

FROM ‘EVEN IF THERE IS NO GOD’ TO ‘EVEN IF THERE IS NO MAN’: *PRO ABSURDO*
HYPOTHESES BETWEEN MODERN AGE AND THE AGE OF ECOLOGICAL TRANSITION

[ESP] *De incluso si Dios no existe a incluso si hombre no existe: hipótesis pro absurdo entre la era moderna y la era de la transición ecológica*

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Summary: This article surveys texts, documentaries, video clips exploring a range of *pro absurdo* hypotheses elaborated between the modern age and the age of ecological transition. A *pro absurdo* hypothesis is a claim designed to exaggerate its significance, either because it is deemed unacceptable in the spirit of the times or because it is inconsistent with established knowledge. The modern age has produced models and ways of thinking that are regarded as valid “even if there is no God” (*etsi Deus non daretur*), while the postmodern and ecological transition age is nowadays hypothesizing what the world and nature would be even if there were no humans (*etsi homo non daretur*) or if humans had never existed. Both these periods have frequently constructed these hypotheses on the hypothetical linguistic structure “even if.”

Keywords: *Pro absurdo* Hypotheses; Bruno; Grotius; Ecological Transition; A World without God/Humans.

Resumen: Este artículo recopila textos, documentales y videoclips que exploran una serie de hipótesis *pro absurdo* elaboradas entre la era moderna y la era de la transición ecológica. Una hipótesis *pro absurdo* es una afirmación diseñada para exagerar su importancia, ya sea porque se considera inaceptable en el espíritu de la época o porque es inconsistente con el conocimiento establecido. La era moderna ha producido modelos y formas de pensar que se consideran válidos «incluso si no hay Dios» (*etsi Deus non daretur*), mientras que la era posmoderna y de transición ecológica está planteando hoy en día hipótesis sobre cómo serían el mundo y la naturaleza si no hubiera seres humanos (*etsi homo non daretur*) o si los seres humanos nunca hubieran existido. Ambos períodos han construido frecuentemente estas hipótesis sobre la estructura lingüística hipotética “incluso si”.

Palabras clave: Hipótesis *pro absurdo*; Bruno; Grocio; Transición ecológica; Un mundo sin Dios/humanos.



1. WILL THE 21ST CENTURY BE A METAPHYSICAL CENTURY?

As it enters its second quarter, the 21st century is clearly making its bid to be a “metaphysical” century. This assertion is in direct opposition to the predictions made by numerous continental European philosophers in the aftermath of the Second World War, who foresaw the imminent demise (“end”) of metaphysics and what was termed “strong thought.” However, it can be argued that metaphysics not only survived the 20th century, but it also left behind a profound legacy. The current century has inherited this metaphysical legacy and has benefited greatly from it. From a historical-philosophical point of view, the 21st century has been able to accommodate a truly mighty expansion of research in the history of metaphysics and ontology, fostered by the increasing integration of studies with new research on the histories of Jewish, Byzantine and Islamic metaphysics. From a systematic point of view, the last quarter of the 20th century has delivered to the current century the so-called *Ontological Turn* impressed by Willard V.O. Quine to Anglo-American systematic philosophy, resulting in a strong *renaissance* of metaphysical studies throughout the Western world. In these first decades of the 21st century, we have witnessed the increasing hybridization between these two lines of research: a contamination and synergy between historic-philosophical and analytical-systematic approaches that increasingly challenges some reductionist or “positivist” orientations.

The forthcoming decades will reveal whether the 21st century will be able to contend with some of the “integrally” metaphysical centuries of Western history, such as the 13th and the 17th century. The 13th century was driven by the Latin translation of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* in the West, while the 17th century was propelled by the need for the recourse to the metaphysical lexicon in the debates following the Protestant Reformation and Scientific Revolution. Therefore, an analogy can be posited between the 17th and 21st centuries. In the manner that the 17th century was prepared by a series of metaphysical models elaborated and refined as early as the 16th century, our century has been prepared by choices and orientations taken as early as the second half of the 20th century. The following paragraph (2.) will examine some of these hypotheses elaborated during the early modern age (16th-17th centuries). It is becoming increasingly evident that the period of modern Western thought was prepared by a series of *pro absurdo* hypotheses, arguments and theses, through which thought the modern way of thought opened itself to mental explorations into hitherto unknown “lands.” A *pro absurdo* hypothesis is a claim designed to exaggerate its significance, either because it is deemed unacceptable in the spirit of the times or because it is inconsistent with established knowledge. *Pro-absurdo* hypotheses seem to follow a structure like this: Even if p (but we all know

~p!), then still q. An example might be: even if God were not omnipotent (and we all know he is!), God could still prevent a lot of suffering from occurring.

In this paper, we will propose a quick excursion through case studies with the intention of providing a big picture that will lead us from the “micrological” level to the “macrological” one: the structures of some of these hypotheses will serve to reconnect us later to the framework of contemporary debates on ecological transition.

2. BETWEEN *PRO ABSURDO* HYPOTHESIS, SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE, AND MENTAL EXPERIMENTS: THE MODERN AGE

The 17th century was the century of “classical” modern philosophy, with prominent figures such as Descartes, Pascal, Spinoza, and Leibniz. For several decades, historic-philosophical research has been increasingly oriented in a “micrological” direction. This shift is rooted in the well-founded conviction that to best assess the charge of novelty produced by the “champions” of modern philosophy, one must delve into the context and schools they frequented, rummaging, for example, within the tradition of schoolbooks and manuals on which they were trained. From a macrological level we thus move to the micrological level of academic and scholastic philosophy, populated by authors (*minores*) and the little-known manuals on which the great philosophers matured their own structures of thought.

Between the late Renaissance and the early modern age, *pro absurdo* hypotheses and arguments were not the exclusive domain of philosophy. Indeed, even within the field of theology and spirituality, *pro absurdo* hypotheses emerged, delineating novel boundaries for prayer and spiritual exercises. A remarkable example of this phenomenon can be observed in the prayers by the cardinal Charles (Carlo) Borromeo (1538–1584). In August 1576, an outbreak of plague occurred in Milan, persisting until the summer of 1577. In the face of this crisis, Borromeo, as the Cardinal of Milan, defiantly challenged the sanitation measures imposed by the Spanish authorities. He visited the sick and afflicted in their homes, organized penitential processions, administering the sacraments. During open-air celebrations, Charles Borromeo often ashes as a penitential sign, even though we were far from Lent. This is also the context of his famous prayer to the Crucifix, where the Milanese Cardinal used a *pro absurdo* hypothesis, built syntactically on locutions such as *even when* (Italian: *quand'anche*) which is equivalent to *even if*:



“I’m drawn to You, Lord, because of You. You nailed to the cross, with Your torn Body in the agony of death. Your love has taken hold of my heart. Even if there were no heaven, I would still love You. You have nothing to give me that could provoke my love. Even if there were no hope for what I hope for, I would still love You as I love You.”¹

It is evident that the experience of praying or contemplating the Christian God, even if heaven did not exist, can only be achieved for absurdity. This hypothesis is further reinforced by the concept of assuming a love for God independent of the hope in which “we have been saved” (St. Paul, *Rom* 8:24). During the post-Tridentine era, exemplified by the Jesuit motto “For the greater glory of God” (*Ad maiorem Dei gloriam*), Charles Borromeo advanced a *pro absurdo* hypothesis, encouraging the faithful to elevate their dialogue with God to a previously uncharted level. Turning now from spirituality and prayer to philosophy, it should be noted that the same year as the outbreak of the plague in Milan, the Spanish Jesuit Benet Perera (Pererius 1535–1610) published his major philosophical work in Rome, entitled *De principiis* (1576), obtaining *placet* for publication directly from Pope Gregory XIII. It was a work that came at the height of his teaching of philosophy at the Roman College, at a time when Perera was obtaining his first position on theology chairs. In this work Perera theorized that on the basis of his infinite perfection God could also have created a creature infinite in perfection.

“If this argument is valid, it could be concluded that God can originate an infinitely perfect creature, such as affirmed by all theologians, even if it is absurd (pro absurdo).”²

¹ BORROMEIO, C., *Preghiera al Crocifisso (Prayer to the Crucifix)* (1576), published in: ARCIDIOCESI DI MILANO, *Cresce lungo il cammino il Suo vigore. Un itinerario di grazia – Letture, preghiere e canti per la processione eucaristica del Corpus Domini*, Milano, Chiesa del Carmine, 20 giugno 2019, p. 18 [Engl. Transl. mine] – The document (in Italian) is also available in digital format via the provided link. https://www.chiesadimilano.it/servizioperlapastoraleliturgica/files/2019/05/2019_Corpus_domini_interno_esecutivo.pdf

² PERERA (Pererius), B., *De communibus omnium rerum naturalium principiis et affectionibus* (I ed. Rome 1576), Cologne 1609, l. X, c. 11, 596: “*Quod si tale argumentum valeret, eodem concluderetur posse fieri a Deo aliquam creaturam infinite perfectam, quod omnes Theologi habent pro absurdo.*” [Engl. Transl. mine]. On this regard see also LAMANNA, M., «Benet Perera. The Epistemological Question at the Heart of the Early Jesuit Philosophy», in C. Casalini (ed.), *Jesuit Philosophy on the Eve of Modernity*, Leiden-Boston 2019, 270–294.

This *pro absurdo* conclusion met with an entirely unexpected reception. As acknowledged by Franco Bacchelli, in his work *De immenso* (1591) Giordano Bruno implicitly quotes Benet Perera, interpolating this *pro absurdo* argument by the Jesuit in his own text. Bruno’s aim is to contrast the finite and created universe of the Judeo-Christian tradition with his infinite and uncreated universe. Bruno, a former Dominican friar, challenged the foundational tenets of Christian theology, creating discord among Christian theologians and their own theological framework, as also evidenced by his interpretation of St. Paul. This was a kind of operation that Bruno had previously attempted, employing a strategy of turning authors and works born and rooted in the Catholic context against their own theological matrix.³ His aim was to overturn the two fundamental assumptions of Christian metaphysics (transcendence of God and pluralism of substances) in favor of divine immanence and monism of the substance. Added to this is Bruno’s non-acceptance on behalf of the assumption of original sin, to which the Nolan contrasts the admission of perfection in the human being. Bruno’s approach, as articulated in the question “Why should an effect be inferior to its own cause,” marks a significant departure from Perera’s theological framework. Perera’s assertion was consistent with the tenets of Judeo-Christian creationism, despite the presence of a *pro absurdo* argument and conclusion within his statement. According to the Jesuit, it may be possible to concede that God could create an infinitely perfect creature; however, if the cause of this effect remains the Creator (God), inevitably, a relationship of ontological dependence between creator (cause) and his creature (effect) is restored: the divine cause maintains ontological preeminence over its effect (creation). Conversely, Bruno endeavors to dislodge Perera’s conclusion from its original context, situating it within a novel metaphysical and cosmological framework that is not merely divergent, but in direct opposition to that of the Jesuit. As Bruno writes:

“In a similar vein, a philosopher should abstain from accepting that which cannot be proven with evidence and should also avoid denigrating that which cannot be disproven. The question of whether the universe is infinite or not may remain unresolved, although it is not in my particular case. For instance, even if individual worlds are recognized as finite, this does not imply the finitude of the universe as a whole. Furthermore, the fact that human beings are born and die does not imply that the human species is subject to birth and death. (...)

The possibility of deriving multiple infinite perfect bodies of the same kind from an infinite principle is not impeded (whereby it is no more difficult to create two than to create one finite or innumerable

³ The reference herein pertains to the manner in which Bruno utilizes Aquinas’s *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate* (esp. q. 1, a. 1) during his lectures on the lexicon of scholastic metaphysics, given in Zurich (February–March 1591). These lectures were edited and published by Raphael Egli (Eglinus) in 1595 under the title *Summa terminorum metaphysicorum*. For a comprehensive overview on this subject, see LAMANNA, M., «Thomas Aquinas», in *Giordano Bruno. Parole, concetti, immagini*, ed. CILIBERTO, M., Pisa 2014, vol. I, pp. 1950–1954.



instead of two). If the one is derived from the one, why should not unity be derived from so much unity? Why should the effect be considered inferior to its own cause? (...). Furthermore, perfection is inherent in human nature, insofar as we can do many things that we do not do (...).”⁴

After Perera and Bruno, another fascinating exchange took place more than 30 years apart between the Jesuit Francisco Suárez and René Descartes. Revived in the 17th century, this is the debate over so-called “eternal truths.” We must first plunge into the “heart” of Suárez’s natural theology in its *Metaphysical Disputations* (MD XXX-XXXI), where the narrative becomes, so to speak, “evolutionary” and is divided into at least three moments.

In a first moment, Suárez clearly argues that (possible) essences, before they are created by God, are nothing (*omnino nihil*), that is, they do not deserve any ontological status: not only the being of existence, but also that of essence would thus be totally dependent on God’s causal action, being itself contingent. In this sense, Suárez rejects the thesis of John Capreolus (Jean Capréolus) that God would create from an existential nothing (*ex nihilo*), but not from an essential nothing (cf. MD XXXI, 2, 4-6).

On a second point, Suárez asserts that some essences, though never in action, would nevertheless enjoy ontological status, insofar as they are present in the divine mind as modes (exemplars or truths) through which God thinks himself: the foundation and anchorage in God would guarantee such essences a being, even if they are not found in action in any individual in extramental reality (MD XXI, 12, 10 sqq.) and at any given time. Both theses are quite traditional; they can be found in their basic core already in Thomas and later in Descartes.

But there is also a third moment in which Suárez goes to the extreme of hypothesizing a detachment of the possible from divine intuition: there would therefore exist (eternal) truths that are true and possible even independently of God. As Suárez writes, these truths are “[...] *not true because they are known by God, rather they are known because they are true, otherwise no reason could be given why God necessarily knows that they are true, for if their truth proceeded from God himself, that would happen by means of God’s will, so it would not proceed necessarily but voluntary.*”⁵

⁴ BRUNO, G., *De immenso et innumerabilibus* (1591), l. III, ch. I, in *Opere latine di Giordano Bruno*, trad. it. MONTI, C., Torino 1980, pp. 512–515 [Engl. Transl. mine]

⁵ SUÁREZ, F., *Disputationes metaphysicae*, 2 vols., Georg Olms Verlag, Hildesheim 1965, Disputation XXXI, Section 12, n. 40, pp. 294–298 – For the Engl. Transl. see CURLEY E., «Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths», in *The Philosophical Review* 93/1 (1984), pp. 569–597, at 585–586.

The inherent consistency of these eternal truths would thus oblige God to think of them in that manner. As is well known, it will be Descartes who, in a letter to his correspondent and friend Marin Mersenne dated May 6, 1630, will take a position against this stand by Suárez: “As for the eternal truths, I say again that they are true or possible only because God knows them as true or possible, not that they are known by God as true as if they are true independently of him (*si Deus non esset, nihilominus istae veritates essent verae*).”⁶

According to Descartes, there are no truths that can be thought independently of God. Everything is dependent on God and caused by him in every order of reality. This includes not only entities endowed with essence and actual existence, but also the simple essences of things and the eternal truth.

It is evident that Descartes’ expression “If there is no God” (*si Deus non esset*) draws upon the hypothesis proposed by Hugo Grotius’ “even if we should concede that there is no God” (*etiamsi daremus non esse Deum*). Five years prior to Descartes’ letter to Mersenne, in the *Prolegomena* to his *De iure belli ac pacis* (1625), Grotius advanced one of the most successful *pro absurdo* hypotheses in the history of Western thought. The Dutch jurist endeavored to establish a legitimate foundation for natural human law, by asserting that natural laws are valid and legitimate “even if there is no God,” that is, independently of the existence of God.⁷

Grotius clearly remarks that the hypothesis of God’s nonexistence is a *pro absurdo* one, since it “cannot be conceded without the utmost wickedness” (*sine summo scelere*). This hypothesis of Grotius was defined as impious by his contemporaries as well as by more recent scholars. Apart from the debate on natural law, Grotius’ “impious” hypothesis has exerted a profound influence on modern philosophy.⁸

A century later, the case of Christian Wolff merits attention. In the second edition of his *Ratio praelectionum* (1735), Wolff elected to publish his lectures on Grotius’ *De iure belli ac pacis*, given

⁶ DESCARTES, R., *Letter to Marin Mersenne* (May 6, 1630), in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, ed. and transl. by COTTINGHAM, J., STOOTHOFF, R., MURDOCH, D., (3 vols.), Cambridge 1984–1991, 3, 24.

⁷ GROTIUS, H., *Prolegomena*, in *De iure belli ac pacis libri tres*, Paris 1625, pp. aiiiv–eir: “*Et haec quidem quae jam diximus, locum haberent etiamsi daremus, quod sine summo scelere dari nequi, non esse deum, aut non curari ab eo negotia humana.*” For the English translation, refer to *The Rights of War and Peace*, Books I–III, ed. TUCK, R., Indianapolis (IN) 2005: “*What we have been saying would have a degree of validity even if we should concede [etiamsi daremus] that which cannot be conceded without the utmost wickedness, that there is no God, or that the affairs of men are of no concern to him.*”

⁸ BESSELINK, L., «The Impious Hypothesis Revisited», in *Grotiana* 9 (1988), pp. 3–63; CROWE, M.B., «The Impious Hypothesis? A Paradox in Hugo Grotius?», in *Grotius, Pufendorf and Modern Natural Law*, ed. HAAKONSSON, K., Aldershot 1999, pp. 3–34.



at the Philipps-Universität in Marburg during the 1739/40 academic year. Wolff contended that there existed a fundamental congruence between the principles (*dogmata*) of Grotius' philosophy and his own. Wolff contended that there existed a fundamental congruence between the principles (*dogmata*) of Grotius' philosophy and his own. It is noteworthy that prior to his arrival at Marburg University (1723), Wolff had delivered an academic discourse at the University of Halle entitled *Oratio de Sinarum philosophia practica* (*Discourse on the Practical Philosophy of the Chinese*) which addressed the practical philosophy of the Chinese. In this lecture, Wolff publicly argued for the possibility of a virtuous natural ethics that exists independently of Christian revelation and its divine foundation, referring to the secular morality of the Chinese people.⁹ This was a further application of the *pro absurdo* hypothesis “even if there is no God.” Despite Wolff's insistence that nothing in his philosophy went against Christian theology and faith, the presentation of such a natural foundation for moral philosophy generated scandal and strong opposition at the University of Halle. The displeasure of Joachim Lange and the Protestant (Pietist) faction of such university ultimately led to Wolff's removal from Halle. In Wolff's work, an ontology distinct from theology and the hypothesis of “even if there is no God” for moral philosophy would become more than just two heuristic and epistemic hypotheses, configuring themselves as a sort of philosophical and existential “program” for the Enlightenment and beyond.¹⁰

3. FROM “EVEN IF THERE IS NO GOD” TO “EVEN IF THERE IS NO MAN”: NEW HYPOTHESES FOR THE SOCIETY OF ECOLOGICAL TRANSITION

Proceeding from Grotius and subsequently Wolff, a series of *pro absurdo* hypotheses formulated in the modern era have been elucidated through the consistent employment of the locution “even if” (Latin: *etiamsi*). This suggests a non-arbitrary linkage between the 17th and 21st centuries, that is, between the modern and post-modern eras, which brings forth certain elements of interest. Quite similar *pro absurdo* hypotheses animate today's climate change debates and ecological transition society, in which we are seeing a truly impressive proliferation of statistical and predictive models that attempt to assess human impact on the earth in the coming decades. The focus of research

⁹ On this regard see LARRIMORE, M., «Orientalism and Antivoluntarism in the History of Ethics: On Christian Wolff's “Oratio de Sinarum Philosophia Practica”», in *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 28/2 (2020), pp. 189–219.

¹⁰ For similar conclusions see LAMANNA, M., «Ontology and secularization in Hugo Grotius' natural law theory: a missing link», in *Veritas et Jus* 13/2 (2016), pp. 84–104. See also GLINKA, H., / GRUNERT, F., «Die Grotius-Vorlesung von Christian Wolff aus der Sammlung Emanuel von Graffenried», in *Kolleghefte, Kollegnachschriften und Protokolle: Probleme und Aufgaben der philosophischen Edition*, ed. BOHR, J., Berlin–Boston 2019, pp. 7–20.

has shifted from finding a “turning point” in climate change, as defined by Austrian physicist Fritjof Capra in the early 1980s, to a “no-return point,” where reversible climate change will lead to irreversible changes for Earth and humanity. In contrast, increasingly intricate, interconnected, and interdisciplinary models address the consequences of human extinction on Earth. These models explore the repercussions of human extinction on the global ecosystem and nature if humans were to no longer inhabit the Earth’s surface for periods of 10, 100, 1,000, or 10,000 years. These models have been preceded by a prolonged period of debate, with the discussion on the Anthropocene being a notable example.

The Anthropocene is a recently coined term indicating a new formal geological epoch that should have followed the Holocene, which has lasted since the end of the last Ice Age about 11,700 years ago. The debate on the Anthropocene has been founded on the premise that, over the past seventy years, the impact of humans on the environment has been so profound and irreversible that it has precipitated the termination of the stable conditions that prevailed during the Holocene epoch: consequently, there has been a call for the establishment of a new epoch, that is, a new interval of geological time. In March of 2024, the proposal by the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG) has been definitively rejected by the Subcommittee on Quaternary Stratigraphy (SQS).¹¹

However, it should be noted that debates on the Anthropocene have generated significant interest over the past two decades, fostering collaboration between specialists and the general public. This interest reached a notable high point with the Canadian documentary *Anthropocene – The Human Epoch* (2018). However, the first attempts in this area had already been registered a decade earlier with the publication of the book *The World Without Us* (2008) by the American journalist Alan Weisman. A significant development in this area was the launch of the television series *Life After People* (2008–2010), which aired on channels such as *Focus* and *History Channel*.

Comprising of two seasons, this series explored the hypothetical scenarios of the planet’s future in the absence of human existence, whether due to progressive extinction or a sudden and unexpected disappearance. In another successful series called *What if*, there is an episode devoted to “*What if all humans suddenly disappeared from the Earth.*”¹² Documentary trailers of this kind have garnered considerable attention, reaching millions of viewers worldwide. They show predictions that

¹¹ As to the rejection of the Anthropocene as Earth’s new epoch, see the article published in *Nature* on March 6, 2024 [<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-024-00675-8>, accessed November 17, 2024].

¹² For this episode of the “What If” series, please refer to the following link [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWXdTwFHETA>, accessed November 17, 2024].



500 years after the hypothetical extinction of the human species on Earth, natural forces will have effectively eradicated most anthropic influences.

However, the presence of certain objects, particularly those made of plastic, is predicted to persist for extended periods of time, with some remaining for millennia. A designated time frame for this occurrence is set at 25,000 years after the hypothetical extinction of humankind, a point at which the complete eradication of all human traces from the planet is expected. Based on these predictive models, a race has begun to develop increasingly extreme hypotheses that attempt to reconstruct not only what the planet would be like without humans, but also what the natural world would be like if humans had never existed (*A World without Humans – What if we never existed*).¹³

Once this level is reached, the reference to statistical models and scientifically based studies is often lost, the use of sources becomes more vague, and a kind of ecological ideology based on negative or apocalyptic anthropological views advances. The most popular conclusion is that a world without humans would probably – even certainly – be a better place, according to a wide range of views. These are hypotheses that animate discussion forums, even in influential newspapers such as *The Guardian*, and are not confined to virtual communities limited to their own followers.¹⁴

In summary, the modern age has produced models and ways of thinking that are regarded as valid “even if there is no God” (*etsi Deus non daretur*). The postmodern and ecological transition age frequently hypothesizes what the world and nature would be even if there were no humans (*etsi homo non daretur*) or if humans had never existed. In the face of such scenarios, an attempt at an answer can come from the poetics of Thomas S. Eliot, when in the first lines of one of his *Choruses* from *The Rock* (1934) he stated that the world without the human heart would be “waste and void.”¹⁵

¹³ On this regard see the video clip *A World without Humans – What if We never existed* [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dDjsW8xCjRU>, accessed November 17, 2024].

¹⁴ On this regard see “What would the world be like if humans had never existed,” *The Guardian* (April 23, 2014) [<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/apr/23/world-humans-never-existed184894,00.html#:~:text=So%20if%20mankind%20never%20existed,they%20would%20have%20thrived%20better>, accessed November 17, 2024].

¹⁵ ELIOT, T.S., *Choruses* from *The Rock* (1934), in *Collected Poems 1909–1962*, London 2002, chorus VII, 106–109. – The motif of *waste and void* had previously been explored by Eliot in his 1922 work, *The Waste Land*, drawing upon the third line of the second verse of Richard Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*, in which the shepherd says to Tristan, “Oed’ und leer das Meer” (*Desolate and empty is the sea*).