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## Uses of the End of the World: Apocalypse and Postapocalypse as Narrative Modes

[The] apocalyptic imagination may finally be defined in terms of its philosophical preoccupation with that moment of juxtaposition and consequent transformation when an old world of mind discovers a believable new world of mind, which either nullifies and destroys the old system entirely or ... makes it part of a larger design.—David Ketterer (13)

If the “end” has traditionally secured a sense of order, meaning, originality, and autonomy to the narrative as it progresses from start to finish, what is at stake in a world that no longer offers up narratives with conclusive endings?—Teresa Heffernan (3)

*The Postman* (1985), David Brin’s novel about survivors rebuilding after a global nuclear war, describes two strategies for incorporating “world-ending” events into historical narrative and using these narratives to organize political action. The villains of the novel understand the war as an end and a new beginning; they tell a story in which the falling bombs have destroyed the old world of the past and prepared a *tabula rasa* upon which the future will be built from scratch. For these characters, “the end of the world” offers the opportunity to escape from an imperfect past into a new and better world, and their narrative provides a rigorous explanatory rubric through which to distinguish between actions that contribute to this goal and those that impede it. In contrast, Brin’s hero locates the vast destruction wrought by the war within history, rather than at the beginning or the end of anything. He insists that the post-war future remains connected to the pre-war past, arguing that while the war has disrupted and transformed the world, “there is never a disaster so devastating that a determined person cannot pull something out of the ashes” (1). Rather than clarifying historical causality and political responsibility, this account of the war raises these issues as unanswered questions, forcing a confrontation with the legacies of a past that is never truly past and with a future that never definitively arrives.

Disaster, cataclysm, and the end of the world are perennially fascinating topics. In the twenty-first century the modern atom bomb and the classical armies of angels in the sky have been joined by a veritable pantheon of eschatological powers and millennial figures. A cursory glance at the sf shelf in any American bookshop—or the current events page in any American newspaper—will reveal a host of threats large and small, natural and supernatural, magical and technological, earthly and alien, spectacular and mundane, all poised to destroy humanity, or the Earth, or reality as a whole. In a more optimistic vein, millennial fantasies of rebirth, renewal, and the advent of a golden age proliferate just as widely and diversely.

Within this proliferation of end-time narratives, however, two distinct trends are evident, two broadly defined approaches to telling stories that deal

with or make use of “the end of the world.” The two narratives of nuclear war and its aftermath that Brin explores in *The Postman* are representative of these two modes of eschatological storytelling. In many contemporary texts, cataclysmic events are used to give structure to the otherwise chaotic and incomprehensible experience of history. Presented as abrupt ruptures or pivots between old and new worlds, these events frame a series of clearly defined moments or epochs, and such narratives thus evoke ideas of a coherent process of historical development in which traumatic upheavals trigger transitions between distinct world-systems. Other texts, telling stories of similarly catastrophic events, complicate this neat, linear account of world history by describing survivals and continuities that blur before/after distinctions. Rather than providing an overview of historical development, such narratives draw attention to the necessarily indeterminate nature of a future that is constantly in the process of emerging from the past. In this essay I argue that these two narrative modes are usefully understood as “apocalyptic” and “postapocalyptic,” respectively.

In tracing this distinction, I draw on the literary critic Frank Kermode’s thesis, developed in *The Sense of an Ending* (1967), that storytelling is a mechanism for making sense of the overwhelming and unstructured experience of lived history. Kermode’s discussion centers on the Biblical story of providential or apocalyptic history, which he presents as the most influential paradigm for narrative world-ordering in Western literary culture more generally. Lived history is confusing, a welter of ongoing changes that the individual enters and exits midstream and within which she must struggle to find structure or meaning; by narrating the end of the world, Kermode argues, the Biblical text circumscribes and stabilizes this dynamic realm, rendering history finite and therefore comprehensible. This allows readers to “project” themselves “past the End, so as to see the structure [of temporal existence] whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle” (8). The Biblical account thus allows readers to establish what Kermode calls “consonance” between the past and the future, the sense that past and present events can be correlated to knowable future outcomes. Kermode goes on to argue that other forms of narrative function in a similar fashion; he suggests that by ending, finite literary narratives such as those told in novels provide small-scale, implicit models of the finite and comprehensible history explicitly described in apocalyptic religious writings. Although Kermode does not speak specifically about science fiction, the significance of his analysis to the study of literary works that explore speculative futures is clear. The religious discourses Kermode analyzes in *The Sense of an Ending* were for a very long time the most important of the vehicles through which Western cultures deployed apocalyptic narratives. Today, however, the narrative paradigms we use to stabilize and structure the experience of history are most explicitly articulated in science fiction and related literary genres.

But while Kermode suggests that all narratives are in some sense apocalyptic, in that they offer readers “images of the grand temporal consonance” simply by ending (17), there are ways of telling stories about the

future that depart from and critically re-examine this apocalyptic paradigm, as Elana Gomel and others have noted. When Brin has his hero in *The Postman* deny the possibility of a disaster “so devastating that a determined person cannot pull something out of the ashes,” he effectively destabilizes the entire sense-making project that Kermode analyzes. If it is always possible to recover the past—or, conversely, if it is never possible to fully escape the past—then there is no end beyond which to project oneself, and thus no transcendent position outside history from which it would be possible to “see the structure whole.” As Gomel argues in *Postmodern Science Fiction and the Temporal Imagination* (2010), the idea of history as a coherent developmental process bounded by clear origin and termination events is only one of many possible timeshapes, Gomel’s term for the paradigmatic narrative patterns through which understandings of history and temporality are articulated and reproduced. Brin’s hero rejects the apocalyptic timeshape in favor of an alternative narrative engagement with temporal reality. Rather than looking forward to a terminal future moment that will define and give meaning to an otherwise amorphous present, Brin’s novel models a form of historical thinking that focuses on the present as the site at which the meaning and shape of the future is continually being determined. This focus sets up different kinds of political questions and practices from those enabled by the existentially stabilizing apocalyptic engagement with the future that Kermode describes. *The Postman* and stories like it thus warrant analysis as a class of postapocalyptic fictions distinct from those that Kermode calls apocalyptic.

In the first section below, I survey a range of apocalyptic discourses and texts, and argue that despite differences in content, mood, and ideological commitment, all are alike in that they conceptualize historical change in terms of a series of revolutionary breaks between new and old worlds. In the second section of the essay, I provide examples of postapocalyptic literary narratives that seek to undermine or escape from this apocalyptic storytelling paradigm by narrating history as a series of ill-defined and overlapping transformations. By differentiating between apocalyptic narratives that treat the future as the end (of the present, of history, or of the world) and postapocalyptic narratives that deny the possibility of such an end, this essay aims to articulate a clearer understanding of the ways in which different kinds of contemporary stories about the end of the world are used to think about the future and to provide conceptual support for political action in the present.

**Apocalyptic Narrative: “The Former Things Are Passed Away.”** The word apocalypse is most frequently encountered today as, in Lois Parkinson Zamora’s phrase, “a synonym for ‘disaster’ or ‘cataclysm’” (4). But nothing links the word etymologically to the idea of destruction; it derives, through the Latin *apocalypsis*, from the Greek verb ἀποκαλύπτειν, “to uncover.” Apocalypse was first used in English to translate the opening word of the Book of Revelation, and in this context it suggests a revelation of divine knowledge. Although few of them remain well-known today, many religious records of revelation were produced between the fourth century BCE and the first century

AD, during what is now known as the Intertestamentary Period. The deity reveals many things in these texts, including the meaning of older scriptural stories, the legitimacy of specific leaders and doctrines, and the proper dates of festivals and feasts. A specialized scholarly usage of the word apocalypse derives from this proliferation, and when Biblical scholars speak of apocalypses or apocalyptic writing they are referring to the entire body of ancient Jewish and Christian revelatory writings.<sup>1</sup>

But outside of the specialized context of academic Biblical study, the word has come to be associated less with the form than with the content of these ancient texts. Today, apocalypse does not generally evoke either the idea of revelation as such or the corpus of Judeo-Christian revelatory religion as a whole, but rather one very specific revelation. By far the most enduring and influential of the ancient apocalyptic texts were those that the Biblical scholar John Collins refers to as “historical apocalypses” (6), which focus on the revelation of future events and the coming end of the world. The three ancient apocalypses most widely available in print today—the canonical books of Daniel and Revelation and the apocryphal book known as the Ezra Apocalypse—are all historical apocalypses. The futures detailed in these texts differ, but each traces a developmental historical trajectory that moves through periods of peace and tribulation and culminates in the advent of a new world, usually represented by the New Jerusalem or heavenly kingdom. This turn from one world to the next involves a complete break between what is and what will be; the historical apocalypses define the future in terms of its radical distinction or separation from the historical world of the present. As the Book of Revelation puts it, in the new world of the future “the former things have passed away” (21:4).

The ancient apocalyptic scriptures are, of course, open to interpretation, and endlessly so—there are perhaps as many systematic historical doctrines based on these texts as there have been readers of them. A broad distinction can be made, for example, between pre- and post-millennial apocalyptic doctrines. In pre-millennial readings, the apocalyptic books predict that the end of the old world will take place before the return of the messiah, and the paradise promised to the faithful will only be achieved in the next world. Post-millennial doctrines, in contrast, look forward to a period (generally a thousand years) of messianic rule and earthly paradise in this world, and expect the apocalyptic break to come only after that period has elapsed. Many of the most prominent apocalyptic voices in Christianity today ascribe to a post-millennial model but, as critics such as Norman Cohn and Paul Boyer have shown, Revelation and the other apocalyptic scriptures have been and continue to be read in both ways. One can also distinguish between literalist readings of the apocalyptic texts and readings that interpret them in terms of spiritual or perceptual transformations. The ever-popular exercise of identifying a loathed world leader with the Antichrist is an example of the first of these approaches; the “de-mythologized” theology of Rudolph Bultmann, who advised Christians to seek the end of the world by transforming their understanding, is an example of the latter. The differences between these interpretations of the

Biblical texts are substantial and often irreconcilable, but all turn on the idea of the end; they describe different futures, but each tells a story in which the future is produced by and exists on the other side of the end of the present. All of these discourses are committed, in other words, to versions of the same narrative project of organizing temporal experience by telling stories about clearly defined endings that separate distinct moments of historical time and distinct states of worldly existence.

Various more or less secular doctrines can thus also be understood as apocalyptic, in the sense that they are similarly focused on or organized around the idea of history as a movement defined by ends and the advent of new worlds. Hegel was not the first writer to discuss history in terms of such a movement, but his writings on the subject are among the most influential. Hegel argues apocalyptically in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (1837) that the course of history is determined by the progressive development of the self-consciousness of universal spirit. The future described in Hegel's philosophy is by definition a state radically distinct from the present; his historicism assumes "not the mere formal conception of development, but the attainment of a definite result" (71), an attainment that sets the future off from all that came before it, and which brings that obsolete past to an end. Where the present is defined by the imperfection of spirit's self-consciousness and freedom, the future will be inaugurated by a moment of absolute transformation in which this self-awareness becomes fully and perfectly realized. "This result it is," he writes, "at which the process of the World's History has been continually aiming; and to which the sacrifices ... laid on the vast altar of the earth, through the long lapse of ages, have been offered. This is the only aim that sees itself realized and fulfilled; the only pole of repose amid the ceaseless change of events and conditions" (33-34). Here it is quite explicit that the end of the world is introduced into historical narrative as a sense-making element, a way of explaining historical traumas (by justifying "the sacrifices laid on the vast altar of the earth") and stabilizing overwhelming or confusing experiences (by identifying a "pole of repose amid the ceaseless change"). This version of the apocalyptic narrative has been immensely influential across a wide range of discourses; writers as politically at odds as Karl Marx and Francis Fukuyama rely on Hegel's work in articulating their own apocalyptic historical narratives. Both Marx and Fukuyama go further than Hegel in secularizing apocalyptic history, shifting responsibility for achieving the ends that define and structure historical progress from God's shoulders to those of a worldly and human power, but both thinkers maintain the central apocalyptic understanding of the future as the end of the present.

In this sense many fictional narratives, and especially many works of science fiction, can also be understood as apocalyptic—not because they describe spectacularly destructive events, but because they use accounts of such events to place the past and future into the same dichotomized, developmental relationship that is established in religious and secular apocalyptic historical discourses. Often such stories are unabashedly optimistic; as Martha Bartter

argues, apocalyptic fictions usually find “ways to explain the survival of a select group ... [who] might eventually be able to build a new, infinitely better world” (148). Brian Aldiss memorably dubbed such stories “cosy catastrophes” (292). The slate-clearing scenario of the cozy catastrophe has been used to defend a wide range of political convictions. In *Lucifer’s Hammer* (1985), for example, Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle use a massive asteroid strike to imagine the modern world redeemed by a return to simpler systems of social organization; the novel argues for the superiority of an agrarian and patriarchal neo-feudalism over the industrial consumerism of twentieth-century American civilization. H.G. Wells advocates for a very different set of social and political ideals in *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933); here a devastating world war leads to the advent of a benevolent dictatorship that abolishes national and religious identities, imposes a lingua franca, and unites humanity into a global socialist community. Despite such differences in ideological orientation, however, there is a sense in which all cozy catastrophe narratives are alike. Beneath their commitments to pseudo-libertarian and communalist social ideals, *Lucifer’s Hammer* and *The Shape of Things to Come* tell stories about the future that share basic assumptions about the nature of history and futurity. Both establish the same narrative relationship between the future and the present; both are predicated on the idea that the world of the future is entirely distinct from the world of the present and that historical change proceeds by way of the annihilation of the past. Both are stories about the future that pivot on the idea of the end of the present, revealing that the known world will pass away and be replaced by a new reality wholly different from all that came before. The politics these stories support are very different, but they articulate these different political positions by way of the same narrative strategy of world-framing.

Other fictions are less optimistic about the productive possibilities of the end and describe sterile cosmic denouements. The anti-nuclear propaganda film “A Short Vision” (1956) provides a particularly striking example. Written and directed by Joan and Peter Foldes, this animated short film depicts the detonation of a nuclear weapon over a populous city; the film lingers over vivid images of flesh melting from the skulls of the victims, and caused a public uproar when it aired on the Ed Sullivan show. “A Short Vision” gestures towards Biblical promises of a better world to come after the end of this world: the sight of the bomb makes a hunting leopard release a deer, evoking the prophet Isaiah’s vision of a future in which the “leopard shall lie down with the kid” (11:6). But no utopian peace emerges, and both leopard and deer are consumed in the conflagration. All that survives the blast is a small flame circled by a single moth; then the moth is consumed, the flame is extinguished, and the film ends in darkness. Most sf texts hew more closely to the model of Revelation and describe end-events that inaugurate new births, but there are literary examples of similarly sterile ends. In Nevil Shute’s *On the Beach* (1957), for example, the world goes out with a whimper, slipping away into darkness as humanity succumbs to radiation poisoning in the aftermath of a nuclear war; it does so as well in Stephen King’s “Night Surf”

(1978), with the survivors of a global pandemic frittering away their final hours in boredom and petty cruelties. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* (1988) also operate in this mode. No possibility of a redemptive final transformation appears in these narratives—each charts, in its own way, an inevitable downward spiral toward a future defined by absence and loss.

Kermode decried the shift in usage that allows one to describe such situations as apocalyptic, dismissing it as a “fashionable” evacuation of the word's original revelatory content (“Apocalypse and the Modern” 84). Critics such as Elizabeth Rosen and Zbigniew Lewicki make a similar point when they argue that pessimistic texts of decline represent a new eschatology “different in kind and not degree” from more hopeful millennial narratives (Rosen xv). But the distinction between the optimistic, progressive eschatological narratives discussed in the first half of this survey and the pessimistic accounts discussed above is not so radical as these critical responses suggest. The same basic idea of the future, as a new world distinct from the present that animates the optimistic apocalypticism of Revelation, also underpins narratives of decline and destruction; both treat the future as a new world distinct from the present and both assume that historical change proceeds by way of the annihilation of the present and the inauguration of wholly new futures. The only difference is that in the pessimistic narratives the new world of the future is defined by death or absence rather than rebirth or renewal. Destruction, like revelation, necessarily implies a future that is radically different from the present and past. Unlike related concepts such as change or evolution, the future created by an act of destruction is by definition one that is clearly and absolutely distinguished from all that precedes it, separated from the past by the simple fact that some aspect of that old world no longer exists.

This brief survey includes a range of very different narratives, but a common thread runs through these religious histories, secular teleologies, fictions of rebirth and renewal, and fictions of sterile finality. There are obviously important differences among the Christian's millennial kingdom, a secularly imagined utopia, and a lifeless rock blasted clean by nuclear weapons. But all of these discourses treat historical change as a revolutionary process predicated on leaving the past behind and on a severing of continuities between the present and the future. Some of these narratives describe the end of the world at a cosmic scale, and imagine a truly posthistorical new world of timeless paradise or static oblivion; others operate at a more modest scale, imagining the end of some single element or component of the world. But a generalized understanding of history as a linear series of radically distinct moments or states defined and made coherent by the end events that punctuate and separate them underlies all of these discourses.

Each of these narratives thus provides what Kermode calls consonance: a sense that historical time is governed by a definite structure or organizational principle inside of which events that would otherwise be experienced as chaotic or arbitrary find a place and a justification. This effect is clearly achieved in the optimistic religious and secular histories, which look forward to a desired



future event and thus allow all actions and events in the present to be evaluated and understood through their relationship to that event. But despairing stories such as “A Short Vision” or *On the Beach* that deny the possibility of a utopian tomorrow still offer this reassuring epistemological clarity; prophets of doom are pessimists in that they predict the worst, but this very prediction is an assertion of conceptual mastery, a way of taming and controlling an otherwise confusing world. One need not desire to see the end of the world to use it as an organizing principle.<sup>2</sup> The practice of apocalyptic storytelling offers epistemological insurance: by using stories about the end of the world, or of some aspect of the world, to structure temporal experience, apocalyptic narratives smooth out the complexities of historical change and allow one to know the world and one’s place in that world. It is, to adapt Fredric Jameson’s famous *bon mot*, easier to talk about the end than to engage with the complexities of historical reality. The apocalyptic mode of futurist narrative can thus be defined in terms of both its method and its intention, as a mode of narrative that produces a stabilizing understanding of historical experience by imposing a rigid system of periodization onto the past and future.

**Postapocalyptic Narrative: “To Pull Something Out of the Ashes.”**

Postapocalyptic narratives that depart from or operate outside of the paradigm of apocalypse, in contrast, do so by telling neither secular anti-revelatory nor optimistic anti-catastrophic stories, but rather by rejecting the stabilizing concepts of the end of the world and of dichotomized old and new worlds. Such narratives deny the possibility of any kind of final end, often explicitly interrogating and critiquing the apocalyptic model of history; they seek to narrate futures that are different from the present without employing the reductive idea that such futures are separated from the present by an absolute break or unbridgeable rupture. Postapocalyptic narratives remain tied to apocalyptic discourse in that they push back against this traditional mode of futurist speculation, opening up spaces of ambiguity in apocalypse’s seamless accounts of straightforward transition from present to future. They depart from this model of speculative narrative by using stories about world-shattering calamities not to structure temporal experience but to emphasize the ambiguity of that experience and the need for active historical subjects to take responsibility for directing and shaping indeterminate and open-ended historical processes.

One example of such a narrative is Philip K. Dick’s short story “Autofac” (1955). Dick’s story opens in the aftermath of a world war that has resolved into a prosperous new age, one in which automated factories provide for all of humanity’s material needs. Dissatisfied with this techno-utopian paradise, a group of human characters asks one of the autofacs to turn itself off; they argue that by fully automating production the factories have left humanity with no meaningful occupation. When the factory refuses to hand over the reins of the economy, the human characters decide to trigger a resource war between the various robotic factories. They hope to destroy the autofac system and open the way for a newer new world, a pastoral new world in which they will be

able to work for themselves and enjoy the fruits of honest labor. The venture is a success, but the characters find themselves once again unhappy: hungry, cold, unfamiliar with farming and homesteading, and wishing that the factories were still running. In a final wrinkle, the story ends with the discovery that the factory system is rebuilding itself—presumably it will once again begin providing for the huddled masses. But the ominous tone of this final revelation and the conflicted responses to it by the human characters suggest that this new autofac regime will also prove to be unsatisfactory and impermanent, and the story ends with the suggestion that the historical tensions it records will continue in the un-narrated future towards which the narrative gestures.

“Autofac” describes a series of cataclysmic upheavals that transform the world in fundamental and far-reaching ways, any one of which might have served as the central historical event inspiring an apocalyptic sf narrative. There is the opening global war, in which the modern world of nation-states gives way to a global union organized around advanced technologies of production and distribution; the war within the autofac system, in which that union gives way to a world of neo-primitivist frontiers; and the second resurgence of the machines that closes those frontiers by reestablishing ultra-modern production and distribution networks. But in each case the old world that has been transformed has also survived in some form: the forces of human ambition survive the first “apocalypse”; the forces of technology and of over-civilized dependence on technology survive the second; and the story gives the reader no ground to suppose that the third transformation will be any more absolute. Rather than progressing through a series of world-historical epochs, “Autofac” offers a messier account of history as an endless series of incomplete changes and partial transformations, in which new and old forms of historical reality overlap and coexist in complex ways. The story curves back on itself in a series of modulated repetitions with difference, with the final scene of “Autofac” echoing the opening scene without reproducing it; again the human characters confront a representative of the factory system and try to determine what impact it will have on their lives. The story rejects both the optimistic apocalyptic assertion that the present can be completely transformed and the pessimistic apocalyptic assertion that the end of all things is nigh, but in doing so it does not suggest that the status quo is immutable. Instead, it illustrates the limited but real agency human beings have to create change in a complex and open-ended historical world. Refusing to allow his characters or his readers to indulge in the fantasy of an absolute escape from the present, Dick critiques the apocalyptic idea that history can be meaningfully organized into a series of discrete moments or epochs.

In using the word postapocalyptic to describe such a story, I am departing somewhat from more familiar uses of this relatively recent neologism. The word is generally defined in temporal terms, used to identify a moment, period, or event that takes place after an apocalyptic end. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the adjective in this way, as “of or relating to the time after the revelation of St John ... [or] following an event regarded as an apocalypse, esp. following a nuclear war or other catastrophic event ... [or] set in a period

following such an event.” But placing apocalypse and postapocalypse into this temporal relationship has the unfortunate effect of making it rather difficult to keep the two words meaningfully distinct.<sup>3</sup> Apocalyptic discourses are, as was demonstrated in the previous section, never concerned only with the end-time moment itself, but with the entire history organized and defined by the end, including the future that such events inaugurate. One of the *OED*’s usage examples for apocalypse, taken from the January 1980 issue of the magazine *Bookseller*, advises that the discontinuing of certain popular titles should not be taken as evidence of an impending “publishers’ apocalypse.” After such an event there would be no more publishers; this is what the phrase “publisher’s apocalypse” says, and to refer to the future period in which the publishers have vanished as a “publisher’s postapocalypse” says nothing more. In that it renders the words apocalyptic and postapocalyptic effectively synonymous, this temporal definition makes it difficult to think outside of apocalyptic historical logics; in this usage, the postapocalypse is part of apocalyptic history, which itself assumes a seamless discursive totality.

Nonetheless, many scholars have found this usage productive. Those who use the word postapocalypse in this way often do so to critique the logics of social erasure that underwrite fictions of socially perfected futures. In *Race, Ethnicity and Nuclear War: Representations of Nuclear Weapons and Post-Apocalyptic Worlds* (2011), for example, Paul Williams argues that “the vestigial master narrative of white supremacy ... is being resuscitated” (3) in “post-apocalyptic” narratives set in the wake of nuclear wars, either through celebrations of wars that homogenize national populations by killing off minority groups or through accounts of conflict between “civilized” and “savage” groups in the post-war future. Claire Curtis likewise draws attention in *Postapocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract* (2010) to the ways in which “problematic” social groups such as minorities or outspoken women often “conveniently” disappear in fictional disaster narratives (7). In a similar but more broadly framed critique, in *After the End* (1999) James Berger examines “postapocalyptic” political discourses that justify a given status quo by describing an end that has already happened, thereby positioning the present as the new world of the future; his primary example of such a discourse is the triumphalist account of twentieth-century history told by the American right, for whom the fall of communism marked the advent of the final stage of history, when free-market liberal democracy sweeps away all outmoded political systems. But the narratives that Williams, Curtis, and Berger critique are really better understood as apocalyptic narratives: these are stories about breaks in history that mark transitions between distinct old and new worlds. That these narratives cast complacent looks back at the end rather than expectant looks forward does not change the basically apocalyptic nature of the ends they describe or of the histories they narrate. These scholars show that stories about the end of the world can be used to justify acts of grotesque violence and to maintain unequal distributions of power, but this is an insight into the abuses of apocalyptic narrative; the word “postapocalyptic” does no critical work in these studies that “apocalyptic” cannot already encompass.

As critical terms, postapocalypse and postapocalyptic are more productively understood as marking a conceptual distinction from apocalyptic narrative, rather than a temporal succession. In making this suggestion I have in mind the way in which other productive critical “posts-” have been defined in terms of conceptual distinctions from older discourses or ideas. Brian McHale, for example, argues that the referent beyond which postmodernism points “is not merely a chronological division but an organized system” (4); thus the postmodern “does not come after the present ... but after the modernist movement” (4-5). In other words, the postmodern or post-modernism is a discourse that departs from a specific set of ideas about the nature of the present that scholarship designates as modernist. Cary Wolfe’s definition of posthumanism works in much the same way. Wolfe argues that posthumanism “isn’t posthuman at all—in the sense of being ‘after’ our embodiment has been transcended—but is only posthumanist, in the sense that it opposes the fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy inherited from humanism” (xv; emphasis in original). Again, the suggestion is that posthumanism is not a reality or moment coming after the human moment, but a way of thinking about humanity that Wolfe wishes to distinguish from the older discourses of humanism. The use of postapocalyptic I am arguing for here follows the same procedure, identifying a postapocalyptic idea about history and futurity that departs from and opposes the apocalyptic idea that history proceeds by way of clean breaks and the advent of new worlds.

The postapocalyptic idea would then demonstrate that the movement from the present into the future is never as neat as apocalyptic doctrines suggest; at the core of postapocalyptic narrative is the recognition that there is no entirely new world, and that history can never be transcended or escaped. Theresa Heffernan uses the word in this fashion, explaining in *Post-Apocalyptic Culture* (2008) that she “employs the term post-apocalypse to suggest that we live in a time after the apocalyp[tic].... [F]aith in a radically new world” has ceased to be compelling (6). Josef Pesch, similarly, writes that “postapocalyptic literature tells us that ... the end of the world is never total” (396-99). Where apocalyptic narrative uses accounts of cataclysmic events to illustrate the rupture that divides the future from the present, postapocalyptic narratives take up very similar events in order to demonstrate precisely the opposite, highlighting the various forms of adaptive continuity and survival that link the pre- and post-disaster worlds. Many writers have produced examples of narratives that are postapocalyptic in this sense, but for purposes of illustration I will look briefly at just two exemplary postapocalyptic storytellers: the filmmaker George Romero and the novelist Octavia Butler. Working in very different media and telling very different kinds of stories, Romero and Butler have created two influential bodies of postapocalyptic science fiction.

Romero’s genre-establishing film *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and its sequels are set on the other side of something that looks very much like an apocalyptic end: the sudden appearance on earth of hordes of flesh-eating animated corpses, an unprecedented disaster that overwhelms and destroys the structures of modern civilization. But Romero uses the conceit of setting his

narrative on the other side of this bizarre catastrophe to demonstrate that, drastic and traumatic as the arrival of the zombies has been, it has neither resulted in a break in history nor produced a new world. To the contrary, the future depicted in the *Dead* films is full of survivals of the old reality. The zombies themselves are symbols of survival and immutability, of that which cannot be overcome or left behind, even as they are also symbols of change and death. So too are the elaborately fortified ruins and the bands of survivors wielding incongruous assemblages of high and low technology that feature so prominently in these films. The very defamiliarized novelty of Romero's landscapes—contemporary cities suddenly transformed into monster-haunted wastelands—serves to emphasize the familiarity of the racism, sexism, class struggle, and capitalist exploitation that structure the societies occupying those landscapes. As the *Dead* series progressed, Romero worked consistently to emphasize the basic continuity of his future with our present, primarily by chipping away at the novel identity of the zombies themselves. By the time of *Land of the Dead* (2005), the hordes of monsters that had initially seemed to be agents of eschatological finality are explicitly presented as a crowd of abject subalterns, an avatar of the oppressed peoples who figure so prominently in any clear-eyed account of the historical present. Romero's films are often described as stories of the "zombie apocalypse," but this is a misleading descriptor (although it applies to the work of many other writers and filmmakers inspired by Romero's work). Like the nuclear war in Brin's novel or the various conflicts in Dick's "Autofac," Romero's zombies represent a major, traumatic, one-of-a-kind event that transforms the world, but the survival of old forms and the impermanence of new ones show that this change has not been the complete and definitive transformation of an apocalyptic end.

Octavia Butler's fictions are also centrally concerned with questions of change and continuity. Like Romero's *Dead* films, Butler's *XENOGENESIS* trilogy (*Dawn* [1987], *Adulthood Rights* [1988], *Imago* [1989]) is set on the other side of what appears to be an apocalyptic rupture in history: the first novel opens several hundred years after a devastating nuclear war has rendered Earth uninhabitable. But the founding conceit of the novel is that the apocalyptic implications of this event have been averted by the intervention of a helpful alien race, who have rescued the last survivors and placed them in suspended animation while restoring the planet to lushness and livability. Nuclear annihilation seems to have both happened and not happened, as Butler repeatedly emphasizes the terrible scale of the destruction, but also the vibrant fertility of the restored planet. In one sense, the world in which the human characters wake up in *Dawn* is as alien and new a world as could be imagined: a chance to start again on civilization, bestowed by a quasi-divine power, on the other side of a slate-clearing catastrophe. But Butler complicates this new beginning by treating the survivors themselves as a thread of continuity connecting this future to the old world that nuclear conflagrations have transformed but failed to destroy; they bring all of the tensions that defined the past with them into the future, especially raced and gendered tensions. The nuclear war that opens *XENOGENESIS* is mirrored by a second trope often used

to apocalyptic effect in *sf*. The payment the aliens demand in exchange for saving humanity—that humanity join the alien collective and meld with their saviors at the genetic level—seems to threaten the end of a specifically human species, and the advent of a new, posthuman future. Here again, however, Butler at once emphasizes and dismisses the historical significance of this apocalyptic trope. On the one hand she dramatizes the extremity of the changes humanity will undergo, offering detailed anatomical descriptions of a seemingly endless procession of human/alien hybrids. On the other hand, she normalizes those changes, presenting them as quotidian and even trivial, by centering the *XENOGENESIS* books around a domestic space and presenting her semi-human characters as children and teenagers who struggle with growing tentacles in the same way that the children and teenagers of other novels struggle with facial hair and pimples. Butler's project throughout the *XENOGENESIS* books is, in one sense, to deflate apocalyptic scenarios. Her characters are not new men and women living in a new world, nor are they inhabitants of an old world who have been left behind by the advent of such a new world; they are simply participants in complex and transformative historical events. Nuclear war and posthuman genetic transformation become events like other events: not ruptures in history or apocalyptic turning points, but difficult and traumatic factors to be counted among the many historical factors that contribute to the evolving state of the world in the novels' present.

Some critics interpret these kinds of postapocalyptic denials that the future will be a new world wholly distinct from the present and the past as tantamount to a fatalistic acceptance of the state of things in the present. For example, although neither uses the language of apocalyptic and postapocalyptic narrative developed in this essay, both Jean Baudrillard, in *The Illusion of the End* (1994), and Slavoj Žižek, in *Living in the End Times* (2010), have argued that the apocalyptic idea of the future as the end of the present is necessary for facilitating political action in the present. But by treating the future as a fully historical and therefore dynamic extension of the present, postapocalyptic narratives necessarily imply that any present status quo must be understood as temporary. These narratives thus open onto a wide field of utopian possibilities for political action even as they reject utopian certainties regarding the results of such actions. Both Dick's "Autofac" and Romero's zombie films, for example, are quite optimistic, despite all the grim imagery of pervasive violence. Even as they deny that humanity will ever definitively establish a stable and just society, these narratives also emphasize that it is always possible to change and thus potentially to improve the world—even if only because it is always necessary to do so. Butler's *XENOGENESIS* books similarly work to maintain a space within which meaningful political action might take place in all possible futures; Butler's narrative puts human societies into extreme situations precisely in order to demonstrate that even at such extremes communities continue to be full participants in history. These postapocalyptic narratives reject fantasies of escaping from history, either through the establishment of a timeless and ideal social system or through the nihilistic embrace of oblivion. They are thus akin to what Peter Paik has called

“counterutopian” narratives that are “subversive of both the goal of utopia and the desire to secure the continuance of the established order” (22). Confronting a temporally endless world in which the past is always a factor with which to be reckoned and a resource upon which to be called, postapocalyptic narratives reject both simplistic faith in the inevitability of a better future and simplistic despair over the impossibility of changing the world. Instead they offer a challenge, insisting that in an endless world it is always necessary to work towards a better tomorrow that will never fully arrive.

**The Ends of Books and the End of the World.** When *The Postman* was adapted to film and released on DVD, David Brin wrote a short essay, included in the liner notes, in which he explains that he wrote the novel “as an answer to all those post-apocalyptic books and films that seem to revel in the idea of civilization’s fall” (Liner Notes 1). Brin’s use of “post-apocalyptic” here displays exactly the confusion I have argued is often endemic to the term. He does not name the novels against which he is defining his own book, but, reveling as they do in civilization’s fall as an event that sets humanity free from the constraints of civilized society, these would seem to be novels about endings and new worlds. Brin’s response to this cavalier “cosy catastrophe” treatment of eschatological material is a novel about traumatic and destabilizing events that transform society without allowing humanity to avoid either the difficulties of developing new social and political organization or the legacies of the past. *The Postman*, which demonizes a group committed to radical change and lauds a character who wants to restore American civil society, can be read as a reactionary parable; Rob Latham, for example, dismissed the book as “a quasi-Reaganite apology for survivable nuclear war” (287). But Brin does not deny the horrors of nuclear war; he simply rejects the idea that one can escape from history into the future, insisting that not even the destruction wrought by a nuclear exchange would obviate our responsibility to remain sensitive to history while struggling to build a better tomorrow. In this sense, Brin’s novel departs from the tradition of apocalyptic storytelling and offers a truly postapocalyptic account of the future.

It is true, of course, that *The Postman* ends, as do the other postapocalyptic narratives discussed above; “it is one of the great charms of books,” as Kermode puts it, “that they must end” (*Sense* 23). In the final pages of Brin’s book, the narrative past in which his hero was unsure about the nature of his responsibility has been resolved into the new world of a narrative future in which that responsibility is clear, a resolution that permits readers of *The Postman* to walk away with a sense of closure and completed structure. But Brin uses this closed form to argue against the practice of thinking that history possesses a similarly closed and easily comprehended structure. His novel does not achieve the impossible ideal of perfectly reproducing open-ended historical experience, but it does succeed in telling a story about that experience. Like Dick’s “Autofac,” Romero’s *Dead* films, and Butler’s *XENOGENESIS* novels, *The Postman* does this by circling back on itself in a series of repetitions with difference. The novel opens with Brin’s hero about to enter what was once the

state of Oregon, searching for someone who has kept the lamp of civilization burning, and it closes as he departs for what was once the state of California, still searching for survivals of the old world in the wreckage left by the war. His situation has changed; he entered Oregon a homeless, barefoot refugee and sets off for California as the representative of a new government. But in other ways it has not changed at all, and at the end of the book he faces the same challenge he faced at the beginning, that of trying to improve the lives of the people around him in a world where the old imperfections are never fully overcome and the new possibilities that appear on the horizon are never fully realized.

Apocalyptic narratives bring structure to history by modelling within themselves the closed and comprehensible structure they impute to the world at large. In contrast, postapocalyptic narratives do justice to history by pointing beyond themselves to a world that is more dynamic and complex than their own limited textual frames can adequately contain. These stories invite readers to confront the full complexity of historical existence, rather than setting out to frame and domesticate that complexity. Where apocalyptic speculation about the future is epistemologically stabilizing and reassuring, postapocalyptic narratives are necessarily destabilizing. Instead of an organizational principle by which events in the present and past can be placed into correspondence with anticipated events in the future, they offer only the obligation to find a way to engage with contingent processes of change. At the same time and in the same gesture, however, the postapocalyptic stance opens up an endless series of opportunities to participate in those processes and contribute to determining the always-changing shape of the open-ended future. The difference between apocalyptic and postapocalyptic narratives thus extends beyond issues of optimism and pessimism, of the agent or mechanism of eschatology, or even of the outcome of any specific end-of-the-world scenario. It involves the ways in which different kinds of stories teach their readers to understand history and humanity's relationship to it, the kinds of engagements and commitment they encourage, and the politics they enable.

#### NOTES

1. Many of these texts have been translated into English and collected in the first volume of James Charlesworth's *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. For a more extensive discussion of apocalypse as a genre of ancient religious writings, see D.S. Russell's *Divine Disclosure* and *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic*, Adela Collins's *Crisis and Catharsis*, and John Collins's *The Apocalyptic Imagination*.

2. The idea of sterile apocalypse is taken to extremes in contemporary media discourses, where the word is frequently used in reference to relatively trivial incidences of destruction. When production of a popular hot sauce was interrupted by a federal health inspection in the spring of 2014, at least one online media outlet bewailed the coming "sriracha apocalypse" (Hernandez); "aporkalypse" has been used to describe porcine disasters including wild pigs destroying public parks in Texas, a viral outbreak in factory farms, and the proposed purchase of the Smithfield Ham company by a Chinese agricultural conglomerate (Waller, Shanker, Arnold). When the Atlantic seaboard saw heavier than normal snows in early 2010, *The New York Times*,



*Fox News*, and *Business Insider* were among the prominent voices that described the event as a “snowpocalypse” (Broder, Gainor, Lubin). Like more dramatic apocalyptic narratives, these discourses turn around the idea of an end and a transition into a new world: the aporkalypse as the end of bacon and the beginning of a world without bacon. And like other apocalyptic narratives, these trivial apocalypses also offer epistemological security; there is no great existential payoff to thinking about the closing of a Sriracha factory as an apocalypse, but to do so provides a very definite understanding of an event that might otherwise present various complexities.

3. This ambiguity is evident in a review of critical commentary on Octavia Butler’s *PARABLE* novels assembled by the critic Hee-Jung Joo: “Tom Moylan ... describe[s] Butler’s future vision as a ‘post-apocalypse world,’ ... Angela Warfield refers to it as an ‘indeterminate, apocalyptic society,’ ... and Jim Miller classifies it as expressing a ‘post-apocalyptic hoping’” (283). Here different forms of the two words become effectively interchangeable, and neither says anything more specific about Butler’s novels than that they describe a disaster. To some extent this is because Moylan’s, Warfield’s, and Miller’s uses of the words have been thoroughly abstracted from their original context through the multiple levels of citation that bring them to this page, but the ambiguity also arises from the fact that these critics are all using the same words in different ways to describe what is innovative about Butler’s end-of-the-world story.

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#### ABSTRACT

Through a broad survey of fictional, religious, philosophical, and political end-time narratives, this essay identifies two strategies for telling stories about the end of the world. Apocalyptic narratives use the idea of the end to give structure to the experience of history. By narrating the end as a moment of rupture that creates an absolute division between old and new worlds, they frame history as a series of clearly defined and therefore comprehensible transitions between distinct moments or epochs. Postapocalyptic narratives complicate this neatly organized account by narrating "ends" as complex historical transformations that involve survivals and continuities and thus blur before/after distinctions. Rather than providing a comprehensive and therefore existentially stabilizing overview of history, they draw attention to the indeterminate nature of ongoing processes of historical change. By focusing on the conceptual understanding of historical change that underwrites different kinds of end-time narratives, the essay clarifies the theoretical terminology of apocalypse and postapocalypse, and articulates a clearer understanding of the ways in which different kinds of contemporary stories about the end of the world are used to provide conceptual support for political action in the present.