, and cognition of the mysteries of the celestial throne-world." Scholem goes on to compare throne mysticism to early Christian mystical and Gnostic practices, comparable to what Corbin identified as the active Imagination in Islamic mysticism, or what we might think of nowadays as creative visualization. The silent angelic tormentors Donahue summons stand perhaps for the interferences this visionary realm works on our consciousness: whether we seek this earth of light ourselves or we find ourselves suddenly staring at the blinding throne of God, insight combines with anguish to give us the archive of what is in the ruined grounds of a once-sublime palace.

Like Nathaniel Mackey's *Song of the Andoumboulou*, Donahue's *Terra Lucida* follows the course of an oblique plot in which a questing subject transforms at times into a collective subjectivity, moving through "a world dark as anthracite / & lit by flames of an invisible war"; gaining insight, suffering sadness, finding death and resurrection, and battling evil: "And during those two days / when our souls were elsewhere, // dazzled in pavilions of the spirit, / with angels, martyrs, & rock stars, // what evil slipped in me? What curse got me?" *Terra Lucida* gives the sense that the poem's phantasmal world is as untrustworthy as it is revelatory:

Then will all  
be nothing?

Then will every  
death be a delusion?

Then will our lives  
be waves of shade

in the roaring core of  
the sun at night,

be shadows  
in the dazzle?

*Shadows in the dazzle*: this could stand as a statement for Donahue's hierognostic conclusions about reality.

If one thing characterizes the active imagination Donahue brings to bear on his poem, it's his desire that the visionary reality he has entered not be merely some dream, but a place of absolute reality. His skill at conveying this feeling seems unmatched by any other living American poet, such that parts of his poem exhibit a simultaneous lightness of touch and gravitational pull, where surrealistic follies vie with imaginal intensities. One of the best examples of Donahue's mastery appears in the midst of "in this paradise," in lines that combine throne-mysticism with a Richard Diebenkorn painting:

One heaven for optics, one  
for mysticism, & down the hall,

idling, on a stage, a string quartet.  
A hawk shakes the trees as the sun falls

over these houses, over these hills  
where, since this is California,

a father tells his son: there are  
two kinds of infinities,

those that can be counted,  
& those that cannot. And later,

at bedtime, the mother will add  
and there are those crossed

by souls once they have drunk  
from white cups of magnolia

blossom over a sunlit deck, in  
a forest, where festive guests toast

the abracadabra of zero,  
as, at a low-limbed tree where

the path meets the stream,  
the ghosts of two girls wait in

the shade for a passerby, purer  
than you, from whom to slice

the heart, & read in its red  
the whim of the stars.

*I'm drowsy, but I don't want  
to sleep, one girl says to the other.*

*I don't want our marvelous  
death to be only a dream.*

*The abracadabra of zero:* it's that quality of inevitability Donahue manages in these lines, the expression of death as marvelous, and the sense that the heart has in it the whim of the stars that both ventilates and intensifies the apocalypse we glimpse in his poetry.

## §

Where Donahue's apocalypticism is dazzling, literary, and esoteric, Rehm's is sober and melancholic, expressing the anxieties of the Gospels themselves or the urgencies of Paul's letters with their sense that "the form of this world is passing away" (1 Corinthians 7:31):

A roof is no guarantee  
that you'll sleep

The unease of premises  
pins together the curtains  
at night

Waiting for a clearness  
of purpose

Eating 3 meals a day  
we go to bed hungry

Privacy is not a remedy

We've become separated  
by "efficiencies"  
Nobody can do anything with

A kind of machine person  
Floundering in the dark

It's hard to believe  
5 sparrows were sold for this

Rehm works in her poems through aphorisms—"a roof is no guarantee that you'll sleep"—which she modulates with a resigned disdain that verges on despair: "It's hard to believe / 5 sparrows were sold for this." "This poem," writes Rehm, "is about the frustration of living in a culture that separates humans from the natural world. It's a poem that wonders what it means to live among things that I wouldn't consider to be essential to living." It's hard not to hear echoes of the opening of George Oppen's "Of Being Numerous" here: "There are things / We live among / and to see them / Is to know ourselves."

"The sparrows," continues Rehm, "are a reference to Luke 12:6." The twelfth chapter of Luke finds Jesus defending himself against the Pharisees, who are "lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say" (Luke 11:54). When Jesus begins to speak, he points an argumentative finger at the Pharisees themselves: "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops" (Luke 12:1-3). *Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed.* This is the essence of the Gospels' apocalypticism: unlike the flamboyant witnessing of St. John the Divine, reflected so vividly in Donahue's poetry, in Luke, revelation is soothsaying. As Jesus continues, he tells the crowd whom they should truly fear: "I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear

not; you are of more value than many sparrows” (Luke 12:4–7). In *The Historical Jesus*, John Dominic Crossan refers to “the message of an open secret” in reference to the mission of Jesus and his disciples: “The missionaries have a message that is neither private nor clandestine, neither hidden nor occult, neither secret nor mysterious.” One way to look at this passage in Luke is to see that Jesus is calling for full and open confession. The sparrows stand for a currency in this economy of the open secret: God is aware that these sparrows seem to be a good deal. He’s also aware of every hair and blemish on your body. And He wants to reassure you that you are worth more than these sparrows.

Rehm, in a curious but potent inversion of Jesus’ teaching, uses the buying and the selling of the sparrows to stand for something more troubling: the commodification of the natural world. In the context of Luke 12:6, which reflects Matthew 10:29 (“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?”), these sparrows represent a bargain. For Rehm, the deal leads only to false comforts, without guarantees, and eventual despair. “It’s hard to believe / 5 sparrows were sold for this.” Reading Luke, she seems to tell us, our thoughts shouldn’t be focused on the evil one who might cast us into hell after we die; rather, our thoughts should be, “Poor sparrows! They’re worth much more than this sad world we’ve made to live in.” Rehm’s sympathies for the animal world are as keen as they are revelatory. In “Acts of Fiction” from *Small Works* (2005), she writes:

I turned. I saw a door open  
between my confessions.  
On it were written these words:

*The animals are angels*

I then drew near the earth with  
bended knee. The flowers were  
so small and bright.

The birds were glowing like stars.

*The animals are angels.* In Rehm’s poetry, angelomorphic animals mediate our knowledge of the world.

Rehm's principle tool of revelation in her poetry is the anagram. Typically, she identifies a word and uses it to discover hidden meanings and associations. There's playfulness to her rearrangements, but there's also gravity. Her technique connects to the exercise of *Notarikon*, the practice in ecstatic Kabbalah that rearranges letters of words in the Bible in order to uplift one's praying mind to a transcendent realm of meaning. Words of power in Rehm's poetry yield kinetic meaning as they modulate from one arrangement of letters to another. Take these lines from "When Poverty Is Unobtainable":

Behold  
a wilderness of voices  
crying within one

Pursuit

The tension created between proof  
and devotion

When reveal becomes a lever  
and you press it

your heart will feel gallantly  
recreated

In a sense, the exhortation to behold in these lines prompts the poet and reader to look to see that there is a lever hidden in the letters of "reveal." Rehm's anagrammatic process is premised on consequence: it's not so much that there is a lever in reveal if you can find it. It's that a lever in reveal will necessarily be revealed, at which point it must be pressed.

Elsewhere in *Small Works* we find in the poem "A Charm for Sleep" lines such as "Fear has an ear / in it"; "My balm was a lamb"; and "To ward something off / draw it." But Rehm's poem "Eden" might be read as an *ars poetica* for her anagrammic technique, as well as a demonstration of her skill with this method:

Endure has an end  
you may rue  
at the outset

But it also has need

and need is an Eden  
(if you know what I mean)

Eden = Need

One and the same  
the same

How I hold it

*Endure* is one word of power in Rehm's body of work: it locates her frustration with the world of getting and spending, but it also suggests the ability to bear something difficult without breaking—Rehm's definition of virtue. But even endurance has an end, one manifested in need. The hinge of this poem is the ironic intensity of her declaration/discovery that "need is an Eden," underscored by the parenthetical which we can read as something said under the breath and meant to be funny, or, more likely, as deadly serious. (Do we know what she means? Probably not.) To reinforce her point, she makes plain the equation, "Eden = Need," which then allows her to finish the poem with a repetition—"the same"—and an assertion—"How I hold it"—calling the whole poem into question, in that it sounds as resolved as it does desperate.

The mysterious word in "Eden" is *rue*. In this poem, it's the residue of letters/sounds left behind after "end" has been extracted from "endure." Ruefulness is sorrow, regret, and grief: an unusual feeling to drive one's work. Rue does not appear in Philip Fisher's book *The Vehement Passions*, which claims that strong feelings lie at the center of the Western imagination. (Grief does make an appearance.) Religious passion, willfulness, rage, erotic obsession, love: these seem the proper, romantic feelings from which to make great poetry. We need to look further for Rehm's model: rue in her work is akin to what the fathers of the early Christian church called *penthos*. These thinkers borrowed the idea from paganism; originally it referred to a specialized kind of mourning—typically for relatives or friends, or even lamentation for a dead god—but came to denote a feeling of compunction that provides the possibility of comfort. This notion derives from the Beatitudes, in which Matthew has Jesus say, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they

shall be comforted” (Matthew 5:4). (One Greek word—*penthountes*—stands for “those who mourn.”) For the desert fathers, *penthos* was a blessing because it required so much discernment: it was believed to strike suddenly and to plant itself deep within the soul. Saint Gregory of Nyssa wrote, “*Penthos* (in general) is a sorrowful disposition of the soul, caused by the privation of something desirable.” Irénée Hausherr explains that “there is one word which expresses all that is desirable: salvation.... Here then is the first concept of *penthos*: *mourning for lost salvation*, whether one’s own or that of others.”

Rehm is not necessarily mourning for the lost salvation of herself or anyone else in these poems. Nevertheless, the conceptualization of something like *penthos* is helpful for imagining the kind of rue that works in Rehm’s poetry, a plaintiveness arising from connections made, connections lost, and the sense of the importance of recognizing these connections even as they cannot satisfy the Edenic needs that trigger them. In one poem, Rehm describes “a paradise of loneliness // incurred.” That a paradise of loneliness exists in the human soul is a distinct possibility; Rehm qualifies that phrase to make sure we understand that human solitude is both punishment and debt, even as its reality resembles the primordial garden longed for since the dawn of human consciousness.

We can look to a selection from an earlier poem to see the apocalyptic qualities ruefulness elicits in Rehm’s poetry. “Where Oh Where Has My Little God Gone?” appears in *Gone to Earth* (2001), though the poem first appeared in 1996 in *LVNG* 6. The poem, which is a sequence of eight unnumbered parts, addresses its own opening question—“By what are you thwarted?”—by cataloguing spiritual, material, emotional, and actual impingements. The second part depicts existential hardship in the face of the market:

Economic life  
will run down blind alleys  
a specter

“Eternity’s curtain”  
pulled by purse strings

Once apprehended

the coin becomes a relic  
diminished by the number  
of deaths in our time

The gibbering shades of the departed

It is absurd to speak  
of the spirit presenting itself  
to make us live again

The body is an echo  
in the shadow-image of Pantheism

This section of the poem resounds with several words of power: specter, coin/relic, gibbering shades, absurd, body/echo, shadow-image, Pantheism. Each word facilitates an excoriating meditation on the *deus absconditus* of the poem's title. Rehm's clarification of the specters and gibbering shades as something like the body itself is haunting. There's no better word for it. For Rehm, apocalypticism is not an anticipation as much as a means of expressing the oppressive realities of the present. In this sense, her approach accords with Daly's sense that as a genre, apocalypse is embroiled with political economy; he calls it "a literature of complete yet coded protest against worldly domination structures." Unlike Donahue, or St. John the Divine for that matter, apocalypse is not spectacular in Rehm's work. What do we see in eternity? Shadow-images. Spirits presenting themselves absurdly, speaking of salvation and resurrection. Here, it's a sobering vision. For Rehm—who can be an intensely joyful poet—salvation comes at the hands of connection: to loved ones, to beloved figures from myth, history, and books. Her poem "Acts of Knowledge" reads:

As if a book  
were a kind of  
voluntary nurse

looking for the wound  
inside you

Words and senses  
Terror and delicacy

Wisdom

The leaves on the tree  
grew

§

A poetry of apocalypse is no easier to find today than it was sixteen years ago, when *apex of the M* first appeared. It's no coincidence that both Donahue and Rehm are obscure poets, whose work is attended to by small but dedicated audiences. In their work, they carry forward the achievements of what is for me the most interesting strain in American poetry, practiced in the past century by H.D., Olson, Duncan, and Mackey, as well as Susan Howe, Fanny Howe, John Taggart, and Alice Notley. An apocalyptic poetry remains difficult to write in a poetry world filled with allergies to the spirit. But we need such poetry, difficult as it may be to write, difficult as it may be to understand. It is a complete, necessary, and coded protest against structures of worldly domination. And it can make for a truly great, truly radical poetry.