Between

Apocalyptic Narcissism and the Difficulty of Mourning

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Since the beginning of the Twenty-First Century, fictional representations of violence, crisis, and the end of human civilization have enjoyed huge success across different media and at all levels of cultural production (Williams 2011; Mousoutzanis 2014; Szendy 2015). While some of these narratives provide readers with gory visions of catastrophe, others focus on experiences of solitary survival in the time-honoured tradition of last-man stories. In many recent books and films, in fact, the sudden disappearance of the human species is witnessed only by a small group of survivors, or narrated by a single observer who discovers that he – or, increasingly often, she – has become "the last of the race" and hence the sole heir to humanity (Stafford 1994; Mussgnug 2012; Schossböck 2012). Cultural commentators have acknowledged the importance of apocalypse fiction, but disagree on the reasons for our collective fascination with catastrophic denouements. For British author and journalist Marina Benjamin, the obsession with our own ultimate demise is best explained as «a semiotics of self-loathing, as though humanity itself were a global scourge whose annihilation would be somehow curative» (Benjamin 1998: 20). Literary scholar Robert Plank, more contentiously, sees last-man narratives as wish-fulfilment fantasies (Plank 1983: 30), a hypothesis that has inspired research on apocalyptic masculinities (Mussgnug 2014) and that is also explored in a recent, wide-ranging study by German critic Eva Horn (Horn 2014: 10). Political readings of post-apocalyptic narrative, by contrast, have concentrated on trauma (Berger 1999; Heffernan 2008) or on the alleged

universal triumph of liberal democracy and on late capitalist modes of accumulation, predicated on global growth. As Slavoj Žižek proclaims with characteristic verve, capitalist societies across the globe are rapidly approaching «an apocalyptic zero-point», yet we find it easier to imagine the end of the world than to think of alternatives to global capitalism (Žižek 2010: x; cfr. also Williams 2011).

A less widely examined feature of post-apocalyptic fiction holds particular significance in the context of this discussion. Many narratives of global obliteration appear peculiarly devoid of genuine compassion. While the solitary survivors of post-apocalyptic literature and film are fascinated by the awe-inspiring vistas of a world without humans, by its vastness and sublime terror, they also seem strangely untouched by the fate of the billions who perished. Apparently, they are unable to relate to these victims as individuals, not as anonymous members of a nearly extinct species. In a genre mostly concerned with death, then, there appears to be paradoxically little room for expressions of loss and mourning. «How could he exist in this clean, dry, monotonous, ordinary room, gobbling caramel soycorn […] and brooding on the total fiasco that was his personal life», wonders Jimmy, the solitary survivor in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) «while the entire human race was kakking out? The worst of it was that those people out there – the fear, the suffering, the wholesale death – did not really touch him» (Atwood 2004: 400). Makepeace, the female narrator of Marcel Theroux's *Far North* (2009), is haunted by a very similar recognition:

> All those hours and days of human struggle, thousands, millions of them, spent building up this place, only to have it kicked down like an anthill by a spoilt child. There wasn't a soul left in the whole place save us, I grew surer of it by the day. Imagine: a city of thirty thousand reduced to two women and a bump. And yet, the odd thing was, I liked it a lot better (Theroux 2009: 28).

«Missing what most the whole time?» wonders the last man in Peter Heller's *The Dog Stars* (2012): «The babbling faceless agora, the fame, the parties, the pop of flash bulbs? The lovers, the gaiety, the champagne? The solitude carved out of celebrity, poring over charts by a single lamp on a wide desk in a venerable hotel? Room service, coffee before dawn?» (Heller 2012: 47). Finally, in M.R. Carey's bleak end-time thriller *The Girl with all the Gifts* (2014), scientist Caroline Caldwell «feels for a sickening moment that she might be the last human being left alive on the face of a necrotic planet. And that it might not matter at all. To have the race that built these mausoleums lie in them finally, quiet and resigned, and crumble into dust. *Who'd miss us?*» (Carey 2014: 351, author's italics). The list could be continued.

The peculiar emotional coldness of Twenty-First century apocalypse literature, I suggest, reflects a more general uncertainty about death and mourning. From early childhood, our lives are shaped by the awareness of death's inevitability and by the tremendous task of living with this knowledge, and despite it. In the face of illness, old age and dying, the consolations of firm religious belief are often unavailable. Even among the faithful, hopes for a life beyond death do little to dispel the pain of mourning and the fear of nothingness. «A whole range of factors», writes British theologian Paul S. Fiddes, «prompt us to face the finality of death for human life, that is, to regard it as the end of the whole person, and not just the cracking of an outer shell of flesh so that the butterfly of an eternal soul can emerge» (Fiddes 2000: 66) Modern ideas of psychosomatic unity define our understanding of the self, even in religious practice. Terminal illness and bereavement – the loss of persons near and dear, whose lives are intertwined with ours – alert us to the true meaning of finality and irrevocability (Gilbert 2005).

Death cannot be escaped, but more and more frequently, we seem incapable of coming to terms with loss. Living in an age of ideological conflict we look with great apprehension to secular and religious millenarians who eagerly exploit age-old fears of death, and dreams of sacrifice and everlasting glory (Mosse 1990: 34-52; Gray 2011). Among the more privileged, death itself has become marginalized. According

to a frequently stated opinion, modern consumer society evicts our fears of mortality in a systematic effort to promote the importance of the present moment. As Philippe Ariès remarks in the conclusion to his extensive historical study of modern attitudes towards death, in industrialised, urbanised and technologically advanced areas of the global North «everything in town goes on as if nobody died any more» (Ariès 1980: 560). Even more radically, Jean Baudrillard sees the foundations of postmodern society in a death-taboo that resembles the one suffered by sex in the Nineteenth Century: an «exclusion that precedes every other» and thereby becomes «the very core of the rationality of our culture» (Baudrillard 1993: 126).

But repression is only one aspect of our complex attitude towards mortality. Rather than postulating the existence of a death-taboo, I wish to suggest that our times are characterised by an uncertainty about death, an absence of commonly accepted social practice, which prompts a multitude of diverse and often contradictory «personal rites» (Dollimore 1998: xxviii). In a set of essays written shortly after the outbreak of the First World War, Sigmund Freud describes this uncertainty and suggests that our inability to accept death as a natural part of life prompts a heightened concern with fortuitous causes of mortality: accidents, diseases, infections, violence. Human transience, Freud professes, comes to be misrepresented and misunderstood as an aggregate set of «problems» that can and must be «resolved» one by one (Freud 1959: 304–5). Contemporary apocalypse literature, it could be argued, is one prominent expression of this attitude, yet it can also be found at a much earlier date in high modernist authors like Samuel Beckett and Maurice Blanchot, who depict life as a prolonged anguish, an inescapable, dreadful process of endless fragmentation. Beckett's tormented protagonists – disintegrating, but defiant bodies, overflowing with a monstrous vitality – are masterpieces of grotesque fantasy, in Mikhail Bakhtin's sense of the term. «The grotesque body», writes Bakhtin, «is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body» (Bakhtin 1984: 37). What Beckett and Blanchot evoke, in other words, is not the dread of finality but rather the horror of a life

spent in the interminable temporality of dying, an existence that knows no alternative to existential despair. Life here appears like an irreducible vagueness and death, consequently, becomes the necessary *caesura*, which gives significance to an apparently meaningless existence. Or, as Peter Brooks puts it, «death, in fact, appears to be the one inescapable fact against which all our discursive strategies must be measured» (Brooks 1993: 7).

While high modernist literature may be regarded as a *deconstruction* of death, contemporary consumer culture has been described as its *banalization*. In a recent, illuminating study of fear, Zygmunt Bauman examines our experience of finitude in an age of mass media and concludes that death, endlessly reflected in popular entertainment, has become a powerful stimulant for a society born under the sign of the pursuit of happiness. Mortality, according to the eminent sociologist, is a «permanent, invisible yet watchful and closely watched presence in every human undertaking», but, paradoxically, this omnipresence does not lead to greater insight. Quite on the contrary, writes Bauman, the «daily 'metaphorical rehearsal' of death in its gruesome truth» means that death, «as in the case of 'retro' fads and fashions, can come to be viewed as considerably less than absolute; as revocable and reversible, just one more banal event among so many others» (Bauman 2006: 41–49).

An important and not sufficiently acknowledged essay by intellectual historian Martin Jay offers precious insight into the peculiar relation between apocalyptic imagery and the difficulty of mourning. How, asks Jay, did a cultural tradition obsessed with radical ending produce a genre rooted in the seemingly endless re-iteration of strikingly similar plots? «Why […] is the only thing we can reasonably predict in connection with apocalypse the fact that its four horsemen will continue to come around the track again and again?» (Jay 1993: 85). According to Jay's psychoanalytic interpretation of millennial fantasies, the answer to these questions lies in the genre's characteristic attitude towards bereavement. Post-apocalyptic fiction, for the American historian, is characterized by a reluctance to engage with actual experiences of personal loss. It conveys a more general, lingering

sense of profound dejection and isolation from the world, which, according to Jay, is most aptly captured in Freud's work on mourning and melancholia. «[Freudian] melancholy», writes Jay, «may well be the best term to describe the underlying mental condition accompanying fantasies of termination, while mania captures the mood engendered by belief in a rebirth or redemptive unveiling after the catastrophe» (Jay 1993: 90). Following Julia Kristeva, Jay further suggests that the unmourned object, whose loss cannot be worked through in post-apocalyptic fiction, may be the symbolically integrated maternal image (cfr. Kristeva 1989).

Jay's psychopathological explanation of a collective cultural phenomenon is not unproblematic, as he readily acknowledges (Jay 1993: 92) but it lends itself to a narrative analysis of apocalypse literature. Melancholia, as defined by Freud, plays a prominent role in novels and films that appear strikingly unaware of the lost love-object, and profoundly invested in the narcissistic grandeur and the tragic hubris of last-man figures. With its emphasis on fatal closure and its cognitive orientation towards future catastrophe, then, apocalypse literature leaves no room for the slow and painful adjustments Freud associates with the work of mourning. Any specific form of compassion pales against the expectation of what will be revealed by an imminent global cataclysmic event: the end of history as we know it, which will leave the world profoundly and definitively transformed.

René Girard's mimetic theory provides a particularly appropriate context for these ideas, but also – as we well see in the final part of this article – an opportunity to re-think the meaning of apocalypse against the grain of contemporary doomsday culture. Human history, according to the author of *Violence and the Sacred* (1979), is essentially cyclical: at the root of human culture and representation, the scapegoat mechanism offers a possibility of endless, cathartic renewal. «The destruction of the old religion culminates in the collective murder and the collective murder, through the intermediary of rites, produces the new religion» (Girard 1988: 236–37). But technological progress, according to Girard, rapidly undermines the possibility of successful cultural differentiation and cyclical renewal. In an age of nuclear

warfare the potential for violence has reached a point where it must be doubted whether the crisis can be resolved by means of the scapegoat mechanism. As Girard points out:

> The genuinely new element is that violence can no longer be relied upon to resolve the crisis. Violence no longer guarantees a firm base. For violence to be capable of carrying out its cyclical development and bringing back peace, there must be an ecological field that can absorb the damage done in the process. Nowadays that field covers the entire planet, but even that has probably ceased to be enough. The environment can no longer absorb the violence humans can unleash. (Girard 1987: 258).

Despite Girard's declared reservations about psychoanalysis, the apocalyptic undertone of *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (1987) bears apparent similarities with Freud's somber vision of human history in the concluding chapter of *Civilization and Its Discontents*: «Men have now gone so far in the mastery of natural forces» writes Freud in 1929, «that with their help they could easily exterminate one another to the last man. They know this, hence a large part of their current unrest, their unhappiness, their mood of anxiety» (Freud 1961: 145). Man needs social institutions, according to Freud, to keep in check his incurable ambivalence, his primitive and passionate loves and hates. But society and culture – the self-imposed constraints that work to protect mankind's survival – also produce frustration and lasting discontent. Man cannot live without civilization, but he cannot live happily within it, since civilized humanity, in Freud's opinion, requires the suppression of our instinctual needs, the systematic interference with extreme desires, which continue to fester in the unconscious, ready to erupt in a singular moment of explosive violence.

It is against the background of these considerations that I would like to suggest the possibility of a different cultural understanding of loss: a critical and self-reflective stance, which has its origins in William Franke's *Poetry and Apocalypse*. Published in 2009, Franke's study is

part of an emerging scholarly field, which examines the persistence of religious ideas of meaningful closure in modern elegy, where death appears as the disruption of a closed order, a deferral of meaning, but also as a promise of future possibility (Franke 2009; cfr. also Ramazani 1994; Vendler 2010).

Franke is not primarily concerned with individual death, but examines two different and closely related experiences of the limits of language: poetry and apocalypse. Modern poetry, according to the North American scholar, is best understood as a reflection on the nature of representation and as a necessary exploration of the possibilities of language and its limits. Poetry, writes Franke,

> originates in and as the radical disclosure of world as an ambit of truth or a revealment of things as they are [...] and at the same time in the weaving of the veil of representation, essentially the 'turning' or the 'verse', which is poetic metaphor (Franke 2009: x).

In this important respect, poetry thus echoes our concern with apocalypse, which is understood by Franke as «the moment when language at its limits shatters and all beings are speechlessly present and open to one another, the moment when all articulable differences are surpassed» (Franke 2009: x-xi). Modern poetry, in other words, is the remnant, or rather the «dispossessed heir» (Franke 2009: 28) of a prophetic and apocalyptic tradition that has sought to highlight the incongruity of our present habits and to disclose a truth beyond what can be expressed by a public language.

Franke's seemingly timeless and universal categories may be contested, but his considerations, I suggest, are highly relevant to the genre of elegy and, more generally, to literary writing about dying and loss, including recent apocalypse fiction. Each individual death, as Jacques Derrida reminds us, is the loss of a world, a personal apocalypse: «the emotion of mourning that we all know and recognize, even if it hits us each time in a new and singular way, like the end of the world» (Derrida 2001: 158). At the same time, death is a loss of control, a crisis of public language. Symbolic representations of death

fail to capture the real experience of death, which is located outside of the sphere of the semiotic, outside the continuous interplay between sign systems, the sphere of living, speaking subjects. Death, unlike loss, does not belong to the speaking subject and to language. As Kenneth Burke suggests, "death" is placed beyond the register of images that the living body can know; it can only be read as a signifier with an incessantly receding, ungraspable signified, invariably always pointing back self-reflexively to other signifiers. "Death" refers to a nowhere, a transition between a living body and a corpse, a cut between two different kinds of being, which is forever excluded from language (Burke 1952: 372). Philosopher Simon Critchley's *Very Little… Almost Nothing. Death, Philosophy, Literature* (1997) highlights the wider significance of this paradox:

> Death is radically resistant to the order of representation. Representations of death are misrepresentations or rather representations of an absence. The paradox at the heart of the representation of death is best conveyed by the figure of *prosopeia*, the trope by which an absent or imaginary person is presented as speaking or acting, a form which indicates the failure of presence, a face which withdraws behind the form which presents it (Critchley 1997: 26).

Representations of death, for Critchley, capture the form of an absence, or, more concretely, an image of the human body at the very moment when it ceases to be a privileged object of identification (Mussgnug 2002). Apocalypse, too, can be understood in these terms, as a loss of control, a speechless openness. Drawing from negative theology, Franke sees apocalyptic thinking as an opening that can «usher in the creative change that society needs in order to renew itself» (Franke 2009: 17). This differs significantly from the mood of much recent apocalypse fiction, but also from the approaches of political scientists, philosophers and literary critics such as Michael Barkun, John Gray, and Marina Warner, who have emphasized the Manichean worldview that underlies present-day concerns with

Revelation: a desire to cast historical events in terms of a struggle between light and darkness, good and evil, until the end of time (Barkun 2003; Warner 2006; Gray 2008) «The apocalyptic imagination», notes sociologist John Wallis, «has a tendency to conceive the world in starkly dualistic terms […] There are, in other words, no shades of grey within apocalypticism, nor any moral ambiguity. It is this vision of the world that can predispose its adherent to violence» (Wallis 2006: 28). Millenarian ideology, according to this interpretation, precipitates violence: for the believer, events cohere as part of a universal, apocalyptic plan; actual or perceived opponents are "traitors" or agents of evil; the sense of an imminent end of history inspires plans of empowerment, and calls for ruthless action. The Revelation of John, with its mythic and graphic description of end-time conflict, provides a compelling context for such narratives of apocalyptic bloodshed. As novelist and cultural historian Marina Warner bleakly remarks in her wide-ranging study of spirit forms, *Phantasmagoria*: «The political uses of the book [of Revelation] today have shifted from personal illumination to religious 'revelation' as a warranty for state violence, a remodeled concept of retributive justice and the just war» (Warner 2006: 338).

Franke takes a notably different stance. Like many scholars of modern millenarianism, he associates Christian eschatology with a belief in rectilinear and finite time; the assumption that history is meaningful; the expectation that all meaning will be revealed in a final cataclysm, which is both the ending and the goal of all human activity. At the same time, however, Franke insists, with René Girard, on the subversive and emancipatory message of the Gospels, which he understands as a promise of hope. Again, Girard's understanding of the scapegoat mechanism is relevant here. As Stephen Finamore explains, Christianity, for the French philosopher, is not simply another sacrificial religion – a view that Girard ascribes to Nietzsche (Girard 1988: 243–46) – but rather the knowledge of a truth that prevents us from restoring any cultural order based on arbitrary violence.

> [H]uman history has, until now, been cyclical. However, the effects of the Gospels have now given it a linear trajectory. Now humans must find a means to escape the influence of the way in which our cultures are founded and on which all our systems of representation are built, for these make us imitate acquisitive acts, react to crises by searching for scapegoats, and respond to violence with more violence (Finamore 2009: 89–90).

Or, as Girard himself puts it in the closing sentence of *The Scapegoat* (1986): «The time has come for us to forgive one another. If we wait any longer there will not be time enough» (Girard 1986: 212).

Girard's apocalyptic vision of the present as a traumatic shift from circular to linear time hence relies on two simultaneous but independent premises: where technological progress opens the possibility of absolute violence, the example of Christ proclaims the necessary, universal renunciation of every form of vengeance, retribution and reprisal. It is important, then, to stress that non-violence, for Girard, is not simply a reaction to modern technologies of mass destruction. Indeed, the relation between two different phenomena is precisely what distinguishes Girard's account from more widely known theories of traumatization, such as, for instance, Slavoj Žižek's (Žižek 2010). The discourse of the Gospels, according to the French thinker, is not a symptom that points back to the traumatic wound: it is not, to use James Berger's suggestive analogy, «a landscape of scars that […] must take the shape of the breakage created by the trauma» (Berger 1999: 28). For Girard the atonement of Christ must rather be understood as a genuine *eschaton*: a definitive rupture of the symbolic order, which breaks the seemingly inescapable loop of traumatization and ideology that is re-iterated in many works of twenty-first-century apocalypse fiction. Eschatology, thus, is no longer understood as a divisive discourse, which promotes narcissistic solitude, but as «an enabling condition of genuine dialogue» (Franke 2009: 43).

Apocalypse and poetry, as Franke reminds us, reflect each other in a never-ending game of mirrors: eschatology suggests that every

semiotic system is necessarily contingent and finite. And elegy makes us aware that religious discourse itself can and must be explained as a product of the human imagination. At a more general level, this indicates the possibility of a new approach to twenty-first-century apocalypse literature: not as a misanthropic celebration of loneliness, but as a tragically inadequate response to a profoundly human experience, the inevitability of loss.

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