

## *Introduction*

# Twentieth-Century Apocalypse: Forecasts and Aftermaths

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We are all haunted by visions that we are trying in vain to put out of our minds.

—Robert Jungk (3)

You loved the scenes, didn't you, when I first showed you them? A flat-out fascination with the threat, soberly maintaining that the only thing to do when the world begins to end is to stand aside and paint it.

—Richard Powers (341)

The arbitrary chronometric click of the millennium was registered last year, and it was quite wonderful to see the millennial dawn in every time zone broadcast on Public Television. It was so serious, such an Event, a sure sign that nothing was happening. Only the Danes thought to perform a millennial parody, which ended with the queen of Denmark being assassinated! What was truly noteworthy, though, was not how little took place, but how little was expected. Millennial feeling, for the first time, was almost entirely severed from apocalyptic urges and fears. There were still, of course, people catastrophizing on websites, stockpiling weapons in Texas, and waiting for the end in Jerusalem. But these responses seemed quaintly anachronistic; one could feel almost a pleasant nostalgia knowing that there were still a few people looking forward to the end of the world. The only endemic anxiety concerned Y2K, the possible worldwide computer glitch. Most of us, though, ultimately were convinced by government and business assurances that the problem had been addressed; and, as it happened, the world's computers changed their dates quite smoothly.

And yet, as Walt Whitman once wrote, "Something startles me where I

thought I was safest" (208). Certainly, I am relieved that nuclear annihilation no longer seems imminent. One doesn't really feel nostalgia for Mutual Assured Destruction, Ronald Reagan, and Hal Lindsey. But still I wonder about the causes of the sudden evaporation of apocalyptic feeling at the end of the twentieth century, a century so thoroughly marked, perhaps even defined, by apocalyptic impulses, fears, representations, and events. The reasons for this general millennial calm are both obvious and not so obvious. First, there is no great global crisis that would help precipitate apocalyptic fears and desires. There is, of course, a very real ecological crisis, but corporate and government public relations seem to have successfully numbed public concern. Without the Cold War and the Soviet Union, there is no Evil Empire, no Antichrist, no immediate threat of annihilation. The terrible eruptions of bloody local conflicts do not seem likely to widen into Armageddons; even the Middle East conflict, without the added heat of superpower ideological rivalry, has receded to the status of just another brutal, local idiocy, in spite of the efforts of zealots to make it something more.

Furthermore, the apparent prosperity created by global capitalism has made the millennium seem irrelevant. Even those of us bashing this consumerist Babylon and its international war against labor and the environment want to make sure our TIAA-CREF funds are doing well. But there is another factor, I believe, contributing to the relative scarcity of apocalyptic fervor at the end of the millennium, and that is a kind of apocalyptic fatigue, or indeed, a widespread sense that the apocalypse has, in some sense, *already happened*. No, we didn't actually get nuked or wiped out by ebola or nerve gas; aliens didn't land on the White House lawn. We in the developed West are still alive and more or less kicking. But we need to consider seriously the fact that even the most dystopic visions of science fiction of the last half century cannot replicate events that have actually taken place, events that we have seen, recorded, and reproduced. We don't need to speculate. We know what the end of the world looks like. We know because we've seen it, and we've seen it because it's happened. The images of Nazi death camps, of mushroom clouds and human silhouettes burned onto pavements, of not just massacres but genocides in a dozen places, of urban wastelands and ecological devastation are all part of our cultural heritage. Apocalypse is our history; what difference does a change in the calendar make?

This sense of an apocalypse within history, rather than outside it, extends back at least to the nineteenth century. One of the contributors to this issue, Edward J. Ahearn, in his book *Visionary Fictions*, called the French Revolution the first modern historical event to be widely felt as apocalyp-

tic.<sup>1</sup> In the mid-nineteenth century, two thinkers with very different political bearings uttered quite similar apocalyptic responses to the social changes of their time, statements that have come to stand as touchstones for modernity: Matthew Arnold's reference to "wandering between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born" (321), and Karl Marx's remark that as a result of capitalism, "all fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned . . ." (224).

Frank Kermode wrote in *The Sense of an Ending*, a book that is still the starting point for thinking about twentieth-century apocalyptic literature, that the apocalyptic imagination takes as its premise the conviction that time has reached a critical juncture; that there is a unique importance to the present moment, for the nature of things is, just now, being transformed into something utterly different. This seems an accurate description of the attitudes of European and American modernist writers before the Second World War. For Yeats, it just so happened, fortuitously, that the twentieth century marked the final days of his apocalyptic gyre, which then would turn, renewed, to begin again. Eliot's *The Waste Land* was placed between the material and cultural catastrophe of the First World War and an unnameable revelation that would culminate and redeem the world's devastation. Williams, in *Spring and All*, playfully annihilated the world and then reassembled it precisely as it had been, in every muddy and transcendent detail—except without allusion or quotation, without cultural memory, and thus, he hoped, with the possibility of a genuinely new beginning. For these writers, and for Lawrence, Hemingway, Djuna Barnes, Henry Miller, and other writers of the teens, twenties, and thirties, the memory of the historical catastrophe of the First World War produced the need to imagine an even greater catastrophe that would finish the job. But this second, imaginary, disaster would be apocalyptic in a way that the first, the historical, catastrophe could not be, for it would be revelatory: would *reveal*, as it obliterated, the full meaning of civilization's failures. These modernist writers wrote at what they took to be a moment of transition, between two apocalypses, one historical—and thus merely destructive—and one to be imagined. The imagined apocalypse would then convey retrospectively a fully apocalyptic status to the material, cultural, and human devastation of history. The modernist apocalyptic vision, marked and wounded by the past, nevertheless extended forward, if only toward some even greater catastrophe.

A greater catastrophe did, of course, arrive. Whether or not accompanied by any revelations, the Second World War helped inspire different

apocalyptic perspectives. In representations after the Second World War, the apocalypse became, to a much greater degree, a matter of retrospection. It had already happened. The world, whether it knew it or not, was a ruin, a remnant. More destruction could occur, but it could only be more of the same. Nothing more could be revealed. All subsequent, post-apocalyptic destruction would be absolutely without meaning, mere repetition.

We can point to four principle areas of postwar apocalyptic representation. The first is nuclear war, the second is the Holocaust, the third is the apocalypses of liberation (feminist, African American, postcolonial), and the fourth is what is loosely called "postmodernity." For obvious reasons, portrayals of nuclear Armageddon and its aftermaths proliferated in the wake of Hiroshima and throughout the Cold War. Even those, like Neville Chute's *On the Beach*, that were placed just before a nuclear ending and served as warnings against nuclear war, take on tones of mourning, suggesting that some irreparable damage has already been inflicted and suffered, even by the victors of the previous conflict. Nuclear disaster narratives often assume an inevitable path of technology, whose end is annihilation. The apocalypse in texts as disparate as Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* and Stanley Kubrick and Arthur C. Clark's *2001: A Space Odyssey* is built into technology's development, apparent in postapocalyptic retrospect at every moment of the narrative. On a contrasting note, other nuclear apocalypse narratives—Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*, for example—stress the random, absurd nature of nuclear annihilation. In Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, Lenny Bruce's running joke during the Cuban missile crisis, "We're all gonna die!!," reveals a horrific comedy in our helplessness in the face of mass death. But even in these examples, accident and telos are intertwined. The world is destroyed by coincidences and stupidity, but this very randomness and folly are the lynchpins of global politics: once the world is revealed to be entirely M.A.D., physical obliteration is both inevitable and an afterthought. Still other, more postapocalyptic, texts trace mutations of language after its referents have been destroyed and forgotten. In its brilliant postnuclear cockney, Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*, with its "Littl Shynin Man the Addom" (31), sees the history of Western technological culture as a single, vast, undifferentiated ruin—akin to the vision of Walter Benjamin's angel of history and to the language of Samuel Beckett's Clov in *Endgame*: "I say to myself that the earth is extinguished, though I never saw it lit" (81).

The Nazi genocide of European Jews, though affecting a relatively small population—it is a striking indication of the dimensions of modern horrors that 6 million dead can be considered moderate relative to other compila-

tions of mortality—has come to occupy a central place in late twentieth-century European and American moral consciousness. Nazi ideology and methods seem an amalgam of so many important modern tendencies—nationalism, eugenics, efficient industrial techniques, sophisticated bureaucratic organization, effective mass communication—that its barbarous, apparently atavistic cruelty can appear more exemplary than exceptional in relation to modernity. For many writers and thinkers, the Holocaust was apocalyptic in that it shattered certain ideas and hopes regarding social, technological, and aesthetic progress that had been central to European and American ways of thinking. The Holocaust seemed to be an absolute historical rupture—the end of European Jewry and the end of any unproblematic conception of Western civilization as separable from violent, genocidal impulses—but installed at the same time a new historical continuity: all events and ideas before the Holocaust now seemed ominous and premonitory; all that followed appeared as symptom-laden, postapocalyptic aftermaths.<sup>2</sup> In such novels and films as D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*, I. B. Singer's *Enemies: A Love Story*, Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow*, and Agnieszka Holland's *Europa, Europa*, the Holocaust is portrayed as the revelatory, traumatic, apocalyptic fulcrum of the twentieth century.

But other groups and other events have generated other apocalyptic portrayals. The ends—imagined, wished for, struggled for, and resisted—of male, white, Euro-American colonial and heterosexist domination (and even of gender, race, and nation as meaningful concepts) all have been figured in apocalyptic terms. These feminist, queer, postcolonial, and African American apocalyptic texts often reveal the added complexity that the histories and psyches of the dominant and suppressed groups are intertwined. The old order, in some measure, survives in the hearts of those who would end it. “It wasn’t sweet, and it sure wasn’t home” (14), says a character in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, referring to Sweet Home, the plantation where he had been a slave. “But it was where we were,” another responds, “all together. Comes back whether we want it to or not.” Destroying the old and creating the new in works by writers like Morrison, Salman Rushdie, Angela Carter, Ishmael Reed, Octavia Butler, and Donna Haraway involves acts of self-destruction; surgeries, amputations, grafts, and splices; disassembling and reforming old myths. When the subaltern speaks, a new self and a new world are formed, but no language is ever completely new. When, at the end of the Book of Revelation, an angel measures the New Jerusalem, it uses preapocalyptic, human measures. By the same token, the language of liberation and the subject who speaks it inherit a vocabulary from the language of oppression. Or, as one of this issue’s contributors, Richard

Dellamora, has written in his book *Apocalyptic Overtures* with regard to queer apocalyptic writing, the dominant heterosexual culture may appropriate features of gay culture while suppressing its specific sexual contexts.

Finally, I would argue that apocalyptic tropes and sensibilities largely inflect the broad philosophical/theoretical/cultural and historical orientations grouped under the terms *postmodernism* and *poststructuralism*. Much of the most important North American fiction of the past 30 years, by writers as diverse as John Updike, Bernard Malamud, Margaret Atwood, Thomas Pynchon, Marge Piercy, Gore Vidal, Don DeLillo, Paul Auster, and Michael Ondaatje has focused on some revelatory catastrophe whose traumatic force reshapes all that preceded it and all that follows. Moreover, as Lee Quinby, Mike Davis, and I have described in very different ways, there are senses in which contemporary American culture and politics can be seen as oriented by apocalyptic fears and desires, particularly (in my view) in their ambivalent relationships with traumatic historical memories. Fredric Jameson writes, I think correctly, of postmodernism as “an inverted millenarianism” informed by “senses of the end of this and that (the end of ideology, of art, or social class . . .)” (1). And Jameson’s alarmed rhetoric regarding historical and social flattening and disorientation (a rhetoric coming in large part from Jean Baudrillard) is itself an example of the apocalypticism of postmodern thinking. The apocalyptic, or postapocalyptic, tone of theory since the late 1960s is striking. Recall Foucault’s closing words in *The Order of Things* when he imagines the Enlightenment notion of “man” being “erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” (387) or Derrida’s nearly Yeatsian image in “Structure, Sign, and Play” of the impending birth of a yet-inconceivable form of thinking “under the species of the nonspecies, in the formless, mute, infant and terrifying form of monstrosity” (293). Poststructuralist thinkers consistently refer to shatterings and ruptures of forms of thought, and to the absolute alterities on the far side of, or within, these ruptures. For Derrida, the rupture and the alterity, apocalyptic disintegration and reconfiguration, are posited as intrinsic, structural features of language. Others, like Lyotard, Baudrillard, and Jameson locate the apocalyptic transformations of thought and life in developments of technology and global capitalism. As I have argued elsewhere, however, the poststructuralist rhetorical emphasis on shattering, rupture, the sublime, and absolute transformation may signal a forgetting of historical trauma, particularly of the Holocaust. Since the late 1970s, Lyotard, Derrida, and Hayden White, among other poststructuralist thinkers, have looked at issues of representation anew in light of questions raised by the Holocaust. It is especially striking how Derrida’s earlier apocalyptic terminology of “trace,” “differance,” “dissemination,” and so on (which is linguistic and structural)

shifts in his later work to an apocalyptic terminology that refers in a peculiarly specific yet oblique way to the Holocaust: “cinders,” “shibboleth,” “date.”<sup>3</sup>

The essays in this special issue of *Twentieth Century Literature* analyze many of the important issues and reference points of apocalyptic representations of the just-completed century. Elinor Fuchs shows how Henrik Ibsen’s final play, *When We Dead Awaken*, portrays a characteristically modern tension between ironic scrutiny and apocalyptic dread and desire, serving “as a prologue to the twentieth century’s proliferation of apocalyptic literary imagery” (401). Elana Gomel traces a fascinating literary history of narratives of all-annihilating plagues, from Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* to recent science-fiction texts. She argues intriguingly that in many twentieth-century plague narratives, the disease comes to stand for an ongoing, symptomatic condition: plague becomes not the opposite or end of life, but life as lived. Patrick Sharp’s essay on John Hersey’s *Hiroshima* shows how this text, first published to a wide and influential audience in *The New Yorker*, marked a crucial turning point in American thinking about atomic weapons and their Japanese victims. As Sharp describes, Hersey’s work played an important role in constructing a postwar conception of atomic apocalypse as a combination of instantaneous obliteration and gradual, agonizing extinction. Edward J. Ahearn, discussing novels by Peter Ackroyd and Angela Carter, shows how these postmodern British texts continue an apocalyptic and visionary tradition that reaches back to William Blake. Apocalypse in these works is a response to historical crisis that takes the form of some revelatory breakdown of social and sexual identities. In her discussion of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Teresa Heffernan describes the tensions, illuminated by apocalyptic violence, between universal and nationalist ideals in postcolonial discourses—the conflict, in this case, between being a citizen of a civil state and being an Indian in an Indian nation. The shattering of colonial political structures seems to engender new ethnic violence—and so the nation, as Heffernan’s title puts it, is apocalyptically “unveiled.” Finally, Richard Dellamora demonstrates the important confluence of contemporary theory and apocalyptic thinking in his essay on Luce Irigaray and Emmanuel Levinas. Through analyzing Irigaray’s commentary on Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity*, Dellamora shows also how sexuality comes to be at stake in these two thinkers’ views of alterity and apocalypse. Levinas’s sense of ethical obligation toward the other becomes blurred when he describes the quasi-apocalyptic sexual relation directed toward procreation.

In a multitude of texts, genres, and disciplines, then—and this intro-

duction is far from having named all of them—apocalyptic and postapocalyptic sensibilities have helped define the twentieth century. This has indeed been a century full of visions we would like to forget, but which we have nevertheless relentlessly recorded, analyzed, and amplified with uneasy pleasure.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See also Steven Goldsmith's excellent book on apocalyptic representation in English romanticism, *Unbuilding Jerusalem*.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Andre Bernstein has criticized the use of such "foreshadowing" in accounts of the Holocaust. As he rightly points out, no historical event should be portrayed as inevitably following from earlier events. At the same time, an overwhelmingly catastrophic event like the Holocaust does occupy a culturally and psychically central position, dividing history into a before and an after, and radically restructuring understandings of all events on either side. It is not *inevitability* that gives a historical event an apocalyptic character. It is its ability to obliterate existing narratives and to initiate a new history that takes the form of an ominous and symptomatic aftermath.

<sup>3</sup> See my *After the End*, chap. 4. For more on the relations between poststructuralist theory, historical trauma, and the Holocaust, see recent work by Dominick LaCapra. For other perspectives on connections between postmodernism and poststructuralism and apocalypse, see Lee Quinby, Matei Calinescu, Peter Schwenger, Ahearn, and Dellamora.

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