The apocalypse and after

Anthony Burgess

W. WARREN WAGAR

Terminal Visions: The Literature of Last Things


252 35847 7

We have had the end of the world with us ever since the world began, or nearly. As we are all scolds, and all, the world dies with us. Of course, we suspect that our reliefs are going to live on, though we have no proof of it, and there is a possibility, again un-provable, that the sun will heartlessly rise the morning after we have become disposible morphology. Perhaps it is rage at the prospect of our ends that makes us want to extrapolate them on to the swind 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 H. G. H. Wells had papers had double-page apocalyptic 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 runs, 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 the 1920s - all without recorded sound-effects and with only wind-up gramophones - put a play on the consumption of all things, with an angelic blast singing Sir amoros's "Trotter's Hymn." 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-literate about the end of the world (for it is almost entirely that; in Ulises here the End of the World is a killed octopus that sings the Keel Row lies in the point of view. There has to be some body to witness it. Having refugees looking down on it from a space-ship is cheating, and so must have been anachronistic. There is a 777-page novel by Allan W. Eckert called The Hub Theory ("You'd better pray it's only fiction," says the hub) in which the weight of the polar ice-cap 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 man to preserve all knowledge so that civilization can be restarted 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 spon- taneous combustion and ended with a resounding moral paragraph. Mary Shelley, the mother of contem- plate principle of the solitary survivor in her title-page, was able to call the drama The Last Man. This is a story of a monstrous plague killing everybody else, except a doomed person wandering compassionless like Percy Bysshe's "idler" in Gray's Elegy, 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 is averse, 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 immure 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 end are clearings away of old rubbish to make way for the new world. The great age begins anew, as Shelley wrote. St John the Divine's vision is that 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. It is an academic historian and does not have to worry about literary considerations; indeed, style would only get in the way of the vision. Scientific read books we have only heard of, and some not even so - books as Robert Heath Benson's Lord of the World (1908), Paul Anderson's After Doomsday (1962), or K. G. Neville's Nineteen Eighty-Four is very much a novel of the end with no resurrection. When Winston Smith is shot the vision of collective scoliosis 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 bibil- ography can provide, if we except Brave New World, where the last man hangs himself. It is the vision of chaos, of the inevitability of change, that is so terrifying. William Blake slashed at heaven's eminential marble and reflected that in hell there is last energy and motion. Shaw's Back to Methuselah (again unmentioned here) is in the dream, "Dad is it not one SF writer whom we would read for the freshness or originality of his vision? A writer who has established a vision of the future. He is here by presenting before any futurology or the thought that on other creatures too wise to destroy their environment. Wagar's visions do not pretend widespread.

More than halfway through he gives us the meaning of his title: Terminal vision is the story 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 prophetic 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 their all chips on a single hand. But games just the same.

In other words, test the Welan- schaung 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, for example, was that Marquis de Sade and Malathus had visions springing out of theories of sexuality which, by reason of the very atavism of their subject, had to admit catastrophe. After the Enlightenment came the Romantic, who abandoned the steady-state model of reality drawn from mathematics and mechanics and thought, felt rather, in terms of volumes, 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 James 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 fenecence of our time? A cruel answer might be that practitioners of the form are hopeless 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 faith that it is not one SF writer whom we would read for the freshness or originality of his vision. A writer who has established a vision of the future. He is here by presenting before any futurology or the thought that on other creatures too wise to destroy their environment. Wagar's visions do not pretend widespread.

And with those words, Burgess leaves us on the edge of the future, of the world in which we live, and the world that is to come. It is a world of change, of catastrophe, of destruction and rebirth.

It is the fact that Wagar's survey covers only the lower order which makes one want to give too much importance to his theme. Frank Norris wrote, 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 God.." 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 of time but of the story. When Wagar writes of Morley's Red Snow, Southwind's The Seventh Page, Spital's La guerre des mouches, Vidal's Salk, Vonnegut's Cat's Cradle, George's Dr Strangeville (for Red Alert), Moore's Greener Than You Think, Dickens' The Genocides and Roskwald's Level 7, he is dealing with electronic games. The genuine crises that face us - the death of the topol, the question of the war in the Balkans - is not the same as the question of the "right 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 refined experience. As James, of personal agonies and elations. If books have to be written about the end of the world, they should be speculations as science and not as sub-literary life forms.