

## TWO FINITUDES

ZDRAVKO PLANINC

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Barry Cooper, *The End of History: An Essay on Modern Hegelianism*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984, pp. viii, 391.

Hugh MacLennan, *Voices in Time*, N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, 1980, pp. 313.

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Here is what you have to do. . . . Your winter anxieties about the End of History seem now all well comforted to rest, part of your biography now like any old bad dream.

THOMAS PYNCHON, *Gravity's Rainbow*

What can the end of history possibly mean? It is commonly understood as either nuclear annihilation or an unrealizable state of perfection for mankind. The Kantian argument developed by Karl Jaspers claims it is both, in other words that modernity is confronted with a choice between two finitudes: either a nuclear war resulting in the physical end of mankind or "the establishment of world peace without atom bombs" following a radical transformation of man "in his moral, rational and political aspects — a transformation so extensive that it would become the turning point of history."<sup>1</sup> Jaspers finds the choice tragic, but Kantians can also find modernity comfortable. The Harvard Nuclear Study Group claims that it is possible for us to live in peace with nuclear weapons, and that Strangelove Scenarios are of less use to the average man than, say, its Checklists for nuclear weapons issues and arms control proposals, which present no hard choices. As responsible Kantians they attempt to provide the public with important (unclassified) information about nuclear arms and to give solid advice to politicians who are usually too preoccupied with elections to develop any expertise in such matters.<sup>2</sup> The end of this story is frequent publication without secret articles, somewhat at odds with Kant's Second Supplement to "Perpetual Peace."

A more profound articulation of the end of history was given by Robert Oppenheimer, who spoke for all modern humankind when he cited the *Bhagavadgita* upon witnessing the first atomic explosion: "Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds." Each of us is a *Wibakusha*, an A-bomb survivor who experiences a permanent encounter with death. The modern encounter with death is neither denying nor discomfiting nor despairing, and its permanence gives rise to wisdom. To be modern is to be wise in the way that *zeks* who survived the Gulag Arkipelago are wise. This wisdom cannot be expressed in Kantian terms; its

content explodes the Kantian form. The modern "art of dying" is best expressed in the Hegelian System of Science, as presented by Alexandre Kojève's *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. Kojève claims that we live in a post-historical world: history has ended and nothing new can happen, even though it may take each particular man some time to discover the truth for himself. Absolute knowledge has been attained, and is being realized in the spread of the universal and homogeneous state. Since the realization of the final state involves a good deal of compulsion, personal discoveries of the truth have often been preceded by a fanfare of bombs. Napoleon's artillery shelled Jena just before Hegel saw world-history ride in on a white horse. For the soldiers and targeted civilians of the World Wars, the opening words of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* are reminder enough of their experience: "A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now." Oppenheimer had an easy time of it. He made his own bomb and thus recognized only himself in the explosion.

In the two works under review, Barry Cooper and Hugh MacLennan provide us with a Hegelian-Kojévian account of modernity's two finitudes: the end of history is part of our past, i.e., the moral, rational and political transformation of man has already occurred; and global nuclear war will not change anything essentially. But they also provide us with an account of the limits of modernity that may be said to be distinctively Canadian. This is not completely surprising. Both authors are English-Canadians, though of different generations and writing independently, one as a political philosopher and the other as a poet, in Plato's sense of the term. As Canadians reflecting on their experience, both are modern at one remove. This requires some comment. According to George Grant, a prophet understood only in his own land, Canada's unique standing among nations and empires had allowed it to be both a witness to, and a voice against the spread of the universal and homogeneous state. (There is more truth to this than there was in Heidegger's claim that the German *geist* is involved in a world-historical confrontation with technological "always-the-sameness" embodied in American and Soviet imperialism.) Grant could only express his understanding as a lament, sung at the falling of the dusk. As Canada became increasingly incorporated within the American empire, Canadians who felt the same sense of loss were driven to reflection. It was now possible for them to become self-consciously modern, accepting and even loving modernity as their own, while also understanding its limitations. This is what philosophers and poets do, or at least those who are healthy enough to diagnose and cure the spiritual disorders of their age first of all within themselves. Homeopathic cures of this sort are most effective at some remove from the source of the disease: in Canada rather than the USA; in, say, the foothills of the Rockies or North Hatley rather than Calgary, Toronto or Montreal. And of significance for MacLennan's *Voice in Time*, remote communities also have the advantage of not being targets for ICBMs.

*The End of History* is an essay; *Voices in Time* is a novel. Two different techniques, scholarship and fiction, are used to bring us into the presence of the most important questions. Cooper's technique takes us through three layers of analysis. His book is about the contemporary world and how to understand it, about Kojève's interpretation of Hegel, and about Hegel himself. His purpose in writing

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is not simply to decode Kojève's frequently allusive discourse and turn it into a coherent argument, but also to defend the thesis that "the content of Kojève's interpretation expresses the self-understanding of modernity." Kojève's discourse expresses the Absolute Knowledge of the Hegelian Sage, the knowledge that even the totalitarian regimes of Hitler and Stalin were part of the unfolding of the "final, perfect, and complete regime described by Hegelian science" (*EH*, 4-6). After all, the real is rational. Thus, "the emergence of multi-national enterprises [MNEs] as the successors to nineteenth-century colonial imperialism, the system of Soviet concentration camps, and the supersession of them both in the technological society" are not unrelated phenomena, but rather can be integrated into one configuration of meaning. The Sage after Stalin knows that *ex-zeks* and *execs* are both wise. However, Cooper is not Kojève. He understands that there are limitations to modernity. But since "we must come to understand the truth of our existence by way of our modernity," one way of doing so — perhaps the best way — is by confronting Kojève's understanding of post-historical discourse and practice. An alternative to the view that history is over "is enormously difficult to formulate;" but nothing is gained by understanding modernity "from the outside except moral superiority and the fraudulence of a good conscience" (*EH* 11-12, 330).

Kojève's signifiante is well known among political philosophers. Allan Bloom, for instance, has written that the *Introduction* is "one of the few important books of the twentieth century — a book, knowledge of which is requisite to the full awareness of our situation and to the grasp of the most modern perspective on the eternal questions of philosophy."<sup>3</sup> Yet Kojève is all too frequently dismissed for his historicism, his failure to understand human nature, or his apologies for tyrannical regimes. These objections are easily met. First, if the dilemma of the relation between *philosophia perennis* and temporal (historical) existence leads to nihilism, then only those who do not accept that history has ended are nihilists. The System of Science gives no evidence of historicism (*EH* 40-50, 74-77). Second, although Hegel made a few regrettable errors concerning the existence of a natural dialectic, Kojève does not. Nature has no role in history; and insofar as human nature is relevant, Hobbes provides the best account. The Hobbesian state of nature and the Hegelian Master-Slave dialectic are equivalent. Both describe the natural substratum of history. The fear of death at the hands of another gives rise in a man to the desire for power after power. Knowledge is power. Consequently, Absolute Knowledge is power over death. And the universal Leviathan allows all men to overcome death (*EH* 26-45, 78-93, 90-94). Third, according to Hobbes, tyranny is a term used by those who dislike a regime. Often they are philosophers who also claim that knowledge has no relation to power. But these philosophers do, on occasion, advise tyrants. Kojève's reading of Xenophon's *Heiro* shows that the universal and homogeneous state resolves once and for all the problem of the relation between wisdom and tyranny. If some remain unconvinced that their knowledge is nothing but the rationality of the real, then they are merely beautiful souls who refuse to recognise that their inconclusive objections have already been answered by the System of Science (*EH* 265-272, 330-336).

There are formal and empirical criteria for Hegelian-Kojévian wisdom. The

formal criteria are that one's knowledge must be comprehensive and circular, that is, both total, unchangable, universally true and capable of accounting for itself. All discourse that is not complete discourse or wisdom is ideological. All ideological discourse has a component of power, since ideologists treat their (incomplete) ideas as self-evident realities, make deductions from them as if they were logical premises, and then act on their deductions as if they were policy instructions. Wisdom is possible when all ideologies have worked themselves out in the world, in proper order. Pagan philosophers and Christian theologians were of special significance among ideologists because they accepted the ideal of wisdom while denying the possibility of attaining it; instead, they loved wisdom, or loved God, who possesses wisdom. Hegel and Kojève provide us with several complete catalogues of all possible ideologies: the histories of metaphysics (how man understands the world), of anthropology (how man understands himself), and of "religion" (social self-interpretation) are all roads leading to Absolute Knowledge, and are, strictly speaking, equivalent in the eyes of the Sage. One can thus surmise that the empirical criteria for wisdom are: the existence of Sages, or rather of their self-conscious wisdom in book form; and the unfolding of the universal and homogeneous state in post-historical time, or at least sufficient evidence to convince a Sage (EH 170-177, 211-221).

It takes a great deal of evidence to convince some people. For those unfamiliar with the virtues of textual exegesis, Cooper's Kojévian reconstruction of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* and his discussion of its place in Hegel's System may not be enough to convince them that they are citizens of the post-historical regime (EH 244-265). Then again, the number of people killed by and for a variety of states in this century may not be enough either. For those with common sense, Cooper discusses the work of Hannah Arendt, whose *Origins of Totalitarianism* describes "in an uncompromising way the political face of the modern crisis, the new regime of modern political man." There is an obvious "connection between the emancipation of bourgeois spirituality from the constraints of medieval life [i.e., God and nature] . . . and the eventual creation of a novel political regime, totalitarianism." All contemporary states have common roots in the modern break with antiquity, but they also have a common goal in the actualization of the universal and homogeneous Leviathan, even though this may occur "in characteristically different ways in its several provinces" (EH 14-22, 283-290, 329). Concentration camps are not the same as MNEs, but the principles that underlie them find their place in the comprehensive System that also explains the present stand-off between the American and Soviet ideological empires under threat of "mutually assured destruction" (MAD) as the Hobbesian-Hegelian struggle for recognition writ large. There is a rationality that is common to both MNEs and the Gulag, both Hiroshima and Kolyma; it appears "most perfectly" in the technological society, and in technology's most perfect product, the Bomb. Today, we all know "the real potential for complete catastrophe." We need not experience the Hobbesian state of nature immediately, as *zeks* do. "And knowing what it means assures us of our wisdom" (EH 290-327).

A central feature of post-historical life is the banality of wisdom. Aristotle claimed that beasts and gods have no place in the polis (*Politics* 1253a29). A beast

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is a mind that thinks nothing, a man sleeping without dreams; an Aristotelian god is a mind thinking itself eternally. The former has no dignity, the latter needs none (*Metaphysics* 1074b15-35). Since Hegel has given an exhaustive account of the contents of mind thinking itself eternally, and has demonstrated that these contents are manifest in the modern regime, post-historical citizens of that regime are of necessity either beasts or gods — possibly both. Modern life is undignified. "One *Wibakusha*-author summarized the entire death-saturated A-bomb experience as 'the omission of various ceremonies'" (*EH* 326). Without ceremony, anything is possible; or rather, one ceremony is as good as another. A complete catalogue of "life-styles" exists. All one need do is choose. Combinations are also possible. A druggist can be a Dionysian as easily as a vegetarian can be an alchemist. Of course, presenting oneself as anything other than thoroughly modern has a certain quaintness about it. Most prefer to find a place within the post-historical hierarchy headed by the citizen-Sage as civil servant or advisor and filled out by a range of "lazy, androgynous, comic, animal gods, no less wise in their own ways than the men and women nominally above them" (*EH* 272-282).

In the *Republic*, Socrates descends from the Acropolis to Piraeus, to observe the festivals, and finds that one is as good as another. He is prevented from ascending by the persistence of his interlocutors' questions as well as by a few threats to his safety. *The End of History* leads its reader into a similar confrontation with Hegelian-Kojévian knowledge/power. But how to get away? Cooper's Epilogue provides the basis for a critical understanding of modernity. Stanley Rosen's discussion of the formal aporias to be found in the Hegelian claims concerning the actualization of wisdom is summarized. The Sage betrays himself; he cannot be a "complete" man, or mortal god, because "he must either display his humanity by speaking or else remain silent and so indistinguishable from a beast" (*EH* 336-339). Eric Voegelin's argument that a magic compulsiveness lies at the heart of the Hegelian-Kojévian enterprise is also presented. Voegelin understands modernity in the same way that Alexandre Solzhenitsyn understands the Gulag: "Everything is steeped in lies, and *everybody knows it*." In the words of Geoffrey Clive, at the heart of modernity's grotesqueness "lies the lie, depravity superimposed upon senselessness" (*EH* 313). But what alternative is there? Kojève's account may not be open to the full range of human experiences, but what would those experiences be, and how would it be possible to give an account of them?

Cooper concludes *The End of History* by saying, "perhaps Heidegger was right: only a god can save us. Perhaps, indeed, a logos that has turned into technique must fall silent to leave room for regeneration" (*EH* 350). MacLennan's *Voices in time* speaks in the silence of modernity about the possibility of regeneration. It is the Myth of Er, the saving tale, that completes our ascent from the Lie. *Voices in Time* is a Platonic anamnetic experiment in mythopoetic form. It is presented as a book of memoirs compiled in the next century by a Canadian survivor of a global nuclear catastrophe. MacLennan compels the reader of his novel to descend in time from the future to the present and recent past — indeed, into Nazi Germany, the Lie itself — while also ascending to the god that will save him. The conflicting movements induced in the soul of the reader allow him to diagnose and cure the spiritual disorders of modernity within himself through *anamnesis*, or recollection,

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just as John Wellfleet, the author of the memoirs, is cured by the memory of those he knew and loved.

Late in his life, Wellfleet is told that a strongbox filled with papers concerning two of his relatives has been discovered in the ruins of old Montreal by André Gervais, a young engineer-architect so dissatisfied with the lies he has been taught by the new regime that he asks Wellfleet to compile the papers in a book that would reveal the truth for him and others of like mind. The box contained the incomplete autobiographies of his step-father, Conrad Dehmel, who had lived through the second World War in Germany and later came to Canada, and his cousin, Timothy Wellfleet, a Montreal television journalist during the 1960s who had contributed to the murder of Dehmel by the manner in which he interviewed him on one of his programs. Shock at his own irresponsibility led Timothy to attempt to complete Dehmel's memoirs while beginning his own, but the shock quickly dissipated. The papers were stored away by Stephanie, who was Dehmel's second wife, Timothy's first cousin, and John Wellfleet's mother. It should be taken as a sign of their spiritual health that these men loved women, and that they all loved Stephanie in their various ways. Dehmel and John Wellfleet also had a deep love for their grandfathers, and Gervais came to love Wellfleet in similar fashion. One generation blends into another, and incompleteness gives rise to memories. One generation completes another through memory, just as men and women complete one another through love.

When he first spoke with Gervais and heard him mention Stephanie's name, "Wellfleet felt as though someone had torn stitches from a wound in his soul." Yet that night he dreamt not of his mother, but of Joanne, a girl he had loved in his youth: "Her body had been dust for years but she had never been more real" than in that dream (*VIT* 1-5). His experience of having a wounded soul indicated that what Wellfleet took to be health was in reality a pathological state of his *eros*; the wound's reopening was a sign of recovery. By the time of his death several years later, Wellfleet could live freely with such memories. He no longer needed to approach them in dreams. When Gervais discovered his body he also found by its side a letter with only the word "Dear" written. Was it intended for Stephanie or Joanne? Gervais didn't know, but he was sure "that in this last instant of his life he was remembering someone he had loved" (*VIT* 313). Gervais understood, as did young Dehmel at the death of his grandfather, "that in the end each one of us is alone with something that may be infinity," and that love is participation in infinity (*VIT* 153). Wellfleet regained his spiritual health by writing a book in which he confronted the disorders of modernity. His first lines were: "As it is with the individual, so it may be with the whole world. When the individual is wounded in his soul he often wishes to die. . . . Can it be the same with communities?" (*VIT* 28) The answer is yes. After reading Dehmel's memoirs he concludes that there is no real difference "between the ambition of a man who sets out to conquer all the people in the world and that of one who sets out to conquer all the knowledge in it." Both are symptomatic of a diseased *eros*, of a deliberate murder of the truth of the soul. Looking back over the past century he writes: "The deliberate murder of truth led to the murder of people. In our case it led to the self-murder of a civilization" (*VIT* 166, 249).

The inexorable growth of the universal and homogeneous state from its Hobbe-

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sian roots appears clearly to Wellfleet from his vantage in Year 25 of the Third Bureaucracy. The "crack-up" leading to humanity's self-murder, not suicide, began in the licence of the 1960s. Wellfleet recalls that it was all "marvellously exciting. Anything could happen. . . . It was a golden age. The golden age of the Common Man" (*VIT* 14). Dehmel compared it with the early decades in Germany, when common men were screaming for freedom without knowing what it is, or what its discipline involves. Indeed, this golden age extends as far back as the French Revolution (*VIT* 203, 295). In any event, the euphoria of the 1960s was soon sobered by the rise of the Smiling Bureaucracies and the global spread of nuclear terrorism. The period of the Great Fear followed, as each man came to terms with the possibility of an arbitrary death. The Smiling Bureaucracies consolidated into a federal Leviathan, the global Second Bureaucracy; and more efficient, or "clean" nuclear weapons proliferated. One day, the Destructions came. The world was "annihilated by a computer balls-up", that is, for no apparent reason. Such an unceremonious, and even trivial death is not the same as being reduced to "a screech of agony" by the Gestapo: "This man Hitler made everything personal." Yet surviving in the Hobbesian state of nature had its own horror: "There was no control at all. It was every man for himself" (*VIT* 8, 248). The cunning of reason was silently at work in the Destructions. Every period of reconstruction following a World War had allowed the universal and homogeneous state to rationalize and strengthen itself. The Destructions produced the Third Bureaucracy, the final regime that stopped time in 2014 AD by proclaiming Year One and codifying all previous history in the Diagram, an easily memorized pictorial representation of the Lie. Everything contradicting the Diagram was destroyed, no matter whether the evidence was contained in books or in minds. The Third Bureaucracy thus rationalized and generalized the methods of Danton and Hitler (*VIT* 203).

Fifty copies of Wellfleet's memoirs were printed. They too would be destroyed if found, but were being kept safe by an underground movement dedicated to a "second Renaissance." Wellfleet knew that their hopes were ill-founded. He was nonetheless moved by their naive sincerity. For instance, Gervais wanted to know "where the truth is," and what the history of mankind was before the Third Bureaucracy. But these were things "he could not grasp because he had never had the chance to understand time and its passage" (*VIT* 7, 124, 170, 312). Gervais could see no further than the beginning of the end of history. His faith in a new beginning prevented him from realizing that the whole sorry tale would simply repeat itself. Wellfleet, therefore, gives him some grandfatherly advice in the memoirs — the same advice Dehmel had received from his grandfather. As a young student in Germany, Dehmel set out to complete a Grand Design: "He would harmonize traditional History with the new findings in Psychology, Biology, and Anthropology, and out of the mixture he would develop a new Moral Philosophy." In short, he became a "learned fool," bent on rediscovering the end of history. Only after surviving the second World War did he appreciate what his grandfather had told him during the first: "They will tell you about the Laws of History when you go to university. Don't believe them. This war wasn't caused by laws, it was caused by fools" (*VIT* 148, 160, 166). Fools with guns are murderers, and learned fools — especially sincere ones — need not fire shots to be complicitous.

As a television journalist, Timothy Wellfleet revelled in modernity, though not

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without some awareness of his role in the post-historical regime. His wisdom, however, did not absolve him of complicity in Dehmel's murder. Before he ended up with the CBC, Timothy was, of course, in advertising. His literary ambitions led him to draft an outline for a play, an ad-man's version of Plato's cave allegory. There was no dialogue. The characters were dressed in the costumes of every previous historical epoch. They simply came on stage, looked about, and disappeared, all in the silence of beasts and gods. Behind them was an enormous television screen flashing images of everything "in the news which adds up to the vast war of shadows . . . the world has become." When given the opportunity, Timothy readily entered this world with the dream of mastering it (VIT 86-87). His interview program was to be "a mirror of *Now*, and there was no limit to the material *Now* could furnish." He need not understand it. His job was to create impressions, and this required that he bring himself "close to insanity." Timothy later reflected: "I had . . . made myself one of the safety valves in the very System I was trying to destroy. I was far cheaper than policemen and torture chambers." Far more efficient too. He could not master the System, but he could tend to the electronic fire and exert the System's power over his "guests" — except on one occasion when a scientist answered his question about how the world will end by saying: "In an armchair. Staring at electrical vibrations in boxes and listening to fools" (VIT 45-46, 61-65). Timothy had enough power to destroy Dehmel. He claimed publicly to have proof that Dehmel had been a member of the Gestapo and that he had been responsible for the death of Hanna Erlich among others. One of his viewers, a concentration camp survivor, thought he recognized Dehmel as his torturer, one Obersturmbannführer Heinrich, and flew to Montreal to kill him. Upon realizing his mistake, he committed suicide (VIT 116-117, 307-309).

The difference between Dehmel and Heinrich is the difference between the truth of the soul and the Lie. The story of their relation is the saving tale for us all. The young Dehmel lived in a time "when it was dangerous to tell the truth even to yourself." Reason was "helpless" before the rationality of the Nazis: "What we have here is the logic of *Alice in Wonderland*. . . Logical conclusions proceeding from absurd hypotheses. Logic can never explain the Nazis" (VIT 205, 219, 241). Neither can common sense, even though it might indicate when things have become unendurable. Dehmel's recovery of the truth required an introspective awareness of the degree to which all modern rationality is based on the logic of *Alice*. It also required spiritual strength and the compulsion of circumstances. Dehmel's first marriage was a conventional one; his wife, Eva Schmidt, "was invincibly stupid and sexually frustrated." It ended abruptly. Eva went on to find wisdom and satisfaction in the Gestapo, married to Heinrich. Dehmel was saved from his own scholasticism by the "love in impermanence" of a young Jewess, Hanna Erlich. As the lives of Hanna and her father became increasingly endangered, Dehmel joined first the Intelligence service and then the Gestapo in an attempt to acquire enough authority to arrange their escape. Love in impermanence requires great courage. Joining the Gestapo had its price. After recounting his training in the techniques of interrogation and torture, Dehmel wrote: "I have found it impossible to love myself. It was this experience that started it. . . . I was no longer the same kind of man I had been before. . . . I felt worse than

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a murderer. I wondered if the shame and horror had passed into my face and I soon discovered that it had" (*VIT* 272-273). The escape attempt failed. Dehmel was discovered in Freiburg by Eva, and then tortured by Heinrich until he revealed where Hanna and her father were hidden. When he last saw Hanna alive she screamed out, "it doesn't matter what you said." Whether or not they had been found before he betrayed them is uncertain. And it truly didn't matter (*VIT* 288-294). What mattered was the love in impermanence that Hanna and Conrad shared, the erotic participation in eternity that allows the soul to distinguish between the truth and the Lie when reason fails. There was no other difference between Heinrich and Dehmel.

During the bombing of Freiburg by the French in World War I, Dehmel's grandfather cited an ancient verse to him: "'And in a rush of wind the gods left the city.' . . . I wonder where the gods are going?" (*VIT* 151) Taken together, Cooper's *End of History* and MacLennan's *Voices in Time* provide an answer for those of us who remain to confront the two finitudes of modernity alone. The ancient gods will not return, the Christian God will not be resurrected, and yet only a god can save us. By making the end of history part of our biographies, we allow the god to appear. We are the gods now. But we are immortal only while we live — and while we have the courage to accept our incompleteness. The vulgarity of the animalized and the wise of the Kojévian world results from their pathological desire to deny their mortality at the expense of participating in the eternal in the highest and most noble ways open to mortals. Truly mortal gods accept their natality and respond to the movements of *eros* in their souls. They are capable of love in impermanence. And "love consists in this, that two solitudes protect, and touch, and greet each other" (Rainer Maria Rilke).

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### Notes

1. Karl Jaspers, *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Man*, trans. E.B. Ashton, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. vii, 4.
2. Harvard Nuclear Study Group, *Living With Nuclear Weapons*, (Toronto: Bantam, 1983), pp. ix-x, 164, 204.
3. Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, trans. J.H. Nichols Jr., ed. Allan Bloom, (N.Y.: Basic Books, 1969), p. vii.