The apocalypse and after

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W. Warren Wagar

Terminal Visions: The Literature of Last Things

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We have had the end of the world with us ever since the world began, or nearly. As we are all solipsists, and all die, the world dies with us. Of course, we suspect that our relicts are going to live on, though we have no proof of it, and there is a possibility, again unprovable, that the sun will heartlessly rise the morning after we have become disposable morphology. Perhaps it is rage at the prospect of our ends that makes us want to extrapolate them on to the swirl of phenomena outside.

When I was a small Catholic boy living in the Middle Ages, the end of the world was likely to come any time: I had sinned so much that the Day of Judgment could not be much longer delayed. But there were periodic doomsday threats for Protestants too, as in 1927, the year of fancy garters and the eclipse of the sun, when the Sunday papers had double-page apocalyptical scare stories. I remember a sudden puff of smoke bursting from a back alley and my running like mad: this was it. At school, with the nuns, the end of the world was in Christ's promise to the disciples – he would be with them till then though not apparently after – and yet the finish of things was contradicted by the "world without end" of the Paternoster. That though, I was told, was another world, post-terrestrial and not easy to envisage. Without benefit of Biblical prophecy, much popular culture in my youth dealt with the end. The *Boy's Magazine* had a serial about it that excited me so much that my father burned it. The BBC, whose expressionistic drama was so brilliant in the 1930s – all without recorded sound-effects and with only wind-up gramophones – put on a play about the consummation of all things, with an angelic bass singing *Sic transit gloria*. Terminal visions are not a speciality of the nuclear age. There seemed to be far more of the end of the world around before we learned how to bring it on ourselves.

The difficulty of writing sub-literature about the end of the world (for it is almost entirely that: in *Ulysses* the End of the World is a kilted octopus that sings the Keel Row) lies in the point of view. There has to be somebody to witness it. Having refugees looking down on it from a space-ship is cheating, and so might be thought the bland narrative of Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* if that narrative were not so impersonal, like some dim-witted archangel's chronicle. There is a 717-page novel by Allan W. Eckert called *The Hab Theory* ("You'd better pray it's only fiction", says the blurb) in which the weight of the polar ice-caps causes the earth to capsize. This has happened before. states the President of the United States in his address to the world, and it is the duty of mankind to preserve all knowledge so that civilization can be reinitiated by the possible handful of survivors. " 'I therefore call on all governments and all people – ' And *then* all the power went off . . . *all over the world*." So the book ends, and clearly Allan W. Eckert is still there with a typewriter. It won't do.

There never was a time when it would do. Not even Charles Dickens, who worked in the white light of theocentric fiction, would have sent the whole world up in comic spontaneous combustion and ended with a resounding moral paragraph. Mary Shelley, the mother of contemporary science fiction, established the principle of the solitary survivor in her little-read eschatographical novel *The Last Man*. This is a story of a monstrous plague killing everybody off except a doomed personage wandering companionless like Percy Bysshe's moon. There is thus an observer, though he is not going to observe much longer. (Incidentally, I must deplore in my old-fashioned way the custom, to which the author of *Terminal Visions* adheres, of presenting women writers with neither first name nor honorific. Mary Shelley becomes Shelley, as Doris becomes Lessing. There is only one Shelley, and he was a poet; there was only one Lessing, and he was a German.) H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* looks at the imminent extinction of the sun, but it is only an apocalyptic vision, St John the Divine on a bicycle. The point is, if I read W. Warren Wagar's book right, that most of our literary world's ends are clearings away of old rubbish to make way for fresh starts. The world's great age begins anew, as Shelley wrote. St John the Divine's vision is of the end of pagan Greco-Roman civilization. The end of the world was for that; world without end was for the new faith.

The virtue of Professor Wagar's book is that he has read so much rubbish, old and new. He is an academic historian and does not have to worry about literary considerations: indeed, style would only get in the way of the vision. He has read books we have only heard of, and some not even that – books like Robert Hugh Benson's *Lord of the World* (1908); Poul Anderson's *After Doomsday* (1962); Léon Daudet's *Le Napus: Fléau de l'an 2227* (1927). He has read every book called *The Last Man*, of which there are a fair number, though he does not mention one that was very nearly called *The Last Man in Europe*. Strictly, Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is very much a novel of the end with no resurrection. When Winston Smith is shot the vision of collective solipsism will take totally over, and the world as objective reality will cease to exist. This is a far more terrible prophecy than anything in Wagar's long bibliography can provide, if we except *Brave New World*, where the last man hangs himself. It is the vision of stasis, of the impossibility of change, that is so terrifying. William Blake shuddered at heaven's sempiternal marble and reflected that in hell there is at least energy and motion. Shaw's *Back to Methuselah* (again unmentioned here) sees life itself as the great mutable élan: the human world may end, but, as servants of the life force, we should regard this consummation with indifference. Even Wells, who had begun as a scientific optimist and ended by presenting no future for humanity, saw the vital torch handed to other creatures too wise to destroy their environment. Wagar's visions do not perhaps range wide enough.

More than halfway through he gives us the meaning of his title:

> Terminal visions are not just stories about the end of the world, or the end of the self. They are also stories about the nature and meaning of reality as interpreted by world views. They are propaganda for a certain understanding of life, in which the imaginary end serves to sharpen the focus and heighten the importance of certain structures of value. They are games of chance, so to speak, in which the players risk all their chips on a single hand. But games just the same.

In other words, test the *Weltanschauung* that happens to be in vogue by pushing it to the limit. Some world views have a theory of catastrophe, some don't. That of the Enlightenment did not, though the Marquis de Sade and Malthus had visions springing out of theories of sexuality which, by reason of the very atavism of their subject, had to admit catastrophe. After the Enlightened came the Romantics, who abandoned the steady-state model of reality drawn from mathematics and mechanics and thought, felt rather, in terms of volcanic changes, catastrophe for good or ill. They were succeeded by the followers of Comte and his doctrine of positivism. Without positivism there would have been no Mill, Darwin, Spencer, Engels or Marx and, in literature genuine or sub, no science fiction. Certainly no Jules Verne or H. G. Wells.

Since positivism is, except in socialist states and departments of sociology, generally discredited today, how is it that science fiction flourishes and by some writers, notably Ballard and Asimov, is regarded as the really significant imaginative florescence of our time? A cruel answer might be that practitioners of the form are hopelessly old-fashioned and do not see how the world has changed since 1914. Certainly, in respect of the techniques and insights of modernism, they cherish a peculiar blindness: there is not one SF writer whom we would read for the freshness or originality of his style. A writer who proclaims that subject-matter is all – as most SF writers do – is clearly already admitting a rejection of modernism, but since modernism arose with a rejection of positivism this is probably in order. Now world catastrophe is one of the themes of science fiction, and yet science fiction is a child of positivism, which rejects catastrophe. We must leave it to Wagar to resolve the anomaly.

Where there is a "positivist terminal vision" the blame for world catastrophe is to be placed not on science but the abuse of science by people who do not understand science, or else on the blind forces of unscientific nature, which might include items like messianic Ludditism. But there is a post-positivist "anti-intellectualism" or "neo-romanticism" or a new *Weltanschauung* which Wagar, with misgivings, calls "irrationalism." This posits a new beginning after disaster, a system which rejects science and accepts superstition, primitive pastoralism, pragmatic cannibalism of technological debris. What both kinds of vision find impossible to accept is total and irreparable destruction, which is an extrapolation of the individual's inability to accept the death of consciousness. Sleep is in order, but death is only a kind of sleep. Nothing, thou elder brother e'en to shade, cannot be a conclusion for even the lowest order of literature.

It is the fact that Wagar's survey covers only the lower order which makes one unwilling to grant too much importance to his theme. Frank Kermode saw, in his *The Sense of an Ending*, that what Wagar calls the public endtime had to be "radically immanentized . . . reduced merely to an individual's death or to a time of personal crisis or of waiting for crisis, a waiting for Godot." That "merely" is surely out of order. The end of the world is, alas, a very trivial theme. If Henry James had written a story about a group of people awaiting the end in an English country-house, his concern with personal relations would have rendered the final catastrophe highly irrelevant, the mere blank part of the page after the end not of time but of the story. When Wagar writes of Moxley's *Red Snow*, Southwold's *The Seventh Bowl*, Spitz's *La guerre des mouches*, Vidal's *Kalki*, Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*, George's *Dr Strangelove* (or *Red Alert*), Moore's *Greener Than You Think*, Disch's *The Genocides* and Roshwald's *Level 7*, he is dealing with electronic games. The genuine crises that face us – the death of the topsoil, the population explosion, the chance of the wrong button being pressed – are not strictly material for fiction. Fiction is not about what happens to the world but what happens to a select group of human souls, with crisis or catastrophe as the mere pretext for an exquisitely painful probing, as in James, of personal agonies and elations. If books have to be written about the end of the world, they should be speculation as science and not as sub-literary criticism.

And if H. G. Wells emerges in this survey as the only giant in a genre which he virtually invented, it is, almost in spite of himself, because he was interestingly ambiguous, which few of his successors are, and because he dealt in the minutiae of human experience. The man in *The War of the Worlds* who, facing the probable endtime, mourns the loss of tinned salmon with vinegar remains more memorable than the Martian death-rays. Only very minor literature dares to aim at apocalypse.