**3.23 Gothic and the Apocalyptic Imagination**

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**Imagining Apocalypse**

Apocalypse, in its ancient biblical forms, is a genre concerned both with visions of the eternal and with social and political transformation. Written in contexts of national, political and religious crisis, apocalypse opens a vision of a future in which the injustices and reversals of the present will come to an end. Writers in the Jewish and early Christian traditions came to imagine this future in terms of a renewal of creation; the present, corrupted order of things would be replaced by a ‘new heaven and earth’ in which pain and suffering would come to an end and universal justice would be established. This new reality would be inaugurated by a divine action in which God would vindicate decisively the faithfulness of his people and pronounce judgment upon the worldly powers that opposed and persecuted them. In the early Christian churches, the restoration of creation was associated explicitly with the reversal of death itself. On the last day, St. Paul writes, ‘the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first’.[[1]](#endnote-1) The apocalypse would restore the world to something like its Edenic condition. Death and suffering would be abolished, the divided nations of humanity would live together in peace and the people would live in the unmediated presence of God.

Apocalyptic narratives told stories of a world that was to come, imagined in a series of fantastical images that frequently alluded to earlier apocalyptic texts. The apocalyptic visionary was allowed to see beyond the limited horizons of the present and to communicate to others – albeit in a heavily symbolic and frequently fantastical narrative mode – the future that they had glimpsed. Apocalypse, Kevin Mills argues, locates its narrator in ‘an indefinable cosmic embrasure from which he can look out on two worlds, seeing beyond the confines of time and space into the eternal’.[[2]](#endnote-2) Biblical apocalypse opened an eternal perspective on present reversals and reaffirmed the ultimate faithfulness and justice of God. Early Christian apocalypses provided a vulnerable Christian minority with a vision of a future in which the faithful believers would be vindicated when Christ returned as judge of the living and the dead. History was orientated towards an ending that gave eternal significance to the present; the task of the believer was to live faithfully in the light of that ending.

As the sacred, ritually ordered experience of time was displaced in modernity by secular, chronological time, the belief that history was orientated towards a universal and meaningful end became increasingly difficult to sustain.[[3]](#endnote-3) Enlightenment philosophy offered a new, secular eschatology of human progress that was predicated upon reason, science and the domination of nature. By the end of the nineteenth century, this narrative of progress had itself become increasingly unstable. Though older versions of theistic apocalyptic belief remained, the literatures of the nineteenth century showed a new tendency to imagine the end of the age not as the inauguration of a new world, but as a condition of waiting for a future that was endlessly deferred. Matthew Arnold’s image of a present age ‘wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born’ incorporates the language of biblical apocalypse into a vision of an ending without renewal.[[4]](#endnote-4) The end of the present order is followed neither by the new heaven and earth of Christian apocalypse nor by a new and better world built by human hands, as the Romantic radicals of the late eighteenth century had imagined.[[5]](#endnote-5) The nineteenth century in England closed on images of a ruined future, whether in the entropic science-fiction dystopias of H. G. Wells or the bleak Romanticism of Thomas Hardy. In these imagined futures, there was no renewal of creation beyond the end of the present age, but only the gradual decline – or violent overthrow – of a complacent and corrupted world that seemed emptied of its former vitality.

The pessimistic apocalyptic sensibility of the late nineteenth century yielded a new kind of literary visionary in Friedrich Nietzsche’s madman, a prophetic figure who announces the death of God to a world of complacent, fashionable scepticism. Modern unbelievers, the madman declares, have never recognised the appalling implications of God’s death; they speak confidently of faith as outmoded and obsolete, yet they continue to live as if the death of God had never occurred.[[6]](#endnote-6) The madman describes a world shaken loose from its foundations and drifting endlessly through empty space. He is a prophetic visionary who gazes into an eternity emptied of God. Modernity has killed God, Nietzsche insists, yet modern humanity is not yet ready to confront the implications of its own deed. The coming future is one in which humanity must come to terms with the terrible silence that now surrounds it.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Nietzsche’s parable of the madman establishes an apocalyptic mode that would become a significant aspect of the Gothic imagination in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Like their biblical predecessors, apocalyptic writers of the early twentieth century attempted to imagine a new reality that might lie beyond the present age. For many, what they saw was a vision of horror. Once a literature of radical hope, apocalypse came to be reimagined as the violent overthrow of a world order already collapsing from within. If biblical apocalypse exemplifies what Frank Kermode has famously termed the ‘sense of an ending’, the apocalyptic horrors of the early twentieth century were predicated upon an ending without sense: a future that not only failed to reveal the fuller meaning of the present, but seemed to deny even the possibility of such meaning.[[8]](#endnote-8)

This pessimistic reconfiguration of the apocalyptic mode is integral to the Weird fiction that emerged as a significant subgenre of the Gothic in the twentieth century. The Weird apocalypse placed its visionaries at the interstices between the familiar order of the human world and the forces of chaos that threatened its overthrow. In these narratives, the apparent stability and order of human civilisation is exposed as a fragile illusion by the unveiling of the chaos by which it is surrounded. In William Hope Hodgson’s *The House on the Borderland* (1908), a man identified only as the Recluse undergoes a visionary experience that echoes the nihilistic cosmic perspective of Nietzsche’s madman. In the vision, the Recluse is carried deep into space, passing ‘beyond the fixed stars, and . . . into the huge blackness that waits beyond’.[[9]](#endnote-9) Time is accelerated, and the Recluse witnesses a distant future in which the sun has cooled, recalling the similarly entropic far future in Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1895). Unlike Wells’s novel, however, Hodgson imagines a cosmos beyond human reason, inhabited by monstrous beings and structures incomprehensible to the Recluse. This realm of cosmic disorder threatens to escape the confines of the vision, intruding into and disrupting the Recluse’s familiar world. At the close of his narrative, the Recluse, now returned to his house, hears sounds that suggest the final collapse of borders between the human world and the chaos beyond:

Hush! I hear something, down – down in the cellars. It is a creaking sound. My God, it is the opening of the great, oak trap. What can be doing that? The scratching of my pen deafens me . . . I must listen . . . There are steps on the stairs; strange padding steps, that come up and nearer . . . Jesus, be merciful to me, an old man. There is something fumbling at the door handle. O God, help me now! Jesus – The door is opening – slowly. Somethi –

That is all.[[10]](#endnote-10)

The Recluse’s story is told via his journal, found by later travellers in the ruins of the house that, by the end of the novel, has apparently collapsed into the chasm that the Recluse believed to lie beneath it. This chasm is the source of the monstrous creatures that invade the house itself and which are also present in the Recluse’s vision. The house occupies a liminal position between the apparent order of human civilisation and a realm of incomprehensible disorder: its collapse embodies the overthrow final overthrow of the Recluse’s reason and intellectual control.

Hodgson’s mode of Weird apocalypse subverts the essentially optimistic perspective of the apocalyptic tradition. As Lois Parkinson Zamora observes, ‘Apocalyptic modes of apprehending reality appeal to us in our secular times because they rest on the desire that history possess structure and meaning, if only the structure and meaning we attribute to it in our literary forms and fictions.’[[11]](#endnote-11) In Weird apocalypse, the sources of this apparent structure and meaning – history, culture, reason, science – are exposed as elaborate and deceptive fictions. Such revelations of cosmic unreason are integral to the fiction of H. P. Lovecraft, in which human belief in an ordered and comprehensible universe is shattered by the discovery of a fuller reality that undermines even the possibility of rational order. In Lovecraft’s stories, revelations of humanity’s true situation invite madness and despair, as the narrator of ‘The Call of Cthulhu’ (1928) observes:

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Lovecraft’s fiction develops the situation of metaphysical crisis depicted in Nietzsche’s parable of the madman. In the Lovecraftian mythos, humanity has not simply failed to come to terms with the implications of the death of God, but, more trenchantly, is fundamentally incapable of doing so. The modern belief in an ordered, comprehensible reality is a necessary fiction that shields the human mind from a universe of infinite disorder. Lovecraft’s version of the apocalyptic visionary occupies that figure’s traditional location at the interstices between the present world and the infinite, but sees there visions of unnameable horror rather than redemption and recreation. ‘For full three seconds I could glimpse that pandaemoniac sight’, the narrator of ‘He’ (1926) recalls,

and in those seconds I saw a vista which will ever afterward torment me in dreams. I saw the heavens verminous with strange flying things, and beneath them a hellish black city of giant stone terraces with impious pyramids flung savagely to the moon, and devil-lights burning from unnumbered windows.[[13]](#endnote-13)

The story ends with the narrator ‘gone home to the pure New England lanes up which fragrant sea-winds sweep at evening’, a retreat to the ideological security of an American social order the horrifying collapse of which he has glimpsed.[[14]](#endnote-14)

**Cold War Catastrophe**

If the Weird apocalypses of Hodgson and Lovecraft were philosophical descendants of Nietzschean nihilism, the first half of the twentieth century provided more material reasons for pessimistic visions of the future. As Lucie Armitt observes, twentieth-century Gothic is characterised by ‘the manner in which the real-life horror of two world wars takes over from the imagined horrors of the supernatural and/or superstition’.[[15]](#endnote-15) Images of catastrophe were no longer confined to fiction or film: in addition to the devastation caused by the wars themselves, the mid-twentieth century brought with it the West’s discovery of the full horrors of the Holocaust and the new threat of nuclear warfare, the latter bound up also in Cold War paranoia and fears of Communist infiltration. Like the anxieties concerning anthropogenic climate change and environmental disaster that would become increasingly prevalent later in the century, these real-world events suggested the possibility that the end of the present age would arrive as catastrophe rather than renewal. End-of-the-world scenarios proliferated in mid-century popular culture, perhaps most obviously in science-fiction films such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (dir. Robert Wise, 1951), *When Worlds Collide* (dir. Rudolph Maté, 1951) and *The War of the Worlds* (dir. Byron Haskin, 1953). Where science fiction often ended with disaster averted, or at least survived, Richard Matheson’s 1954 novel *I Am Legend* adopted a more pessimistic outlook. Set in the aftermath of a catastrophe that has already taken place, *I Am Legend* locates its protagonist, Robert Neville, as the only apparent survivor of an epidemic that has transformed humans into vampires. At the beginning of the novel, Neville lives alone in a house that is surrounded nightly by vampires who attempt to entice him out. He is a modern incarnation of Mary Shelley’s ‘last man’, an obsolete remnant of the old world in a seemingly post-human America.

In *I Am Legend*, Marilyn Michaud argues, the ‘theme of time as cyclical and corrosive is the organising mode of the text. As a figure of degeneration and tyranny, the vampire refutes the idea of progress, signalling instead the rise of power and corruption, and the inevitable movement towards decay.’[[16]](#endnote-16) Neville’s belief in his own ‘last man’ status is flawed: on his regular expeditions to destroy vampires as they sleep in the daytime, he has inadvertently killed still-living humans who have been infected with the germ but who are able to control its effects with drugs. The new society emerging in America is being built by these infected humans who regard Neville as a murderer and execute him for his crimes against them. As Michaud argues, the novel’s pessimistic ending represents a view of time as cyclical, with modern confidence in scientific and technological progress leading to new forms of self-destruction and the inevitable return of societal corruption.[[17]](#endnote-17) Neville himself calls into question the ability of moral values to endure beyond the end of the society in which they took shape, denying their existence as anything other than shared social norms while also acknowledging their continued force as a habit of thought:

Crossing your fingers, Neville? Knocking on wood?

He ignored that, beginning to suspect his mind of harbouring an alien. Once he might have termed it conscience. Now it was only an annoyance. Morality, after all, had fallen with society. He was his own ethic.

Makes a good excuse, doesn’t it, Neville? Oh, shut up.[[18]](#endnote-18)

The ambiguous status of morality in the post-apocalyptic world is revisited at the novel’s conclusion. Facing his own execution, Neville momentarily sees himself through the eyes of the new society: ‘To them he was some terrible scourge they had never seen, a scourge even worse than the disease they had come to live with. He was an invisible specter who had left for evidence of his existence the bloodless bodies of their loved ones.’[[19]](#endnote-19) Neville has become to the new hybrid race what the vampires had been to him: a murderous threat that must be eliminated.

The post-apocalyptic landscape that Neville in *I am Legend* inhabits is the end-point of a society in terminal decline. The novel suggests that this collapse is both inevitable and cyclical; the vampire plague is the latest manifestation of a corruption that has recurred many times over in human history. ‘It was the germ that was the villain’, Neville concludes; ‘The germ that hid behind obscuring veils of legend and superstition, spreading its scourge while people cringed before their own fears.’[[20]](#endnote-20) The latest reappearance of the germ locates the collapse of modern American society within a longer history of progress and decline, while also registering historically specific concerns surrounding the Cold War, military technology, authoritarianism and materialism. As Bernice M. Murphy points out, ‘The creatures that terrorise Neville in his boarded-up suburban home every night, like [George] Romero’s “Living Dead”, are not alien “others”; they are fellow citizens, transformed, yet recognisable.’[[21]](#endnote-21) A consumerist society consumes itself as ordinary Americans are infected by the germ and begin to feed on their neighbours.[[22]](#endnote-22)

In the mid-twentieth century, Gothic versions of apocalypse were beginning to imagine bleak futures in which technologically advanced, capitalist societies became complicit in their own downfall. If the immediate cause of the end of the world as they knew it was often the emergence of such monstrous threats as Matheson’s vampires, these narratives hinted that their Gothic monsters were creations or expressions of the corruption or instability already present within the society itself. As Michaud observes, ‘In the Gothic imagination, culture or progress is often a movement towards decline and an open invitation to corruption and tyranny.’[[23]](#endnote-23) In the second half of the twentieth century, Gothic apocalypse came increasingly to depict end-of-the-world scenarios in which this trajectory towards decline was played out at the level of national and/or global catastrophe. In these narratives, the failures of contemporary society not only play a part in causing disaster, but also persist beyond it as limitations on the capacity of survivors to rebuild the world after the end.

This theme of structural flaws that endure beyond the collapse of the structures themselves is central to George A. Romero’s highly influential 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead*. In the film, a small group of human survivors take shelter in an isolated house as, without explanation, the dead begin to reanimate. The house functions as a microcosm of American society, drawing attention repeatedly to the ways in which the interactions between the survivors are shaped by race, gender and class. Ben (Duane Jones), the lone black survivor, fends off a group of zombies, saving both his own life and that of Barbra (Judith O’Dea), who is in deep shock following the murder of her brother by one of the dead. When Ben discovers that two couples have been hiding in the cellar, he accuses them of ignoring Barbra’s screams: ‘you’re telling us we got to risk our lives just because somebody might need help, huh?’ objects Harry Cooper (Karl Hardman), a middle-aged white man whose shirt and tie suggest a professional occupation.[[24]](#endnote-24) As a financially comfortable, middle-class man who is entirely unwilling to risk himself for others, Harry represents a failed version of American individualism. It is Ben rather than Harry who risks his life in an attempt to obtain medicine for Harry’s daughter, Karen, who has been bitten by a zombie. Harry’s cowardice and selfishness are depicted as moral failures that weaken co-operation between the survivors and endanger the whole group. In a final irony, Harry dies in the cellar, killed and consumed by his own daughter – a final image, perhaps, of generational decline within an economically secure, but morally weak, white middle class.

If Harry’s death suggests the corruption of an American ideal of individualism into moral and physical weakness, Ben’s fate suggests that even the most resourceful and capable of individuals can still be victims of a degraded and inadequate state. When the authorities learn that the zombies can be killed by the destruction of their brains, groups of armed men, including police officers and civilians, begin to patrol the country in order to kill the walking dead with gunshots to the head. Ben, by now the only survivor left alive in the house, is shot dead by one of these groups, who mistake him for a zombie. The manner of Ben’s death both recalls the assassination, earlier in the year, of Martin Luther King Jr and hints at wider resonances with the Civil Rights struggles of the decade. Earlier in the film, Harry’s wife, Helen, learns that the house has a radio and insists that they should leave the cellar in order to use it: ‘If the authorities know what’s happening’, she insists, ‘they’ll send people, tell us what to do.’[[25]](#endnote-25) On one level, Ben’s death at the hands of the very people who have been sent by the authorities suggests that Helen’s confidence in the official response is misplaced. However, it also holds open the possibility that such confidence was always racially coded. Where the white, middle-class Coopers attempt to lock themselves in the cellar and wait for the ‘authorities’ to ‘tell us what to do’, Ben assumes throughout the film that he must take responsibility for his own survival. The film concludes with Ben shot dead on sight by a group of white men who make no attempt to confirm that he is a zombie before shooting, and who barely spare him a thought afterwards. The film’s black protagonist dies at the hands of an official response whose protection the white family takes for granted.

Though they employ familiar Gothic monsters in their visions of the end, the versions of apocalypse imagined by Matheson and Romero are identified with science and nature rather than magic and the supernatural. The vampire plague in *I Am Legend* is created by a bacillus that is released in dust clouds caused by bombing. The aetiology of the reanimations in *Night of the Living Dead* is never identified conclusively, but at least one scientist associates it with radiation from a probe that has been destroyed in Earth’s orbit. These seemingly supernatural or mythical versions of apocalypse, then, are rooted in the technological contexts of the Cold War: they allude to real-world military technologies, nuclear weaponry and the Space Race. They recall in secularised form the resurrection of the dead as it is imagined in New Testament eschatology, which becomes reanimation rather than rebirth, but the narratives invoke little sense of transcendence, even of the chaotic and nihilistic forms imagined by writers such as Hodgson and Lovecraft. In the decades that followed, however, Gothic apocalypse became more overt in its exploration of the genre’s theological heritage, a tendency that has continued into the twenty-first century. As Andrew Tate has argued, prominent writers of contemporary apocalyptic fictions, ‘consciously or otherwise, echo visionary ideas of biblical prophecy regarding the finite nature of human power’.[[26]](#endnote-26) Indeed, one of the striking features of Gothic apocalypse since the late-twentieth century is the extent to which the transcendent has returned as a central aspect of the post-apocalyptic world. The survivors of the contemporary Gothic catastrophe narrative frequently find themselves occupying a world in which God moves not only in mysterious ways but also, at times, in some disconcertingly obvious ones. If these narratives do not suggest a return to traditional forms of orthodox faith, they do perhaps hint that the philosophical as well as the economic and technological structures of modernity might be at risk of collapse.

**Rationalism and Re-enchantment**

This renewal of interest in theological aspects of the apocalyptic tradition reflects postmodernity’s challenges to the coherence of modernity itself. If, as Graham Ward has argued, postmodernity is characterised by ‘the re-evaluation of ambivalence, mystery, excess and aporia as they adhere to, are constituted by and disrupt the rational’, Gothic apocalypse figures this cultural shift from modernity to postmodernity as the movement from the old world to the new.[[27]](#endnote-27) One of the protagonists of Stephen King’s *The Stand* (1978) makes this point overtly. ‘Assume that the age of rationalism has passed’, sociologist Glen Bateman tells his fellow survivors in post-apocalyptic America. After rationalism, he suggests, humanity would live in a re-enchanted world:

‘Dark magic,’ he said softly. ‘A universe of marvels where water flows uphill and trolls live in the deepest woods and dragons live under the mountains. Bright wonders, white power. “Lazarus, come forth.” Water into wine. And . . . and just maybe . . . the casting out of devils.’[[28]](#endnote-28)

King’s apocalypse has secular origins: the human population of America is devastated by a superflu created by the US military and released through accidental contamination. In the tradition of biblical apocalypse, however, this catastrophe is depicted not simply as an event within chronological time, but also as one that interrupts the regular flow of time and history. The passage of time in the old world is marked by the ticking of the grandfather clock in Frannie Goldsmith’s family home: Frannie ‘had been listening to its measured ticks and tocks all of her life’.[[29]](#endnote-29) The apocalypse literally stops the clocks, including a town clock that, as Stu Redman observes, ‘had not tolled since nine this morning’.[[30]](#endnote-30) King revisits this image in his 1986 novel *It*, when the failure of the Derry town clock to chime the hour prompts one resident to fear that ‘Suddenly all of those things – things he had spent his life working for – seemed in jeopardy.’[[31]](#endnote-31) The failure of these clocks to mark the regular passage of time suggests that time itself, or the human experience thereof, has been disrupted. In *The Stand*, the survivors of the superflu must come to terms not only with the collapse of society as they have known it, but also with a shift in the nature of reality. Echoing the final battles between the assembled forces of heaven and hell in the book of Revelation, King’s protagonists become participants in a struggle between Good and Evil, or God and Satan, represented by two opposing figures: the saintly Mother Abigail and the trickster-figure known as Randall Flagg. In the aftermath of the superflu, the survivors gather around one or the other of these figures, forming two communities that represent alternative versions of what the new world might be. As Glen Bateman tells his fellow community leaders in Mother Abigail’s group, ‘We’re here under the fiat of powers we don’t understand. For me, that means we may be beginning to accept – only subconsciously now, and with plenty of slips backward due to culture lag – a different definition of existence.’[[32]](#endnote-32)

King’s post-apocalyptic landscape, then, becomes the setting for a contest between two models of human being that become synonymous with the novel’s two versions of community. The novel resists a simplistic moral binary in its division of the population: flawed people are drawn to both groups, and both groups achieve forms of community cohesion. The crucial difference lies in the organisation and structures of power within each community. Where Mother Abigail’s Colorado town establishes democratic government, Flagg’s Las Vegas is an authoritarian state; though framed in terms of theological metaphysics, the opposition between the two communities is rooted firmly in modern American history and politics. Mother Abigail’s interpretation of Flagg’s followers displays this blending of theological and political registers:

He was a liar, and his father was the Father of Lies. He would be like a big neon sign to them, standing high to the sky, dazzling their sight with fizzing fireworks. They would not be apt to notice, these apprentice unshapers, that like a neon sign, he only made the same patterns over and over again.

[ . . . ]

Some would make the deduction for themselves in time – his kingdom would never be one of peace. The sentry posts and barbed wire at the frontiers of his land would be there as much to keep the converts in as to keep the invader out.[[33]](#endnote-33)

Though he is depicted overtly as Satanic, Flagg does not simply represent the return of an older religious or magical world that stands in opposition to the modern nation brought to an end by the superflu. Instead, the novel hints repeatedly that Flagg embodies multiple structural and ideological failures of modernity. Glen suggests that Flagg is ‘the last magician of rational thought, gathering the tools of technology against us’.[[34]](#endnote-34) Flagg’s followers are ultimately destroyed by the nuclear weapons that he intends to use against the Colorado community, an end that both aligns him with one of modernity’s most destructive technologies and identifies his commitment to that technology as fundamentally self-defeating. Flagg also represents the return of authoritarianism. Though his community is successful in many ways, its loyalty and strong work ethic are motivated at least in part by the threat of brutal punishments dealt out publicly to those suspected of failure or betrayal. Tom Cullen, sent to Las Vegas as a spy, recognises the missing ingredient in Flagg’s community: ‘They were nice enough people and all, but there wasn’t much love in them. Because they were too busy being afraid.’[[35]](#endnote-35) The novel’s various oppositions – God and Satan; Mother Abigail and Randall Flagg; Colorado and Las Vegas – serve to locate modern America’s self-destruction in a wider cyclical history of moral and spiritual struggle between the creative, communal flourishing of free people and the destructiveness of authoritarian control and scientific hubris.

**The End of History**

Writers of Gothic apocalypse at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first have retained much of their predecessors’ scepticism towards narratives of progress. If the genre is no longer shaped by the specific concerns of the Cold War era, anxieties surrounding the possibility of nuclear destruction remain, provoked not only by nuclear accidents such as the explosions at Chernobyl in 1986 and Fukushima Daiichi in 2011, but also with renewed threats of domestic and international terrorism in the aftermath of the al-Qaeda attacks on the US in 2001.[[36]](#endnote-36) The contemporary Gothic apocalypse offers a rejoinder to accounts of modern history as progress towards greater levels of global peace and prosperity, a view reflected in Francis Fukuyama’s famous argument that the establishment of liberal democracy – and liberal capitalism as its economic counterpart – constituted the ‘end of history’:

We can . . . imagine future worlds that are significantly worse than what we know now, in which national, racial, or religious intolerance make a comeback, or in which we are overwhelmed by war or environmental collapse. But we cannot picture to ourselves a world that is *essentially* different from the present one, and at the same time better. Other, less reflective ages also thought of themselves as the best, but we arrive at this conclusion exhausted, as it were, from the pursuit of alternatives we felt *had* to be better than liberal democracy.[[37]](#endnote-37)

For Fukuyama, the ‘end of history’ was the point at which no better model of society could be imagined. Improvements could be made to the functioning of the liberal society – the reduction of poverty, for example – and democracy itself could be undermined by the return of regressive and anti-democratic forces, but liberal democracy was incapable of replacement by a superior political and economic model.

In contrast, contemporary versions of Gothic apocalypse have frequently imagined versions of large-scale crisis that emerge from within the political and economic structures of liberalism (or neoliberalism) itself. Linnie Blake and Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet argue that ‘as neoliberalism has come to dominate the ways we live, work, think, interact and introspect, harnessing the epistemological incertitude of the postmodern project in service of its aims, the gothic’s ability to give voice to the occluded truths of our age has resulted in a global proliferation of gothic, and gothic-influenced, cultural artefacts’ – a theme expanded on at more length in Blake’s chapter in this volume.[[38]](#endnote-38) Gothic narratives have explored the shadow side of liberalism as the ‘end of history’, not least by depicting liberal capitalism as the driver of environmental destruction and (particularly in the aftermath of the global financial crash of 2007–8) by imagining in exaggerated and monstrous forms the collapse of the modern economy. By no means all of these narratives are entirely pessimistic: many use the post-apocalyptic landscape as a site in which to explore alternative possibilities for society, and at least a few seem to hint that the end of the present political and economic order might be a kind of fortunate fall that opens up a space for new ways of being. If there is a common thread in these diverse narratives, however, it is the persistent suspicion that the liberal order in some way contains the seeds of its own collapse.

In this context, the fiction of the American horror writer Thomas Ligotti reads as a dark parody of the liberal end of history. Ligotti’s stories often recall the prophetic nihilism of Lovecraft, but their visions of infinite disorder are grounded firmly in the neoliberal age. For Ligotti, even meaninglessness seems to have lost its meaning; revelation amounts to the discovery that ‘existence consisted of nothing but the most outrageous nonsense, a nonsense that had nothing unique about it at all and that had nothing behind it or beyond it except more and more nonsense – a new order of nonsense, perhaps an utterly unknown nonsense, but all of it nonsense and nothing but nonsense’.[[39]](#endnote-39) Where Lovecraft had imagined infinite chaos overthrowing the ordered, rational world of human experience, Ligotti depicts human subjects overwhelmed by their own pointlessness. Ligotti’s characters are individuals trapped within the social and economic logic of neoliberalism: notionally free citizens, they become entirely compliant with the structures and systems that they inhabit. In ‘The Town Manager’ (2006), the residents of a town wait unquestioningly for the arrival of a new town manager each time the previous incumbent departs. One of the townspeople, aware of the increasing degeneracy of each new manager, chooses to leave, but finds only the endless repetition of the same system. ‘I had fled that place in hopes of finding another that had been founded upon different principles and operated under a different order’, he observes. ‘But there was no such place, or none that I could find.’[[40]](#endnote-40) Fukuyama’s ‘end of history’ becomes a nightmare vision of stultifying sameness. In a final irony, the would-be escapee is recruited as the next town manager. The neoliberal order preserves itself by offering rewards of wealth and status to the few individuals who would rebel against it.

For the majority who do not rebel, the economic logic of neoliberalism ensures ever-greater levels of compliance. The narrator of ‘Our Temporary Supervisor’ (2006) is an employee in a factory, where the workers spend their days assembling metal components for purposes that are unclear even to them. When a new employee arrives and chooses to continue working through his lunch break, the other workers begin to emulate his behaviour, motivated by vague unease about the presence of a temporary supervisor and unwilling to be seen underperforming in comparison to the newcomer. The stranger’s performance, the narrator says, ‘introduced the rest of us at the factory to a hitherto unknown level of virtuosity in the service of productivity’.[[41]](#endnote-41) The workers voluntarily stop taking their breaks and no-one objects as both the length of the working day and the speed of the work itself are gradually increased. Their lives are reduced to an endless routine of repetitive and dehumanising labour, but they choose to remain, unable to imagine or contemplate any kind of existence outside of the factory. The neoliberal order, Ligotti suggests, offers its subjects the notional status of free citizens while directing their choices towards participation within the system. The workers accept their own dehumanisation because they are more afraid of what might lie beyond their lives in the factory. As the narrator observes, ‘Working at a furious pace, fitting together those small pieces of metal, helps keep our minds off such things.’[[42]](#endnote-42)

**Apocalyptic Returns**

Anxieties surrounding the conditions of contemporary capitalism have been closely connected with the resurgence of the zombie in popular culture. Since the millennium, a series of high-profile – and often commercially successful – zombie apocalypse narratives have appeared, including Max Brooks’s novel *World War Z* (2006) and its 2013 film adaptation (dir. Marc Forster); *I Am Legend* (dir. Francis Lawrence, 2007), a film that gives Matheson’s novel a more optimistic conclusion; a remake of Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (dir. Zack Snyder, 2004), along with director Edgar Wright’s affectionate parody *Shaun of the Dead* (2004); Swedish novelist John Ajvide Lindqvist’s *Handling the Undead* (2005; English translation 2009); and the long-running and highly popular television series *The Walking Dead* (2010–), based on the graphic novels of the same title by Robert Kirkman, Tony Moore and Charlie Adlard (2003–19). By no means all zombie apocalypse narratives are critical of contemporary economics or of consumerism – indeed, even those that do offer such critiques are themselves commercial products marketed and sold for ‘consumption’ by their audiences – but the genre does nonetheless often register unease both about the workings of the economy and the possibility of its collapse. In Brooks’s *World War Z*, for example, at least one pharmaceutical executive sees the impending disaster as a business opportunity: ‘A cure would make people buy it only if they thought they were infected. But a vaccine! That’s preventative! People will keep taking that as long as they’re afraid it’s out there!’[[43]](#endnote-43) Defending his decision to market ineffective preventatives to a panicking population, the executive insists upon the freedom of the consumer: ‘you wanna blame someone’, he insists, ‘why not start with all the sheep who forked over their greenbacks without bothering to do a little responsible research. I never held a gun to their heads. They made the choice themselves.’[[44]](#endnote-44) As his own testimony demonstrates, this argument is both technically true and misleading. The consumers of the useless vaccine were free citizens with the power of choice, but this freedom was always constrained by the manipulation of information by the government, the medical profession and the pharmaceutical industry, each of which colluded in maintaining the fiction that the vaccine was effective.

Apocalypse, Kevin Mills reminds us, is ‘a genre which grew out of disappointment’.[[45]](#endnote-45) Apocalyptic narratives have always emerged from and responded to situations of crisis, threat and disillusionment with the present order of things. In this respect, the Gothic apocalypses of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries belong to an ancient literary tradition in which narratives of the end of the world, or of the world as we know it, are used to interrogate the faults of the present and, perhaps, to articulate the hope for something better. Implicitly or overtly, the orientation of Gothic narratives is frequently towards futures that subvert the redemptive hope of biblical eschatology. When the dead return in Gothic, they tend to do so not as the redeemed and resurrected bodies of Christian hope, but in the monstrous forms of zombies, vampires and spectres. In Gothic, John Sears observes, ‘whatever returns is *never* Christ’.[[46]](#endnote-46) Indeed, some recent Gothic fictions have made this subversion of Christian eschatology explicit. ‘I can’t profess to understand God’s plan’, says Hershel Greene in *The Walking Dead*, ‘but Christ promised a resurrection of the dead. I just thought he had something a little different in mind.’[[47]](#endnote-47) John Ajvide Lindqvist’s *Handling the Undead* explores the theological implications of the zombie at greater length, but its conclusions are ambiguous. The unexplained revival of the recently deceased in a Swedish town is received initially by many families as the miraculous return of their loved ones, but the returned dead prove to be diminished remnants of their living selves, preserving the physical form (often in states of decay) with little evidence of human consciousness or personality. The returned dead are not the violent monsters of more conventional zombie narratives, but neither are they obvious figures of redemptive hope. They are, rather, uncanny figures that call into question the relationship between identity and the body while interrogating the nature of mourning and the difficulty of letting go of the dead.

For all of their apparent pessimism about the future, however, contemporary Gothic apocalypses have explored tentative possibilities of hope that a better future might emerge from the ruins of the old world. Beyond its persistent interest in the difficulties of survival in the post-apocalyptic world and the frequent deaths of central characters, *The Walking Dead* has returned often to the question of how a form of society might be rebuilt. In a series that uses as its setting the crumbling remains of American cities and the rusting products of capitalism, moments of renewal have often been based upon a return to the land, a direction also taken by the Gothic-inflected science fiction series *Battlestar Galactica* (2004–9). Over the course of the series, *The Walking Dead* has examined multiple versions of community – some of them reflecting ultimately destructive models of authoritarian rule – and explored the question of how far the survivors might go in embracing violence as a necessary tool for survival without sacrificing their own humanity and their ability to rebuild a functioning community.

A more decisive vision of future hope is offered in Justin Cronin’s *Passage* trilogy (2010–16), a post-apocalyptic vampire narrative that recuperates the genre’s theological roots and which culminates in a landscape restored to an Edenic state of nature. As in King’s *The Stand*, catastrophe is unleashed by a US military experiment gone wrong: a virus is released that transforms human beings into vampiric monsters (‘virals’) that rapidly destroy the population of North America and then the world. For Cronin, as for King, post-apocalyptic America becomes the site of a contest between two opposing figures, this time framed in terms derived from Augustinian theology. The ruler of the virals, known as Zero, is a figure of negation, an embodiment of the nothingness and undoing of creation that Augustine believed to be the essential nature of evil.[[48]](#endnote-48) Zero’s antagonist, Amy, is a messianic figure who seeks not to destroy the vampires, but to redeem them. The *Passage* trilogy sets the creative work of love in opposition to the destructive nothingness of evil and ends on a note of transformative hope as nature begins to restore itself. ‘Here she would make her garden’, the narrator concludes as Amy stands alone, the only remaining person on an American continent to which the descendants of the survivors will one day return; ‘She would make her garden, and wait.’[[49]](#endnote-49) Like *I Am Legend*, the *Passage* trilogy imagines a catastrophe that emerges through a combination of nature and modern military technology. Unlike Matheson’s novel, however, Cronin’s narrative closes on an image of a restored, Edenic landscape at the beginning of its repopulation by a human community that has remembered and attempted to learn from the disastrous errors of its predecessors. At a time of profound concern over the threat of anthropogenic climate change, it is a narrative that looks to new possibilities after the collapse of the world as we know it: a Gothic apocalypse that stakes its hope in the redeemability of human errors and offers glimpses of a world reborn in a future beyond the end.

**Notes**

1. 1 Thessalonians 4: 16. For a fuller account of the emergence of early Christian belief in resurrection, see N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK, 2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Kevin Mills, *Approaching Apocalypse: Unveiling Revelation in Victorian Writing* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007), p. 164. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 2007), pp. 54–9. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Matthew Arnold, ‘Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse’, lines 85–6, in Matthew Arnold, *Selected Poems*, edited by Timothy Peltason (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 113. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See Morton D. Paley, *Apocalypse and Millennium in English Romantic Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For a fuller account of the contexts and theological implications of the Nietzschean death of God, see Gavin Hyman, *A Short History of Atheism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, aphorism 125, trans. by Thomas Common (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. William Hope Hodgson, *The House on the Borderland and Other Novels* (London: Gollancz, 2002), p. 119. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Hodgson, *The House on the Borderland and Other Novels*, p. 199. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Lois Parkinson Zamora, *Writing the Apocalypse: Historical Vision in Contemporary U. S. and Latin American Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 24. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. H. P. Lovecraft, ‘The Call of Cthulhu’, in H. P. Lovecraft, *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, edited by S. T. Joshi (London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 139-69 (p. 139). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. H. P. Lovecraft, ‘He’, in *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, edited by S. T. Joshi (London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 119–29 (p. 126). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Lovecraft, ‘He’, p. 129. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Lucie Armitt, *Twentieth-Century Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), p. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Marilyn Michaud, *Republicanism and the American Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), p. 70. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Michaud, *Republicanism and the American Gothic*, p. 69–77. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Richard Matheson, *I Am Legend* (London: Gollancz, 2001), p. 54. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Matheson, *I Am Legend*, p. 160. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Matheson, *I Am Legend*, p. 82. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Bernice M. Murphy, ‘Horror Fiction from the Decline of Universal Horror to the Rise of the Psycho Killer’, in Xavier Aldana Reyes (ed.), *Horror: A Literary History* (London: British Library, 2016), pp. 131–57 (p. 136). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. On the vampire as a metaphor of consumerism, see Rob Latham, *Consuming Youth: Vampires, Cyborgs, and the Culture of Consumption* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Michaud, *Republicanism and the American Gothic*, p. 76. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. *Night of the Living Dead*, dir. G. A. Romero (Walter Reade Organization, 1968), 42:00. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. *Night of the Living Dead*, 51:00. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Andrew Tate, *Apocalyptic Fiction* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Graham Ward, *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), p. 132. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Stephen King, *The Stand* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2011), p. 853. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. King, *The Stand*, p. 119. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. King, *The Stand*, p. 308. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Stephen King, *It* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2011), p. 1256. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. King, *The Stand*, p. 852. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. King, *The Stand*, p. 755. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. King, *The Stand*, p. 853. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. King, *The Stand*, 1167. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Benjamin Percy’s werewolf novel *Red Moon* (2013), for example, includes a nuclear attack on the US by a terrorist group based loosely on al-Qaeda. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 46. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Linnie Blake and Agniezska Soltysik Monnet, ‘Introduction: Neoliberal Gothic’, in Linnie Blake and Agniezska Soltysik Monnet (eds), *Neoliberal Gothic: International Gothic in the Neoliberal Age* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), pp. 1–18 (p. 1). [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Thomas Ligotti, ‘The Clown Puppet’, in *Teatro Grottesco* (London: Virgin, 2008), pp. 53–64 (p. 63). [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Thomas Ligotti, ‘The Town Manager’, in *Teatro Grottesco*, pp. 22–36 (p. 35). [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Thomas Ligotti, ‘Our Temporary Supervisor’, in *Teattro Grottesco*, pp. 99–118 (p. 112). [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Ligotti, ‘Our Temporary Supervisor’, p. 118. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Max Brooks, *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War* (London: Duckworth, 2007), p. 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Brooks, *World War Z*, p. 58. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Mills, *Approaching Apocalypse*, p. 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. John Sears, *Stephen King’s Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), p. 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. ‘Nebraska’, *The Walking Dead*, season 2, episode 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Charles T. Mathewes, *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Justin Cronin, *The City of Mirrors* (London: Orion, 2016), p. 553. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)