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THE AMERICAN BRAND OF THE MYTH OF  
APOCALYPSE

*... the prophetic voice, that cried  
To John in Patmos, "Write!"*

*Write! and tell out this bloody tale;  
Record this dire eclipse,  
This Day of Wrath, this Endless Wail,  
This dread Apocalypse!*

—H. W. Longfellow, "To William E. Channing"

In a hypothetical list of the various satellites of the dominant clichés of American culture, the apocalyptic tradition would certainly occupy a prominent place. Indeed, it might not be an exaggeration to claim that the most viable myth bequeathed to the 20th century by previous American culture is the *myth of apocalypse*. Of course, we have to be staunch supporters of the idea of cultural continuity to make such a claim, for obviously the myth, or rather this Judeo-Christian mythic vision, was no American invention. Nonetheless, American culture has been the source and focus of a powerful apocalyptic vision. Beyond the fact that several major indigenous American religious

groups have been based on urgent apocalyptic expectations,<sup>1</sup> almost every aspect of American intellectual life has been permeated by traditional or secular apocalyptic visions. Indeed since the settlement of the Massachusetts Bay Colony by millenarian religious groups apocalypse has always been essential to America's conception of itself. Even as recently as the Gulf War of 1991, apocalyptic expectations preoccupied a sizeable percentage of the American population. So there *is* continuity.

Continuity, however, does not exclude radical transformations, and the historical fact is that, owing to the inevitable fragmentation, secularization and reinterpretations of the myth, by apocalyptic as it appears, say, in the contemporary novel and the popular culture of the last two or three decades, we mean something slightly or totally different from how the Biblical apocalyptists or the Puritan forefathers interpreted the concept.

Before going further, for the purposes of diminishing the potential confusion about myth, at least a tentative initial clarification of the conceptually elusive term seems inevitable. In the present paper, myth will be used in two broad senses and will be treated as two related but separable configurations: time-embalmed traditional myth as sacred narrative (Myth1, or M1) and myth as a politically expedient justifying-projective construct (Myth2, or M2), respectively. M1 thus stands for the archaic, the traditional, and the high-prestige phenomenon; M2 for the epistemologically suspect modern, the recent, and the contemporaneous. Although M1 and M2 can be as far apart as "ultimate truth" and "bad knowledge" can, there is a deep family resemblance between the two. Firstly, and ironically, in a strict epistemological sense both M1 and M2 are suspect configurations. While in M1 we can observe the attempt of the human mind to generate constructs for the purposes of explaining the totality of reality

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<sup>1</sup> Based especially on urgent expectation of the second coming of Christ (the Seventh Day Adventists, the Latter Day Saints, the Jehovah Witnesses, and more recently the "Jesus people," in a variety of fundamentalist manifestations).

and justify its contradictions, and thus M1 may still be an obvious contender for supreme truth in the light of the transcendentalizing impulses or conative strategies of a true believer, the average myth consumer or the classic myth critic, few M1 formations in modern times could stand up to disinterested epistemological probing. Likewise, while a staunch believer may have absolutely no doubt about his or her cherished version of reality, someone with a different set of truth preferences may easily prove that the object of belief is merely a bunch of pleasant or disturbing lies: false propaganda, a set of fallacious assumptions, an erroneous ideology, "bad knowledge." Thus, while one frequently applied definition of a certain brand of persistently recurring borrowed or received material within the M1 category, "sacred tale or history," "traditional narrative," "high-prestige character type," etc. can be regarded as readily synonymous with "ultimate truth," it could as easily turn out to be false. Thus the M1 = ultimate truth and the M2 = bad knowledge formulas possess a mere statistical relevance; in a strict epistemological sense these equations could be either reversed or declared invalid. Indeed, M1 and M2, depending on the time frame in which they are examined, can be one and the same thing. As regards the general conceptual and functional links, both spheres are subsumed in the broad, if often contradictory and overly encyclopedic, concept of *myth* and in the all-inclusive function of *sense-making*. Likewise, they both pertain, in the final analysis, to the literary possibilities of myth, thus both representing legitimate subjects for myth-and-literature studies, with the reservation, of course, that time-honored myths as sacred texts or classical prefigurations (M1) have traditionally occupied a status considerably different from that accorded to ideologically attuned contemporary/contemporaneous social/cultural myths (M2) in terms of cultural prestige and actual or alleged significance. Yet another shared feature of the two distinct orders of myth is that they both serve as fundamentally revealing indicators of the complex relationship between myth, society, and literature. Thus they serve, either directly or indirectly, as sensitive barometers of the milieu of a given culture. As such, they are strongly

reflective and symptomatic of any particular nation's social circumstances, its collective self-image, value-impregnated beliefs, even of a given group's conception of its own destiny.

In view of the above it should come as no surprise that despite the established, historical approval and massive support that Biblical mythology has been accorded for almost two thousand years in Western civilization, dissenting voices regarding the question of the actual origins, meaning, and authority of canonical scriptural texts have not been absent. Within the American frame of reference, Thomas Paine's deistic "frontier Bible," *The Age of Reason* (1793—1795) was the first widely known attack on the divine origins of the major Christian document. Paine claimed, among other things, that the Biblical stories and characters are actually reworkings of Greek myths:

*It is curious to observe how the theory of what is called the Christian church sprung out of the tail of the heathen mythology... The deification of heroes changed into the canonization of saints. The mythologists had gods for everything; the Christian mythologists had saints for everything... The Christian theory is little else than the idolatry of the ancient mythologists, accommodated to the purposes of power and revenue; and it yet remains to reason and philosophy to abolish the amphibious fraud. (271)*

Thus, Paine observes, Christian Revelation never happened. Lloyd Graham's *Deceptions and Myths of the Bible* (1979) could be cited as a more recent study along similar lines. "There is nothing 'holy' about the Bible," Graham states bluntly and provocatively at the beginning of his book, "nor is it 'the word of God.'"

*It was not written by God-inspired saints, but by power-seeking priests... By this intellectual tyranny they sought to gain control, and they achieved it. By 400 B.C. they were the masters of ancient Israel. For so great a project they needed a theme, a framework, and this they found in the Creation lore of more knowledgeable races. This they commandeered and*

*perverted—the natural to the supernatural, and truth to error. The Bible is, we assert, but priest-perverted cosmology. The process began with the very first chapter—the world’s creation. This first was not the original first; it is priestly cosmology substituted centuries later and for a priestly purpose... Literally, the priestly account of Creation is but kindergarten cosmology, yet we have accepted it for two thousand years... All the metaphysical and cosmological knowledge Western man has, came to him from the East... The Bible is not “the word of God,” but stolen from pagan sources. Its Eden, Adam and Eve were taken from the Babylonian account; its Flood or Deluge is but an epitome of some four hundred flood accounts; its Ark and Ararat have their equivalents in a score of Deluge myths; even the names of Noah’s sons are copies, so also Isaac’s sacrifice, Solomon’s judgment, and Samson’s pillar act; its Moses is fashioned after the Syrian Mises; its laws after Hammurabi’s code. Its Messiah is derived from the Egyptian Mahdi, Savior, certain verses are verbatim copies of Egyptian scriptures. Between Jesus and the Egyptian Horus, Gerald Massey found 137 similarities, and those between Christ and Krishna run into the hundreds. How then can the Bible be a revelation to the Jews?” (1—5)*

Subsequently our author surveys the whole Bible book by book, often verse by verse, debunking most of its truth, symbology, coventionally accepted interpretations, as well as alleged sources and origins. At the beginning of the two separate chapters devoted to the discussion of the Revelation of St. John, Graham, not surprisingly, makes these two assertions: it is not a revelation, and it should not be taken too seriously. In the concluding part of the survey—verse by verse comments and corrections—he declares, “we see then that this ‘Revelation’ is no revelation at all, but ancient, esoteric Cosmology. As such, its ominous threats and glorious promises have no meaning for the individual either here or hereafter” (363, 407).

These are serious challenges, and once accepted, the authority of the quintessential authoritative text of the Middle Ages and Bible-in-literature studies in general would have to be radically revised, if not suspended. I am not prepared to join this potentially awesome debate and will leave it to the practitioners of the comparative and anthropological (and perhaps also political) study of religions and mythologies to decide the matter. In my subsequent discussion I will use the consensus view of Biblical mythology as my working assumption and will primarily focus on whether the myth of apocalypse should be understood as M1 or M2, and whether it can be seen as both. I believe that the myth of apocalypse is especially suited to such an inquiry.

*Apocalypse* means 'revelation' and despite the word's recent misuse, it is not a synonym for 'disaster,' 'upheaval,' 'chaos,' or 'doom.' 'Apocalyptic' is the form of *recorded* revelation in Judaism from around 200 B.C. to A.D. 200. Apocalyptic visions grew out of actual feelings of dissatisfaction, despair and a sense of political powerlessness of the Hebrew people as a result of the growth of the great empires of Persia, Greece, and Rome, and the persecution of the early Christians (Zamora, "Apocalypse" 88). These visions were also motivated by the recognized contradiction between earlier prophetic visions of Judaic history (which had predicted the establishment of a community based on a special relationship with Yahweh) and inspired by a belief that a channel of communication between the divine and the human is now open, direct revelation of the affairs of God is possible, through dream, vision or divine intermediary—usually a prophet.

It is essential to understand that at the time of its conception the myth of apocalypse was called upon to serve as M2 in satisfying a keenly felt group need of a persecuted minority: exhortation and encouragement to the suffering through the justification of tribulations at an unpromising present time through somehow projecting irresistible hope in a radically changed, better, timeless future. At the time of its genesis the myth was a timeserving device which was sufficiently transcendentalized by fixing its own truth to an

unquestioned Christian authority. And since the progression of events toward a given end, in the logic of the myth, is predetermined *but men's actions are not*, apocalypse provides a blueprint for action through a pattern of reward or vengeance: a glorious consummation of God's plan for those who have persisted in the faith and maintained their eschatological conviction, whereas the end of time will be catastrophic for the wicked, those who fail to act for the achievement of the kingdom of God. Thus people are given a choice and a program for action: apocalypse urges loyalty, tenacity, struggle, will, even martyrdom for the cause of God's kingdom. The pragmatic drift (which here takes the form of both the *therapeutic* and the *didactic* — almost to the point of the *disciplinary*; not to forget about the *politically expedient*)—as well as the conative drive (wish fulfilment + volition) inherent in this mythmaking transaction is more than obvious. And so is the operation of two major functional elements (*justification + projection*), with all of these identified as staple components of a ubiquitous and predictable mythmaking process. The mythic formula was both present-oriented and future-tending in that it offered justification for present suffering (by offering promise at an unpromising present time) through delayed gratification.

Thus in the myth of apocalypse a curious overlap between M1 and M2 can be detected. Indeed, as I said earlier, the two can be one and the same thing. All depends on the point of time we choose to consider and analyse them. If we look at the time-honored Biblical texts today, we are dealing with M1; if we consider their functional, epistemological, and functional aspects at the time of their genesis, we have M2. We are also witnessing here two crucial modes of how the human mind is capable of shielding itself from the unknown and from the intrusion of the apparently irrational: through claiming, on the one hand, that the future, which is usually unknown, is known and, on the other hand, by forcing the volatile —i.e., man's private wishes, deeds, and decisions — into the more easily manageable formula of reward and punishment. The fact remains that at the time of their inception what came to be known as testamental apocalyptic texts and visions clearly satisfied the

*immediate* needs and ideology of a persecuted people in order to maintain faith during a period of harsh political, social, and religious sanctions. Although the myth incorporates notions which appear to be fuzzy and confused, the soothing formula as a self-authenticating and projective construct offering delayed gratification proved and has proved vital and enduring throughout more than two millenia of history to various groups and communities during periods of oppression, affliction, and persecution. The myth and its many reinterpreted mutations have withstood the erosions of time, and were capable of influencing a wide spectrum of authors, cultures, and schools of thought as diverse as Milton, the socio-political views of the English Romantic poets, the Marxist ideology of a happy future, or fascist totalitarianism complete with a Third Reich ideology (via Joachim of Fiore) and a Final Solution (Zamora, "Apocalypse" 91, Kermode 101, Dowling 118). To cite obvious American examples, the destining ideology of New England Puritanism may serve as a case in point. Or consider the ease with which the African American community appropriated the myth of apocalypse to be used as a psychological safety valve during and since slavery times.

Testamental apocalypse emphasizes future events and exhorts men to endure their *present* suffering with the assurance of a blessed *future* life. Since the given historical situation of the Hebrew people made the special community with Yahweh less and less realizable, only a radical change or break in history would be enough to rectify present conditions. The present age of suffering and persecution will have to end abruptly and through transcendental miracle: a prospective providential rescue. Hence the mythic innovation of the apocalyptists to see the future as *breaking into the present*, through a *dramatic intrusion of the divine* (the direct intervention of God), instead of gradually arising from it. Thus, although this radical reinterpretation of time, history, and the future developed from the Judaic prophetic tradition, it is useful to regard the apocalyptist's conception of the



unique linkage between present and future as being also different from (or a distinct manifestation of) the prophets' vision of history.<sup>2</sup>

Biblical apocalyptic, then, is basically a type of preview of the end of an age and of the establishment of a new one. It most often predicts the ultimate destiny of the world by suggesting a terrible final end. Apocalyptic imagery connotes the "end of the world" or "Judgment Day" as specific events with which history is to terminate<sup>3</sup> because the world itself will disappear into its two unending constituents, a heaven and a hell, into one of which man automatically goes. Since the Renaissance, however, the concept of this cosmic and radical turning-point has been largely shorn of its biblical overtones and the subsequent use of the word has tended to refer to secular and humanistic phenomena, whether social, political or psychic transformation.

Within the American frame of reference, earlier national optimism proceeded from a millennial vision, in which the idea of the end of the world is complemented by that of its possible renewal. The reason for the intrinsic optimism of the millennial vision is evident in the original Jewish sources. Apocalypse, as described, for instance, in the fourteenth chapter of the book of Zechariah, is more reconstruction than destruction, more of a beginning of a new than an ending of the old, more of a vision of hope than of dissolution. Thus the original understanding of apocalypse can be defined simply as a revelation of spiritual realities in the future.

This is clearly reflected in the early American manifestations. In New England Puritan literature Increase Mather's "New Jerusalem" (1687) suggests that New England was to be the site of the fulfilment of

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<sup>2</sup> Canonical and noncanonical apocalyptic texts exist in abundance in both Hebrew and Christian writings. The foremost examples of testamentary Hebrew apocalypses are Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah, whereas the Gospel of St. Mark and the second Epistle of St. Peter contain apocalyptic passages and, above all, the revelation of St. John of Patmos exemplifies Christian testamentary apocalypse.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the fourteenth chapter of the book of Zechariah, the Revelation of St. John, or the medieval Latin hymn *Dies Irae*.

God's promise to his chosen people, and in 1727 Samuel Sewall proposed, in his *Phaenomena quaedam apocalyptica...*, America as the site of the triumphant culmination of world history. To illustrate the nature and flavor of traditional apocalyptic discourse, I am going to quote a short passage, which will perhaps demonstrate some of the basic components and the Bible-inspired verbal ritualization of the traditional millennial conception. The author is David Austin (1760—1831), one of the most important successors in the New England millennial convention to Jonathan Edwards (1703—1758), whose disciple he actually was. The time is the end of the 18th century, the period of Revolutionary trial then underway. The title of the book is *The Downfall of Mystical Babylon; or Key to the Providence of God, in the Political Operations of 1793—94*.<sup>4</sup>

*Behold, then, this hero of America, wielding the standard of civil and religious liberty over these United States!—Follow him, in his strides, across the Atlantic!— See him, with his spear already in the heart of the beast!—See tyranny, civil and ecclesiastical, bleeding at every pore! See the votaries of the tyrants; of the beasts; of the false prophets, and serpents of the earth, ranged in battle array, to withstand the progress and dominion of him, who has commission to break down the usurpation of tyranny—to let the prisoner out of the prison-house; and to set the vassal in bondage free from his chains—to level the mountains—to raise the valleys, and to prepare an highway for the Lord! (34)*

For the sake of observing the meeting-points of the symbolic imagery of apocalyptic discourse used for quite different purposes, it may be instructive to compare Austin's text, applied with a few historical variations to the 18th-century American scene, with a much more recent, and secularized, passage from a 1970s source on the radical temper:

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<sup>4</sup> Elizabethtown, 1794.

*Thunder and lightning ... overturning days ... teetering and tumbling affairs ... blood will have blood ... doomes-day drawing nigh ... the rule of the just ... a true reformation ... a flood tide of change ... audacious men and dark prophecies ... words are actions ... the minds of men ... purge the nation ... overthrow the rotten structures ... the holy destruction of the evil of oppression and injustice ... the golden age is at hand ... the fire and the sword. (Laski 285—86)*

Another comparison, this time with scenes of chaotic destruction and unredeemed suffering as depicted in a number of 20th-century war novels, like the one Heller's Yossarian experiences in the dark ruined city of Rome, or the careless annihilation of the planet, the freezing of the earth in Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*, or the scene depicting the burnt-out landscape of Dresden after the fire-storm in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the final scene of Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*, or the frenetic search of Mrs. Oedipa Mass in *The Crying of Lot 49* for the revelation of the meaning of life (perhaps the Pentecostal word) in a nightmarish postmodern terrain of high technology and obscure conspiracies may easily convince us that we are dealing with different interpretations of the traditional pattern.

On the basis of Austin's text four typical traits of the American apocalyptic can be immediately established: the concept of a messianic mission for a chosen group of people as a part of the redemptive scheme of history; a sense of optimism occasioned by the revealed prospect of a bright future for those chosen by God; a sense of the apocalyptic "joy" aboard the American ship of state (Bercovitch 105); and again, in mixing history and prophecy, a reading of contemporary events as the fulfillment of the historical plan revealed in the last book of the New Testament. All these traits seem to be eminently present and operative in earlier American conceptualization and expressiveness, and they soon became enduring cultural clichés of the American social consciousness.

Yet another feature of apocalyptic millennialism, not readily discernible from either of the quoted texts, is an acceptance of

tribulations as a necessary prelude to the victory promised by God to his chosen. Thus in classic apocalyptic logic destruction is clearly seen as a prelude to reconstruction: earthly sufferings are seen as a small price to pay for eternal happiness. This last characteristic was still very much operative in the last century in that Protestant adherents of millennialism were ready to interpret even the Civil War as a bloody but ennobling purgation, an inevitable “scourging” dictated by the apocalyptic timetable. Viewed by a nation of Bible-readers as a moral conflict, the Armageddon of the Civil War, “a biblical crusade in blue and grey” (Dewey 16), seemed to fit exactly into a pattern long established. Indeed it seemed to confirm the validity of that pattern: seeing the evil of the times as a necessary prerequisite of the birth throes of the new order. In the Civil War years the apocalyptic trumpet sounded its clearest note in “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” by Julia Ward Howe (1819—1910), first published in February, 1862. Deploying imagery that shows a close correlation with the symbols and general spirit of Revelation, the “Battle Hymn’s” ultimate message is future-oriented, millennial, therefore intrinsically optimistic.

Like all complex and popular myths, traditional apocalypse has been subject to the inevitable process of fragmentation into a loosely interrelated cluster of constituent elements: a satellite of images, symbolic patterns, iconic clichés, visions of violence, thematic segments, hermetic symbols, numerological references, etc. Since both religious and secular, and often even looser, uses have added new analogous components in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Romantic era, and in the 20th century, often it is not easy to find a synchronic family resemblance among these often mutually exclusive, apocalyptic components such as “the end of things,” “earthly beatitude,” “loss of energy,” “social renovation,” “end of history,” “earthly paradise,” “end of the present age,” “the Third Reich,” “one world government,” “heat death,” “the seven seals,” “world revolution,” “concern with final things,” “the ideal king,” “Judgment Day,” “great ruler myth,” “the four horsemen,” “last emperor myth,” “an optimistic

modern apocalyptic,”<sup>5</sup> “secular schematas of progressive history,”<sup>6</sup> “the angelic pope,” “individual perfection” (as an apocalyptic event), etc.

The apparent heterogeneity of the above cluster may result in either weakening the frame of referentiality in literary, and any other, discourse or, from the other end, it may prompt excessive analogous interpretations where any decay, accident, decline, or end (e.g. the end of a love affair) is apocalyptic, with the concomitant hope that a great deal has been added by placing the quotidian in an ostensibly larger frame of reference. As regards the interpretation of apocalyptic archetypes, allusions or symbolic patterns as they occur in the testamental texts, the fact that apocalyptic visions go well beyond simple description, that they are couched in language that is often cryptic and obscure, they have offered rich philosophical and poetic content for subsequent interpretations and prefigurative uses. Yet the ramifications of D. Dowling’s observation might be worth considering:

*Clearly, when writers and readers adopt a system of imagery from another time and place, they may be doing so for a variety of motives, not all admirable. There is also room for much confusion when the imagery of apocalyptic is adopted into a secular context and the already confused notions of an interim period of strife (the thousand year reign of the Devil), Judgment Day and the new Jerusalem, struggle to find some secular counterpart. (119)*

Moreover, I find that today’s apocalypses may appeal in their own right, without mythological shoring up, for the simple reason that the necessity to confront the “last things” possesses irresistible existential overtones that concern fundamental questions of the human predicament. Nevertheless, the connotative cultural residue of these questions is both enormous and awesome and there is no dismissing the heritage of Biblical mythology in any consideration of the literary

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<sup>5</sup> Of which, according to Martin Buber, the chief example is Marx’s theory of history.

<sup>6</sup> from Vico and Comte via Prudhon to Hegel and Marx

uses of the various apocalyptic schemata. However, in the post-nuclear resurgence of “last things” images, which are obvious analogues of religious configurations, actual literary uses show that these images tend to be disconnected from religious doctrine or, on the more popular level, their authority is likely to come from the mythology of science fiction. We are obviously dealing here with the literary exploitation of a common pool of inflated symbology where the rhetoric of the religious believer and the secular millenarian may easily converge.

The 20th-century shift in emphasis brought about several important changes: the modern sense of apocalypse has been secularized to a large extent, and millennial vision has been supplanted by the *annihilist* or *cataclysmic*. What follows from these is the salient fact that by modern times the apocalyptic view conceives of cataclysm as a violent upheaval which brings no profound changes beyond being an ultimate threat to survival, thus the element of traditional optimism is curiously missing. In an age of fluid valorizations there is no such thing as the final triumph of the righteous, there is no glorious consummation. Confident expectation tends to be suppressed by mere visions of violence with no anticipation of order beyond chaos accelerated by entropic forces. In other words, the current emphasis on the annihilist dimension of apocalypse does not synthesize the apocalyptic *vision* of the end with the apocalyptic *interpretation* of the end. As L. P. Zamora has observed,

*[D]uring much of this century ... America's sense of its apocalyptic historical destiny has become almost universally pessimistic in outlook. In our time millennial optimism seems to have been transformed into a foreboding suspicion of the imminence of great cosmic disaster in which the world may be annihilated, with no possibility of anything beyond cataclysm.*

(1)

A large segment of contemporary culture, where the current emphasis on the cataclysmic dimension of apocalypse, the so-called

doomsday mentality, is especially conspicuous, is popular culture. As A. M. Greeley has recently observed, “the SF imagination no longer constructs scientific utopias but either partial or total apocalypses in which the bad we know is wiped out and replaced by something every bit as bad” (Greeley 282). Recent end-oriented science fiction frequently envisions the disappearance of the human race; numerous television programs and disaster movies suggest a veritable “boom in doom”; there has been a recent rash in the mass media of subjects like the ends of cities, empires, other worlds and galaxies; similarly characteristic thematic stereotypes are, for instance, the depredations of an unbridled technology, computers turning into doomsday machines, nuclear mistakes, manmade or extraterrestrially induced holocausts, the blind working of astronomical fate, comet collision, exploding stars, species extermination, total pogroms, mankind terrorized by animals—apes, rats, wasps, ants—enlarged to monsters by atomic radiation, the spectacular destruction of some colossal human creation, etc. “Reading widely in the cataclysmic tradition is a rather numbing experience,” J. Dewey testifies, “like watching a succession of brakeless automobiles slowly heading up a long incline” (Dewey 13).

The relevance of the current preoccupation with the annihilistic vision in popular culture is clearly shown by the revealing titles of some novels published since 1970: *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970), *The Lost Continent* (1970), *The Day After Judgment* (1971), *Satan is Alive and Well on Planet Earth* (1972), *The Terminal Generation* (1976), *Nuclear Nightmares* (1979), etc. I might add that the first of these novels—read also by Ronald Reagan<sup>7</sup>—has sold over 10 million copies since 1970 and the other books have been reprinted more than ten times. The large number of popular fictions of nuclear disaster, an increasing number of recent disaster films, some of them familiar to

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<sup>7</sup> The political thinking of the fortieth president of the U.S. seems to have been imbued with apocalyptic religious ideas and he made repeated statements about the imminence of an Armageddon. Consider also the Reagan administration’s “end-times” mentality. Cf. Jones 59—70.

Hungarian movie-going audiences, like *The Towering Inferno* (1974), *Earthquake* (1975) or several *Airport* films, follow similar apocalyptic scenarios of endtimes.

Recently such manifestations of the stereotyping routinization of formulaic art have received more and more attention from students of American culture, and for the right reasons. The assumption is probably correct that popular culture is a sensitive barometer of the existing beliefs and myth-structure; the relation between the effects of “mere entertainment” of this sort and socio-political behavior might be less tenuous than had been previously thought.

There is one more crucial aspect of apocalyptic myth I will briefly consider here: *time*. To the traditional apocalypticist, time itself becomes a vehicle of divine purpose. After the final cosmic struggle between Satan’s forces and God’s, time will cease, heaven and earth will become one for eternity, and the faithful will enter the City of God. Thus the apocalyptic conception of time, which is the direct consequence of accepting divine providence as a theory of historical causation, is predicated upon an *anti-historical structuring of history*. Between two fixed points, from Creation to Apocalypse, time moves toward a predetermined and transcendent end in a way that is irreversible and linear, deterministic and teleological. In classic apocalyptic texts a sequence of events is described, each event belonging to a definite pattern of historical relationships that will not repeat itself in the cyclical manner of Oriental myth. Rooted in the Hebraic tradition of constructing history as a continuum from past through present to future, the apocalyptic conception of this linear process makes the present always futuretending. This, by the way, is a common feature of all the traditional destining myths. As W. A. Clebsch has aptly remarked, “Our totems have told us about a past presence of divine reality, whose irruptions have pointed to a future time and to an unoccupied space. Instead of our having a tradition *push* identity upon us, our destiny has *pulled us* into it” (87). The corollary of this conception is that historical movement between two fixed points is understood to be evolutionary rather than cyclical; in the linear



progression of time each event moves toward its goal which lies at the end of history. Thus the Hebraic interpretation of time also suggests that *the end of the world can only occur once*.

According to the logic of apocalyptic thinking, however, history without God would be meaningless because there would be no script. "The optimism of the apocalyptic tradition cannot be separated from the vision of God as controlling history" (Bergoffen 29). Thus the critical difference between the historical orientations of the traditional and current apocalyptic visions is that the contemporary visions are basically *nonteleological*. This new emphasis on the lack of any progressive design appears consistent with the pessimistic annihilations that R. Sukenick suggested in "The Death of the Novel," maintaining that "...time doesn't exist ... God was the omniscient author, but he died; ... Time is reduced to presence, the content of a series of discontinuous moments. Time is no longer purposive, and so there is no destiny, only chance." Thus it should come as no surprise that the very act of writing in accordance with the logic of Sukenick's extreme stance could be reduced to one of the "ways of maintaining a considered boredom in the face of the abyss" (41).

The idea of Apocalypse without God creates a totally different set of priorities because the Biblical vision of things to come is a metaphoric itinerary for God's inevitable victory over evil and the removal of God from his own scheme virtually collapses the myth. The nature of the dilemma is thus clear: if there is no script, and if time is not purposive, man is left only with the visions of violence (as detailed, for instance, in the Revelation of St. John) and an inscrutable, impersonal retributive power. Moreover, if the future breaks into the present unaccountably, if history itself is degenerative and malign, if human freedom *within* history is denied, if there is no rationale for viewing calamities as merely crises with a potential for correction and renewal (which actually means the disruption of the creative dualism of the inherited Biblical model: the undoing of the dialectic tension between chaos *and* order, tribulation *and* triumph, ultimately between cataclysm *and* millennium), man is incapable of understanding the

spiritual purpose of history. Neither is he able to communicate it; history becomes simply time the destroyer.

Of course, the Revelation should be read and understood as an allegory, and the early church itself condemned belief in a literal millennium as a superstitious aberration. The cryptic and obscure language of the traditional texts has encouraged fertile interpretations ever since the early Middle Ages, with Joachim of Fiore as the first important apocalyptic visionary, influencing, among other things (movements and ideologies) recent American authors like Walker Percy. That our own age has focused primarily upon the cataclysmic aspect of the myth and that God, the writer of the script, has himself become one of the "Dead Fathers" is symptomatic.

Under these circumstances, what is the contemporary writer to do? The options are limited: dull-eyed apathy, black humor, resorting to strategies of slowing down or arresting destiny's pull, creating for the modern anti-hero a kind of quasi-freedom *from* history through noninvolvement, turning inward, or just "waiting it out" as, for instance, Ellison's nameless hero does in *Invisible Man*.

In pre-twentieth-century American literature there were only occasional glances toward the negative, annihilist side of the apocalyptic myth. Much of New England Puritan literature displayed the threat of the Day of Judgment and the Calvinistic doctrine of damnation and reprieve. Puritan "Doomsday verses," with vivid images of hell fire and descriptions of impending cosmic disasters and of the future new world, such as Michael Wigglesworth's popular "The Day of Doom" (1662), were expected to serve contending aims: "to instruct, to delight and to terrify" (Ruland 21), but primarily to reconcile the frightening (Wigglesworth: "*till God began to power/ Destruction the world upon/ in a tempestuous shower... And every one that hath misdone,/ the Judge impartially/ Condemneth to eternal woe,/ and endless misery*) and the comforting ("*For God above in arms of love/ doth dearly them embrace,/ And fills their sprites with such delights,/ and pleasures in His grace*";) aspects inherent in the pragmatic needs of Puritan utility and the reassuring message that a final order prevailed

in all things. Thus, in spite of the “sulpherousness” and the equally terrifying cold logic of God’s justified wrath in much of New England Puritan writing, the characteristic vision was millennial in the sense that the Biblical myth comprehends both cataclysm *and* millennium: the regenerate would ultimately reign with Christ eternally:

*For there the saints are perfect saints,  
and holy ones indeed,  
From all the sin that dwelt within  
their mortal bodies freed:  
Made kings and priests to God through Christ’s  
dear love’s transcendancy,  
There to remain, and there to reign  
with Him eternally.*

Evangelically motivated abolitionist writing before and during the Civil War deployed frightening apocalyptic symbology to serve as warning. Otherwise, in the age of both the first person singular and empire building, when optimistic visions of an ecstatic future represented the dominant tenor of the times, Poe, whom Douglas Robinson considers as the “central American apocalypticist” (281), was certainly an exception. Predictably, and for various well-known reasons, the budding culture’s first *homo aestheticus* was reluctant to embrace millennial optimism and the celebration of a brave new world. His preoccupation with cosmological catastrophes and the cataclysmic end of the world peaked in the prose poem “Eureka,” where interest in the annihilation of the world as a scientific reality is conspicuous.<sup>8</sup>

Two of the prominent 19th-century nay-sayers, Hawthorne and Melville, both questioned the likelihood of a glorious consummation. Still, although Hawthorne’s Puritan sense of the moral burden of

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<sup>8</sup> Poe’s preoccupation with the cataclysmic option is also apparent in “Al Aaraaf,” “The Masque of the Red Death,” the metaphysical prose dialogues “The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion,” “The Colloquy of Monos and Una,” and “The Power of Words.”

history is a haunting presence, his equally ever-present ambivalence did let a few rays of sunshine appear, as, for example, in Hester's urgent appeal to Dimmesdale („Begin all anew!...The Future is yet full of trial and success. There is happiness to be enjoyed!" /Hawthorne 215/). Conversely, the mood of a strangely foredoomed demise hangs over and leads to the destruction of the *Pequod*, whose captain, named after the seventh king of Israel, finds his Armageddon in the supreme limitations of the self. Whether or not Ishmael's emergence from the vortex is an indication of rebirth is rather ambiguous. The tragic consequences of the inscrutable Bartleby's dark secret and entropic world, or of Don Benito's newly gained knowledge of the abyss are hardly outweighed by the ambivalent optimism, in any, of *Billy Budd*. Melville (and the Mark Twain of *A Connecticut Yankee*), through his emphatic stress on the dark side of the myth anticipates much of the literature of our century, where the first major representative of the apocalyptic vision in fiction is Faulkner.

Although the processes of Faulkner's universe are mostly secular, the pervasive sense of fateful doom does possess the flavor of transcendental script and predetermined destiny.<sup>9</sup> His obsessive exploration of the reasons and consequences of the doom and destiny of the South, the fictional logic of his total output pointing to the ultimate message that the doom, disintegration and decline of the prototype of his literary kingdom were not only inevitable but also foreordained, his epic emphasis on the fatal pressure of the past sins upon the sons, and other related elements make Faulkner's novels appear among the most apocalyptic in modern literature. Because of the terrible moral heritage of slavery, human presumptuousness, pride and pervasive corruption, dynasties are crushed by the relentless passage of time and the impersonal forces of history. Down go the Sutpens, the Griersons, the Compsons, the Sartoris clan, one by one. In

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<sup>9</sup> It is primarily due to the apparent lack of apocalypse *as a religious structure* that critics like Zbigbiew Lewicki are reluctant to treat Faulkner's works as apocalyptic fiction.

the story of Sutpen, who appears in the county in the shape of “man-horse-demon,” the whole pattern, like in the Revelation, of creation, growth, decay, and final catastrophe is projected onto history. Devices of narration, clearly borrowed from testamental sources, like Miss Rosa telling the Sutpen story from beyond the end of history, or the fatal course of blind personal destinies are just a few instances of Faulkner’s apocalyptic sensibility. Quentin Compson, “bitter prophet and inflexible corruptless judge,” stops destiny’s pull by arresting it forever at a point through suicide, thus gaining freedom *from* history that is dictated by a program to which he has no access. Faulkner’s doomed characters move in the closed world of a predestined temporal course where the dimension of the future has been cut off, which is analogous with the way how the traditional apocalypticist recounted the future: as if it were past. Apart from tentative hints that the South might one day emerge as the redeemer of the country, whatever gleam of American millennialism that might remain is largely extinguished. This is a feature also shared by writers like Nathanael West (*The Day of the Locust*, 1939) and, with different emphases, by the explicitly apocalyptic prose of writers as diverse as Steinbeck, Richard Wright or Ellison. The title of one of Baldwin’s essay collections, *The Fire Next Time* (1963), could serve as an ironic motto of the heavy apocalyptic batteries of Pynchon, Vonnegut or Heller.

It would be difficult to provide a reliable diagnosis of the current mood in the increasingly multicultural American society. It might not be a safe bet to claim that the country is in an apocalyptic mood. On the evidence of the prose literature of the past three decades there seems to be an agreement that the American secular mood is gloomy and that the recent prevalence of the cataclysmic construction of apocalypse is not an accidental phenomenon. At the same time, however, we must be aware of the fact that in particular works of recent fiction the very image of apocalypse has been put to uses other than just a projection of frightening dead-ends or apathetic nihilism. Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* or Heller’s *Catch-22* could serve as good cases in point. One of the imaginative fictions of history and the apocalyptic myth, the

former author also recognizes the problems of fiction's potential for humanism. When wedded to the affirmative interests of humanism, apocalyptic fiction can serve as effective alerting-cautionary medium as it lays the secular menace of nuclear destruction, the impersonal entropic chaos, or ecological disaster before us. Just as St. John of Patmos catalogues the disasters of the present age to suggest the inevitability of divine intervention in history, or like the prologue of *Piers Plowman*, which presents an apocalyptic setting of social decay that requires rebirth, the apparent pessimism about America's destiny in recent fiction may be indicative, in accordance with the logic of traditional apocalyptic heritage, of a veiled exhortation to possible renewal. Or, as R. W. B. Lewis summed it up three decades ago: "These apocalyptic visions indeed are offered as weapons for averting the catastrophe" (235).

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