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THE APOCALYPTIC NOVEL AFTER 1945

-summary-

2011

SUMMARY:

The Twentieth Century has proved more than any other period in our recorded history that man is not only the creator of a complex technological civilization, but also the incarnation of an annihilatory force that can put an end to his own evolution as a species (*bio-apocalypse*), to his entity as human, through totalitarian state (the destruction of human values) or the destruction of the world through nuclear holocaust (*nuclear apocalypse*).

The Twentieth Century was also the moment when man almost replaced nature with his power of generating global catastrophes. The syntagm „after 1945” may be regarded as very common, but its power of suggestion remains untouched: it means at the same time „after Auschwitz”, „after Hiroshima”, after the most devastating war, after the end of modernism and its utopias, after the end of a cultural paradigm, after the end of Western European cultural supremacy. The Twentieth Century reveals a terrible novelty in the history of humanity: we are in search of our own human nature. In the first half of the past century this desire to reshape the human nature is obvious through ideology and the rise of totalitarian regimes. The second half makes visible a similar tendency towards reshaping the corporal dimension (the discovery of the human genome). The Twentieth Century had an apocalyptic nature because its catastrophes literally revealed some terrible facts about man and its civilization, putting into question its guiding principles.

The apocalyptic pattern has shaped not only the whole Western history, from its Christian origins to the present, but also has become today the very nature of its *Zeitgeist*. Writing about Apocalypse and its forms in culture and literature seems almost redundant, but also necessary. It is hard to find a single aspect of our contemporary culture and world untouched by the shadow of the apocalyptic, but, at the same time we witness the disappearance of the messianic dimension: imminence, anticipation and preoccupation with the signs of the End. James Berger, Baudrillard and many others have noticed the scarcity of millennial expectation and apocalyptic fears when the new millennium approached. The end of the last century and millennium has passed in silence, and thus becoming singular among other „date settings” that produced millennial anxieties throughout Western history. For the first time since the

Christian beginnings we had a Millennium without hope and apocalyptic fears (others have interpreted it as a sign for entering a post-Christian paradigm). As James Berger suggested, another reason for this radical change in the apocalyptic imaginary is the feeling that the end has already occurred during the last century. Our contemporary Western culture locates itself in a post-historical background, obsessed with the ends and the End, which is obvious in the postmodern discourse (the end of history, the end of man, the end of culture, the end of the Great Narratives etc). The Apocalypse is either dissipated throughout the past history (its traumatic events), or in the present of the „here and now“. Sloterdijk has remarked the new post-Christian version of apocalypticism that manifests today as *the panic culture*, deprived of the religious and messianic dimension.

What are the reasons for the apocalyptic fascination? –this is a recurrent question for those who approach this theme. Could it be a compensation, a revenge for the thought of personal death, an attempt to tame the personal end ? Could it be the attempt to master the passing of time through the fictionalization of the possible end? Could it be the fulfilment of the quest for sense, order, structure, all of them becoming clear only through the perspective of the End, as Frank Kermode suggested? We can also name the fascination towards the inconceivable: no one has ever witnessed the Apocalypse, but we can always compensate for this blank space in our experience through imagination, where the novelist becomes the master, a sort of „god“ with particular powers, conceiving all the possible scenarios, thus surpassing an essential impossibility, and also the postponed Apocalypse. No matter how many ends of the world we imagine, the Apocalypse remains as remote and surreal as a dream. Fiction is the safest and pleasant way of witnessing the Apocalypse.

In the first part of the present work (*The Apocalyptic Phenomenon after 1945: Elements for a Radical Change*), the apocalyptic phenomenon is analysed especially for its novelty, through the change of paradigm after 1945 and its implications, dwelling upon the idea that man is the author of the end of civilization, with the exclusion of the divine causality and also the religious paradigm. The key elements of our approach are the ideology and events which shaped the post-war apocalyptic imaginary, and consequently, the apocalyptic novel. The first chapter (*The End of the World Has Already Occurred: the Apocalyptic Year 1945 and the Fall of Utopias*) stresses upon the idea that our recent history is essentially apocalyptic, from the urban deserts and devastation of the Second World War to the discovery of the

concentration camps and the effects of the atomic bomb upon the imaginary of the post-war era. The second chapter of the first part (*The Postmodern Ends*) surveys the profane eschatology of the postmodern, the announced ends of culture, novel, man and history, underscores the problematic relation between postmodernism and apocalyptic, which is present in the fiction of the Mannerist, parodic and postponed apocalypse. The third chapter (*The Posthuman Utopias, from Theory to Fiction*) is a summary of the ideas behind technological posthumanism, the very core of the ideology behind most of the bio-apocalypses, a third pattern of the apocalyptic novel which starts from the question „which type of human being shall we conceive?“. This type of novel describes the terrible consequences of this transgression: the re-shaping of the biological pattern of the human species. The fourth chapter of the first part (*The Panic Culture and the New Apocalyptic Paradigm*) starts with the significance of the 9/11 events in order to suggest a resurgence of the debate regarding the apocalyptic in contemporary intellectual discourse. The fifth chapter (*The Apocalyptic Scenarios in „Popular Scientific“*) is a short survey through the literature of „popular scientific“ in order to build a hierarchical scale of possible catastrophic ends of the world, from the end of civilization to the heat death of the universe, a summary of catastrophic natural disasters which will not be the focus for our approach to the apocalyptic novel.

A crucial point in a study of the apocalyptic novel is the immense variety of its forms in literature and in finding the functional ways of building categories of those representations in the novel. The vast bulk of apocalyptic fictions can be classified according to the cause that produced the apocalyptic catastrophe: novels about natural disasters, triggered by forces outside the human realm, which do not render him responsible and catastrophes that reveal the human power, irresponsibility and guilt. My approach will focus exclusively on the latter, in order to stress upon the singular aspect of the new paradigm in the history of the apocalyptic novel (the post-war era). The reasons for this selection can be found throughout the first part but especially in the sixth chapter (*Towards a Theory of the Apocalyptic Novel*).

Another possible way of classifying the apocalyptic novel combines the literary form with the content, rendering in four possible types the confrontation between style and theme: mannerist and parodic apocalypse, dystopic apocalypse (ethical and anti-totalitarian), bio-apocalypse (viral and posthuman), nuclear apocalypse (post-cataclysmic). The last three types are analysed in the second part (*The Apocalyptic Novel between Dystopia and Posthuman Utopia*) and are all

considered fictions of the posthumanity, post-cataclysmical, in contrast with the imminence of the end in the mannerist apocalypse, towards the awareness that the end has already taken place, either as a nightmarish *telos* which has brought about the end of the human (*dystopic apocalypse*), the end of man as a biological entity (*bio-apocalypse*), or a catastrophic *terminus* that produced the end of human culture and civilization (*nuclear apocalypse*). The novels that would not fit those categories were placed in the fourth chapter (*Domestic Apocalypses*), between the chapter focused on the dystopic apocalypse (Chapter two and three) and the one dealing with the nuclear apocalypse as a transition between those two, a synthesis of features of both dystopic and nuclear apocalypse.

The third (*Mannerist and Comic Apocalypse*) and fourth part (*Romanian Post-Communist Literature and Mannerist Apocalypse*) are both a minute description of the Mannerist apocalypse (pre-apocalyptic novel) which is completely different from the other three categories: in these fictions it is of a very little importance *how* the world would end (an infinite number of possibilities); the end in itself is never represented, but always highly anticipated, rendered as imminent; the Mannerist apocalyptic scenario focuses on the signs of the end and their interpretations; those authors (Thomas Pynchon, Umberto Eco, Mario Vargas Llosa, Kurt Vonnegut and others) have a postmodern awareness and knowledge of all the instances of the Apocalypse in the cultural tradition (postmodernism is less important for the other three categories); a confrontation between various apocalyptic patterns can be traced in this novels; the Mannerist apocalypse remains very close to the Biblical apocalyptic scenario and imaginary, from the *Book of Daniel* to *Enoch*. The Christian apocalyptic scenario is also subject to irony and pastiche. This category stands as a proof that the apocalyptic novel is not a subspecies of science fiction, because the fictional transcription of the Apocalyptic imagery and motifs is made by different narrative discourses, in an autonomous development (science fiction vs mainstream) as Brian McHale and others have suggested. There are at least four ways of dividing the immense bulk of novels into chapters: different literatures, authors, themes or series of novels. I have grouped the novels in paradigmatic series for each category.

KEYWORDS:

dystopic apocalypse, nuclear apocalypse, bio-apocalypse, baroque and comic apocalypse, posthuman utopia, posthuman and posthumanism, Cold War, culture of conspiracy and paranoia, poetics of paranoia, solipsism, entropy, panic culture, catastrophism, messianism and millennialism, decadence, dissolution of the „real”, the end of the world, the end of history, the end of ideologies, the „Last Man”, the dystopian city, the Postmodern Ends, the archetype of the Book, the postponed Apocalypse.

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