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Gifford Lectures corner

The theological house that Jack (un)built:
Halberstam on an aesthetics of collapse and mushrooms among the ruins

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Gifford Lecture: "Unworlding: An Aesthetics of Collapse", Charles Wilson Lecture Theatre, University of Glasgow, 15 September 2022.[1]

In the second week of September 2022, the United Kingdom was in a period of mourning following the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II; a cost-of-living crisis was looming large for millions; and the nation was witnessing the first faltering steps of the shortest, and arguably most ignominious, premiership in British political history. Many public events had already been cancelled or hung in the balance. But Jack Halberstam's Gifford Lecture attracted a large audience on Thursday 15 September. Indeed, I was only offered a ticket in the main lecture theatre after a late

[1] A recording of the lecture can be accessed here: https://www.gla.ac.uk/events/lectures/gifford/recentlectures/jackhalberstam/. All quotations have been checked against this recording. An additional lecture was added to Prof Halberstam's speaking visit to Glasgow: on 14 September, he spoke on "Collapse, Demolition, and the Queer Geographies" at the Advanced Research Centre, 11 Chapel Lane, (co-hosted by the Glasgow Doors Open Days Festival). I did not attend this lecture, but it can be accessed via the same link.

cancellation. The Chair of the Glasgow Gifford committee, Vassiliki Kolocotroni, began proceedings with a warm welcome to all, before handing over to Jane Goldman, who introduced the invited speaker.[2]

Dr Goldman captured the mood: the 'national state mourning', the 'absentee government', the 'eating or heating' dilemmas of the 'working poor', and on the international front, the seemingly relentless 'proxy war' [presumably in Ukraine] without any prospects of 'peace'. Against the backdrop of this sorry state of affairs, Goldman utilised the language of Halberstam to call on, 'all you losers, failures, dropouts and refuseniks', all 'radical ignoramuses', 'blockheads', 'Spongebobbing stumblers', 'waylosers', 'amnesiac shortfallers', 'wilful wanderers', 'cartoon-watching embracers of all silliness', 'connoisseurs and practitioners of the stupid', 'strollers out of the confines of conventional knowledge', 'inhabitants of rage'…. Anachronisms aside, this might very well serve as an introduction to many of the men and women of the Apostolic Age, who subverted the normative values in their age of empire. And they have been followed by other dissenting religious communities, of wildly divergent creeds, ever since. Their way of engaging the world has sometimes exemplified the 'queer arts of failure' to which Goldman, borrowing from Halberstam,[3] refers. We need more 'queer' readings of religious discourse, in all its forms, natural and revealed. But if any of us were fastening ourselves in for a ride on the wild side of subterranean theological movements and rhetorics, it could only be because we had failed to read the abstract: the talk delivered exactly what it promised.

It would be a stretch to take this lecture as a contribution to natural theology, unless most of the theological connections were those made by the audience. The intellectual division of labour on these occasions is usually the other way round. But operating under principles inspired by Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain,* outlined in the pages of this journal in a previous edition,[4] we will review the lecture in the spirit of our

[2] Vassiliki Kolocotroni and Jane Goldman are both colleagues of mine in the School of Critical Studies, University of Glasgow, and they are both Readers in English literature.

[3] In his earlier career Halberstam wrote under the name Judith Halberstam, for example in *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2011), and he was introduced here by Goldman under both names.

[4] See Birch, "Imagining the Gifford Lectures: 134 Not Out", *Theology in Scotland* 29, no.1 (autumn 2022): 55–71; 63–64, 71.

commitment to the Giffords, taking place as it did in a space supposedly allocated to the discipline beloved and funded by their namesake.

Jack Halberstam

Jack Halberstam is an award-winning academic and Professor of Gender Studies and English at Columbia University, New York.[5] His work experiments with new ways of being and achieving: different forms of life and standards of success, in defiance of those promoted in heteronormative capitalist societies. Halberstam's analysis of the cultural shifts which have been taking place, in the spheres of gender and sexuality, are illuminated by vivid examples from the arts and popular culture.[6] Halberstam began the talk with a thesis he claimed few people would disagree with: that 'we are already living at the end of the world'. This thesis has, of course, been proposed for millennia, and depending on how hazy the proposer is on the timeframe, or what they mean by 'world', they are invariably right: the end is always coming, sooner or later, for anything which has a temporal beginning. In classical natural theology, of course, God does not have a beginning of any kind, but that eternal ground of all being has frequently been associated with the beginning and end of our world, so there was some low-hanging theological fruit here for Halberstam to pluck and, I dare say, unpeel. But the fruit stayed on the tree in this lecture. That the human future and the planet we inhabit are imperilled by climate change is beyond reasonable dispute, however, and this is what Halberstam has in mind. The humanities, he suggested, are not equipped to articulate this new reality: under-resourced as they are in appropriate discourses and concepts (not to mention finances), the humanities are not fit for the gravity of the challenges we face. Meanwhile, philosophies with roots in the 'Enlightenment', their 'scripts and vocabularies', only serve to support a status quo which is condemning the world to destruction. As a historian of intellectual and religious history in the age of Enlightenment, I was interested in the character of these philosophies and Halberstam's critique of them, but this was at most a subtext in the talk that followed.

[5] Halberstam's university webpage gives details of awards and book publications: https://english.columbia.edu/content/jack-halberstam.

[6] See, for example, Halberstam's *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012).

Back to the '70s, and a world less understood

For his own intervention into this moment of crisis, Halberstam takes overarching inspiration from various sources, foregrounding two at the outset: 1) the disruptive practices of artists of the 1970s, who faced their own social crises but were working before the hegemony of neoliberal economics; and 2) that always intriguing and recondite field of the natural sciences, quantum physics. On the artistic side, Halberstam looks in particular to the work of Gordon Matta-Clark (1943–1978), who studied architecture at Cornell University, but gravitated towards a self-styled 'anarchitecture', which subverted many of the principles of his art form, and included radical, discombobulating physical alterations to buildings identified for demolition. This is a form of creativity which emerges from desolation, which is where we are already partially living (if Halberstam is to be believed) and from which we can learn a good deal. Juxtaposed with this was Halberstam's disappointment with the lack of scientific education in the humanities, which had echoes of C. P. Snow's famous 'two cultures' thesis.[7] The missing bridges between the sciences and humanities, which Snow bemoaned, were supposed to have been under construction in the late twentieth century in the form of a 'third culture',[8] although, given some of the writers associated with that wave of literary science (such as Richard Dawkins and Steven Pinker), I doubt whether this is the kind of cross-fertilisation Halberstam would be interested in.

Halberstam thinks we can learn from Werner Heisenberg's 'uncertainty principle'. And perhaps we can. But the use of quantum physics – whether in the arts or the theoretical humanities – is nothing new, and it is difficult to do well and without making a mockery of one discipline or another: as witnessed by the infamous 'Sokal hoax', designed to expose a lack of intellectual rigour in humanities associated with postmodernism, and the willingness of their academic journals to publish work peppered with scientific absurdities so long as the political thrust

[7] Originally the Rede lecture at the University of Cambridge, 1959: "The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution". For a later print edition, see Snow, *The Two Cultures*, introduction by Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[8] See, for example, John Brockman, *The Third Culture: Beyond the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

conformed to the ideological tendencies of their academic readers.[9] Naivety and intellectual overreach cut both ways in these interdisciplinary interactions however, and some natural scientists have been unduly eager to draw far-reaching implications beyond anything the evidence would support.[10] One successful artistic foray into the discipline would be Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen* (1998). The play stimulated renewed historical enquiry into the 1941 meeting between Heisenberg and Niels Bohr in Nazi-occupied Copenhagen, which was the focus of Frayn's drama.[11] Halberstam's own engagement with the subject is seen through the lens of another creative work, the much-praised and genre-crossing *When We Cease to Understand the World*, by the Chilean writer Benjamín Labatut.[12] Labatut paints with a broader brush than Frayn in this fictionalised account of twentieth-century scientific innovation, social progress and misadventure, but Heisenberg remains a central player in the intrigue. There is no lack of integrity in Halberstam's usage (as there obviously was in the Sokal affair), but his allusions to quantum physics in this lecture only really operate as surface-level analogies, which is probably where they are best kept: reality is sometimes stranger than we might like to assume, and we should be open to extending our horizons of the possible, in theory and action. Halberstam's call for scholars to be more conformable operating in a zone of 'uncertainty' within the humanities, over against the pursuit of the 'bigger and better theories' with an unreasonable level of self-confidence that we are offering the right answers, is timely. This was surely one of the lessons many drew from the influence of postmodernist thought in the academy in the late twentieth

[9] Alan Sokal's parody article "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity", was published in *Social Text* 46/47 (spring/summer 1996): 217–52.

[10] Sokal's prank did not impress everyone in the scientific community, some of whom placed much of the blame for absurd parallels between quantum physics and other modes of life on the apparently serious proposals of eminent quantum physicists themselves (including Heisenberg): see Mara Beller, "The Sokal Hoax: At Whom Are We Laughing?", *Physics Today* 51, no. 9 (September 1998): 29–34.

[11] Matthias Dörries, ed., *Michael Frayn's Copenhagen in Debate: Historical Essays and Documents on the 1941 Meeting between Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg* (Berkeley, CA: Office for History of Science and Technology, 2005).

[12] See Benjamín Labatut, *When We Cease to Understand the World*, trans. Adrian Nathan West (London: Pushkin Press, 2020).

century. But for over a decade now commentators have been pronouncing the death of that movement,[13] and perhaps some of the more valuable legacies are already being forgotten. Halberstam practises what he preaches: the lecture is replete with qualifications, deliberate hesitations, and acknowledgments of potential (reasonable) disagreement with his own proposals.

Living in the ruins: The project of unworlding

Given the pending 'end of the world', human beings need to get used to living in the ruins. As an example of flourishing within the context of environmental degradation, Halberstam looks to the work of American anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, and her book *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*.[14] The matsutake mushroom flourishes in otherwise hostile environments: more specifically, in human-disturbed forests across the northern hemisphere, and it is an expensive delicacy in Japan. These mushrooms succeed where and when other species fail, showing as they do, 'a willingness to emerge in blasted landscapes';[15] creating the 'condition of possibility for new growth'; and collaborating with 'other lifeforms'. The mushroom has an 'agency', suggests Halberstam, which we typically only accord to humanity; and human agency is, apparently, 'the wrong thing to be focussed on right now'. Instead, we should be looking at the kind of natural 'processes' found in the matsutake for clues about 'how to live otherwise' in this time of degeneration. Whether 'agency' is a concept we can reasonably apply to fungi is beyond the scope of this essay, although given that some scientists and philosophers doubt whether agency is reasonably applied to human beings in any traditional sense,[16] now may not be the time to be 'othering' the mushroom. More worryingly, since Tsing

[13] For a version of this thesis by one British critic, see Alan Kirby, *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Recon-figure Our Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2009).

[14] Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[15] Halberstam quoting Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*, 3.

[16] See Alex Rosenberg, *The Atheist's Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life without Illusions* (New York; London: W.W. Norton, 2011).

published her book, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has placed the matsutake mushroom on its 'Fungal Red List',[17] so one wonders just how much we can still learn from this example. But let us grant the hitherto extraordinary success of the matsutake. A parallel discourse, which is analogous to agency, comes from within natural theology or the philosophy of nature: the teleological analyses of the natural world in the work of ancient thinkers such as Aristotle, medieval thinkers such as St Thomas Aquinas,[18] and (much to the chagrin of some scientists) even in the biology of our post-Darwinian age.[19] Whether conscious or not (and I rather suspect not), the mushroom, in keeping with other natural phenomena, has an end; there is a 'good' towards which it tends: to flourish in being, reproducing and interacting in creative ways with the environment. And the acquired 'virtues' of the matsutake mushroom, its characteristic traits and tendencies, facilitate that flourishing in otherwise unpromising contexts. Perhaps we do need to cultivate different virtues in this time of crisis and create new contexts for the development of these new habits of mind and action. Does 'unworlding' provide us with those virtues?

Halberstam explicitly contrasts 'unworlding' with 'world-making'. This is not an 'anti-utopian' philosophy, he insists; it is, rather, an 'anti-anti-utopian project': a modest proposal of 'undoing this world' rather than making grand proposals for a better one, which we cannot yet envisage from our limited perspective. The underlying idea, in political discourse, is a familiar one. In a famous debate (not discussed in this lecture) between Michel Foucault and Noam Chomsky, *Human Nature: Justice vs Power* (1971), the argument for greater 'justice' in the world by Chomsky was deflected by Foucault because any form of justice articulated would inevitably be coloured by the very world they were resisting: we should not think in terms of a social struggle for justice; rather, 'one has to emphasize justice in terms of social struggle.'[20] But why would we want

[17] T.-E. Brandrud, "Tricholoma matsutake", *The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2020*: http://iucn.ekoo.se/iucn/species_view/307044/.

[18] See Aristotle, *Physics*, especially Book II; and Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, Book II.

[19] See David Hanke, "Teleology: The Explanation that Bedevils Biology", in *Explanations: Styles of Explanation in Scienc*e, ed. John Cornwell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 143–55.

[20] See Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault, *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate:*

to resist 'the world' as we find it in modernity, any more than an uncritical Enlightenment liberal might want to affirm 'the world'? For many of us, there are things about our world that we want to conserve; there are some we would like to restore; and there are others we would jettison altogether. To be sure, our preferences arise in capitalist modernity, but there are more things in heaven and earth than an all-pervasive economic ruling elite conditioning our hopes. Despite postmodernism's resistance to totalising narratives, many of its theorists (at least implicitly) proceeded from within a Marxist master narrative. Whether Halberstam is operating within that narrative was unclear to me from this lecture alone, but a 'critical friendship' with that tradition seemed to be in play, and he certainly rejects the values of conservation and restoration at this time. But presumably, the very impulse towards 'unworlding' takes hold in the same world of capitalist modernity, and is no less conditioned than its utopian alternatives (if one accepts the logic of this argument, which I do not). It may be more 'modest' in its aspirations, to be sure, but the assumption that we are better off not articulating an even provisional idea of what we might like to see on the other side of the 'end of the world' is, at the very least, open to question. Some people on these islands have probably felt like they are living, in recent times, in a political 'end of the world'. While some of our fellow citizens may have had very definite ideas of a post-Brexit future, for example, others took a seemingly 'unworlding' approach: just unpick a 'stultifying and unelected bureaucracy', as they saw it, and let us see what happens on the other side. It cannot be any worse.[21] Millions of us remain unconvinced. Not that Halberstam would have anything in common with Nigel Farage or John Redwood, but that is irrelevant to the basic principles of unworlding, which could be (and have been) adoptable by a wide range of political actors.

When suggesting a motto for the project of unworlding, Halberstam borrows from a science fiction novel by the African-American writer N. K. Jemisin: 'I don't want you to fix it', says the character Alabaster in *The Fifth Season*, 'No, what I want you to do […] is make it worse.'[22]

On Human Nature (New York; London: New Press, 2006), 50.

[21] For a perspective from one of the 'papers of record' in the United States, see Ellen Barry, "From 'No Problem' to No Deal: How Brexit Supporters Embraced the Cliff Edge", *New York Time*s, 23 March 2019: https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/23/world/europe/brexit-no-deal-may.html.

[22] N. K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* (London: Orbit, 2015), 449.

Halberstam acknowledges that he has been accused of being 'irresponsible' for promoting such a stance, but within the context of the novel, it makes sense: *The Fifth Season* is the first in the Broken Earth series of books, and tells the story of an enslaved people, the Orogenes, ruled over with varying degrees of cruelty by the Guardians on the continent of Stillness. And yet the Guardians rely on the special powers of Orogenes to 'still' the earth, protecting it from extreme weather and natural disasters. When the 'fifth season' looms, a rare catastrophic weather event, the powerful and politically radical Alabaster urges his protégé Syenite *not* to use her powers to return balance to Stillness, but to disrupt it further. The logic of such a disruptive move is easy to sympathise with here: it is, as Halberstam says, far from 'an idle contrarian position', and it has real-world resonance where actual slavery today, as well as the long-term consequences of past slavery, is a horrifying reality of our time.[23] But given the complex social, political and economic problems that many people are facing in twenty-first-century Europe, a repudiation of the values of 'repairing and improving', and of 'amelioration and fixing', coming from an academic at an Ivy League university will, I suspect, strike many as frivolous. Although given Halberstam's positive embrace of 'silliness' this probably goes with the territory.

Where Halberstam is convincing is in the theoretical domain (not that he distinguished this from the practical), which he discusses in connection with Denise Ferreira da Silva's book *Unpayable Debt*, an examination of colonialism, race and capitalism from a black feminist 'poethical' perspective.[24] Constructions of 'the world' and 'the subject' in modern philosophy have been dominated by white European men, with Martin Heidegger the preeminent figure in the twentieth-century continental tradition. (At the mention of Heidegger, I secretly hoped we might be treated to Halberstam's proposals for unworlding the Heideggerian critique of onto-theology. I'm still hoping.) No doubt the canonical European configurations of such notions of *Dasein* (being) and *Weltanschauung* (worldview) are ripe for undoing by writers with very

[23] See *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage*, International Labour Organization, Walk Free, and International Organization for Migration, 2022: https://cdn.walkfree.org/content/uploads/2022/09/12142341/GEMS-2022_Report_EN_V8.pdf. The report estimates that 49.6 million people live under conditions of modern slavery.

[24] Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Unpayable Debt* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2022).

different cultural, ethnic and gendered backgrounds, whether or not there are better proposals on the table already. But given Halberstam wants to hold the theoretical and practical together, one wonders what an injunction to 'make things worse' looks like, for example, within the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This is a time when we are arguably closer to the use of a nuclear weapon within military combat than at any time since the 1960s. Would 'making things worse' be a responsible stance to take in this context? It may be that things will get worse before they get better, but whether one ought to act for that end is quite another matter.

The aesthetics of collapse

In the final section of the lecture Halberstam discusses a range of artworks from which we can learn. I will mention three. In the first instance he returns to Gordon Matta-Clark's anarchitecture, with its aesthetic vocabulary of 'cutting, slicing and sawing', functioning as it does as a protest against a rapacious culture of development and redevelopment. His projects, fusing architecture and conceptual art, are documented in photographs, sketches, and his film *Splitting* (1974).[25] In the latter, Clark is seen drilling and chainsawing his way through a condemned family home in suburban Englewood, New Jersey, before resetting the rear of the building on lower foundations. This opens a space between the two halves of the house, allowing the sunlight to stream through gaps. For Halberstam, the key focus 'is not simply the architectural manoeuvre of pushing the house back onto its foundations […]. The actual artwork is the V in the centre. It's the nothing. It's the thing that cannot be taken to market.' Working at the same time as Clark was the 'black, queer artist' Beverly Buchanan (1940–2015). Having turned her back on a scientific education and possible career in medicine, Buchanan found creative inspiration roaming the many demolition sites in 1970s New York. Buchanan became a collector of the stone fragments and structures that remain after demolition, which she used as the centrepieces of her own artwork. Indeed, this art could never have been produced without the prior demolition.

[25] The film can be viewed on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LcpAMXKInFQ&t=44s.

These creative interventions in sites of destruction, by Matta-Clark and Buchanan, are certainly suggestive of the theoretical and political possibilities Halberstam is exploring. But the ruins within which these works were born were brought about by the independent and intentional agency of others, to make way for what they at least imagined was good, better, even necessary for urban development. Had these artists themselves been actors in the destruction of the urban landscapes in which they later worked, as a deliberate, say, 'unworlding' precursor to the production of the art for which they are celebrated, one wonders whether the work would have the same charm. The phoenix that rises from the ashes is no more beautiful because its predecessor was deliberately set ablaze. Such an act of destruction would serve only as a sinister twist to the original tragedy.

One of the themes emerging from the discussion of the artworks Halberstam profiles is that of transition: physical spaces as the site of transformation, of destruction and making anew. Halberstam is well known for his work on gender and transition,[26] and this topic was addressed towards the end of the lecture. When considering transition, Halberstam invited his audience to think less in terms of the creation of a 'new body' and instead of a 'breaking of the system', which he sees realised in the relatively recent 'collapse of the edifice' of binary gender categories, and the refusal of so many (especially young) people to identify, unambiguously, as either 'male' or 'female'. Drawing from the novel *Freshwater* by Nigerian writer Akwaeke Emezi,[27] Halberstam alludes to a Nigerian, and specifically Igbo, cosmology within the book, whereby the 'trans body' of the central character (Ada) is one inhabited by multiple spirits, pulling in different directions, and where the concept of 'breaking' and 'gender affirmation surgery' are presented as co-extensive, albeit rooted in different theoretical frameworks: Igbo cosmology and Western scientific notions of gender transition. The metaphor is suggestive in many ways. Are we not all, in a sense, divided selves? In the novel, however, the lead character, Ada, is an *ogbanje*: a spirit-person who exists in a liminal space between the natural and supernatural worlds, human and divine. In traditional Igbo mythology, *ogbanje* represent a disordered form of reincarnation, and they typically die in childhood only to return

[26] See Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2018).

[27] Akwaeke Emezi, *Freshwater* (New York: Grove Press, 2018).

repeatedly as disruptive forces within the same family. Ada is no such malevolent being, but the persistence of the myth from which she is drawn has continued to pose problems for correct diagnosis and medical treatment of young people in parts of Nigeria.[28] Moreover, the spirits operating within Ada seem, at times, to make her no more than a vessel for the interests of others, which calls attention to the limits of this as a metaphor for young people making life-changing decisions about their bodily identities.

Question time

The questions posed by members of the audience generally allowed Halberstam to restate his theses in more discrete areas. In the first instance, Halberstam made the case for unworlding within the context of our academic disciplines, suggesting that the responsibility here rested with scholars of his generation. Whether the humanities are in as bad a shape as Halberstam implies is too large a question to be addressed here, but his argument that the current crop of junior academics are less likely than those of previous generations to shake up their disciplines because they are 'radically undermined by the dearth of job possibilities and the precarity of their work' is, to my mind, unanswerable.

Halberstam was, understandably, challenged by those who see the virtue in 'repairing', but after some initial apparent concessions, he doubled down on the thesis: acknowledging that some will say 'it's easy to take something down. It's a lot harder to build things. Maybe. But we haven't even done the taking it down yet, so let's just focus on that.' When challenged by one questioner on the possibility of fascism emerging from the ruins of the fallen systems of power that Halberstam seems to revel in – as happened, for example, after World War I and the failure of the Weimar Republic – our speaker was unmoved:

> Fascism doesn't emerge inevitably out of anything. You could have

[28] See Sunday T. C. Ilechukwu, "*Ogbanje/abiku* and Cultural Conceptualizations of Psychopathology in Nigeria", *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 10, no. 3 (May 2007): 239–55; and Alex. E. Asakitikpi, "Born to Die: The Ogbanje Phenomenon and its Implication on Childhood Mortality in Southern Nigeria", *The Anthropologist* 10, no. 1 (October 2008): 59–63.

> had the end of World War I and something else could have happened. It isn't inevitable that we should end up with the final solution because Germany was defeated in World War I. So I can't get from there to fascism.

The internal logic of Halberstam's own project leads us further away from fascism than any of us can probably imagine. But this is irrelevant to the thrust of the initial question. History does not unfold on the basis of the logic of political ideals and the most well-meaning, sensitive souls who seek to implement them. It unfolds in the midst of actual people, with wildly different outlooks and ideals, some of which are supported by pre-existing systems of power, or highly motivated actors-in-waiting, with the means and will to do untold violence to uphold them. From eighteenth-century France to twentieth-century Russia, China and Cambodia, the often noble dreams of European intellectual dissidents have become nightmares, orchestrated by the kind of psychopathic ideologues who are often the real beneficiaries of political disorder and social collapse. Halberstam was right to point to the rise of Donald Trump in the US and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil as indicative of a rising authoritarianism, and with it the fear of a return of full-blooded fascism. But putting aside the relatively short-term electoral success of these movements (thus far), were they not themselves the beneficiaries of the unravelling of socio-political and economic 'worlds', in their respective countries? Anarchic dreamers can, to some degree, flourish in flawed societies such as our own. And we can learn from them. I would be less confident of this if we really did stand in the political and economic ruins of the world Halberstam decries, where the prisons are emptied and the police abolished (yes, Halberstam was very clear by the end that this is contiguous with his vision). But Halberstam is not monomaniacal in his approach to social change, acknowledging, for example, the gentler power of resistance through poetry, and the defiance of 'silence'. At last, I thought, we arrive at the true destination in a movement of resistance: the apophatic. But Halberstam's reading of Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart, possibly through the lens of Gaga feminism, will have to wait for another lecture.

We need challenging and experimental thinkers like Halberstam. Whether the Gifford series was the appropriate space for this particular lecture is rather less obvious to me. A conspiratorial mind might wonder whether there is an unworlding faction on the Glasgow Gifford committee

working for the abolition of natural theology through a process of appointing lecturers who have nothing to say on the discipline. But knowing a little of how academic (and other) committees work, I doubt there is such foresight and cunning at work. And I do not question the integrity of my colleagues who issued the invitation. I am glad to be better acquainted with the work of Jack Halberstam, which would have been unlikely were it not for the Gifford appointment. I recommend the lecture. But there are radical and disruptive intellectuals, if that's what the Glasgow committee were after on this occasion, who work within theological frameworks and communicate in theological registers (within or outside traditional religion). And we ought to be hearing from them in an endowed series of lectures on 'Natural Theology in the widest sense of that term, in other words, the Knowledge of God, the Infinite …'.[29] We look forward to reviewing one.

[29] *TRUST DISPOSITION and SETTLEMENT of the late Adam Gifford, sometime one of the Senators of the College of Justice, Scotland, dated 21st August, 1885*. The document is available as "Lord Adam Gifford's Will", https://www.giffordlectures.org/lord-gifford/will.