The Sense of an Ending

STUDIES IN THE THEORY OF FICTION
with a New Epilogue

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then the Last Judgment begins, & its Vision is Seen by the
Imaginative Eye of Every one according to the situation he holds.

BLAKE

we can only
Walk in temperate London, our educated city,
Wishing to cry as freely as they did who died
In the Age of Faith. We have our loneliness
And our regret with which to build an eschatology.

PETER PORTER

It is not expected of critics as it is of poets that they should help us to make sense of our lives; they are bound only to attempt the lesser feat of making sense of the ways we try to make sense of our lives. This series of talks is devoted to such an attempt, and I am well aware that neither good books nor good counsel have purged it of ignorance and dull vision; but I take comfort from the conviction that the topic is infallibly interesting, and especially at a moment in history when it may be harder than ever to accept the precedents of sense-making—to believe that any earlier way of satisfying one’s need to know the shape of life in relation to the perspectives of time will suffice.

You remember the golden bird in Yeats’s poem—it sang of what was past and passing and to come, and so interested a drowsy emperor. In order to do that, the bird had to be ‘out of nature’; to speak humanly of becoming and knowing is the task of pure being, and this is humanly represented in the poem by an artificial bird. ‘The artifice of eternity’ is a striking periphrasis for ‘form,’ for the shapes which console the dying generations. In this respect it makes little difference—though it makes some—whether you believe the age of the world to be six thousand years
or five thousand million years, whether you think time will have a stop or that the world is eternal; there is still a need to speak humanly of a life's importance in relation to it—a need in the moment of existence to belong, to be related to a beginning and to an end.

The physician Alkeon observed, with Aristotle's approval, that men die because they cannot join the beginning and the end. What they, the dying men, can do is to imagine a significance for themselves in these unremembered but imaginable events. One of the ways in which they do this is to make objects in which everything is that exists in concord with everything else, and nothing else is, implying that this arrangement mirrors the dispositions of a creator, actual or possible:

... as the Primitive Forms of all
(If we compare great things with small)
Which without Discord or Confusion lie,
In that strange Mirror of the Deitie.

Such models of the world make tolerable one's moment between beginning and end, or at any rate keep us drowsy emperors awake. There are other prophets beside the golden bird, and we are capable of deciding that they are false, or obsolete. I shall be talking not only about the persistence of fictions but about their truth, and also about their decay. There is the question, also, of our growing suspicious of fictions in general. But it seems that we still need them. Our poverty—to borrow that rich concept from Wallace Stevens—is great enough, in a world which is not our own, to necessitate a continuous preoccupation with the changing fiction.

I begin by discussing fictions of the End—about ways in which, under varying existential pressures, we have imagined the ends of the world. This, I take it, will provide clues to the ways in which fictions, whose ends are consonant with origins, and in concord, however unexpected, with their precedents, satisfy our needs. So we begin with Apocalypse, which ends, transforms, and is concordant.

Broadly speaking, apocalyptic thought belongs to rectilinear rather than cyclical views of the world, though this is not a sharp distinction; and even in Jewish thought there was no true apocalyptic until prophecy failed, for Jewish apocalyptic belongs to what scholars call the Inter- testamentary Period. But basically one has to think of an ordered series of events which ends, not in a great New Year, but in a final Sabbath. The events derive their significance from a unitary system, not from their correspondence with events in other cycles.

This changes the events themselves, and the temporal relations between them. In Homer, we are told, the Odyssean episodes are related by their correspondence with a cyclic ritual; the time between them is insignificant or null, Virgil, describing the progress of Aeneas from the broken city of Troy to a Rome standing for empire without end, is closer to our traditional apocalyptic, and that is why his imperium has been incorporated into Western apocalyptic as a type of the City of God. And in the journey of Aeneas the episodes are related internally; they all exist under the shadow of the end. Erich Auerbach makes a similar point in the opening chapter of Mimesis, where he contrasts the story of the scar of Odysseus with the story of the sacrifice of Isaac—the second story has continually to be modified by reference to what is known of the divine
plan from the Creation to the Last Days: it is perpetually open to history, to reinterpretation—one remembers how central the story was to Kierkegaard—in terms of changed human ways of speaking about the single form of the world. *The Odyssey* is not, in this way, open. Virgil and Genesis belong to our end-determined fictions; their stories are placed at what Dante calls the point where all times are present, *il punto a cui tutti li tempi son presenti*; or within the shadow of it. It gives each moment its fullness. And although for us the End has perhaps lost its naïve *imminence*, its shadow still lies on the crises of our fictions; we may speak of it as *immanent*.

This is a position I shall try to justify in my second talk. Meanwhile let me assume it. In their general character our fictions have certainly moved away from the simplicity of the paradigm; they have become more ‘open.’ But they still have, and so far as one is capable of prediction must continue to have, a real relation to simpler fictions about the world. Apocalypse is a radical instance of such fictions and a source of others. I shall be speaking of it both as type and source. In view of my own limitations and because the end of one’s lecture is always immanent, I shall go in for drastic foreshortenings; but if I concentrate on aspects of the topic important to my argument, I do so, I hope, without falsifying the others.

The Bible is a familiar model of history. It begins at the beginning (‘In the beginning . . .’) and ends with a vision of the end (‘Even so, come, Lord Jesus’); the first book is Genesis, the last Apocalypse. Ideally, it is a wholly concordant structure, the end is in harmony with the beginning, the middle with beginning and end. The end, Apocalypse, is traditionally held to resume the whole structure, which it can only do by figures predictive of that part of it which has not been historically revealed. The Book of Revelation made its way only slowly into the canon—it is still unacceptable to Greek Orthodoxy—perhaps because of learned mistrust of over-literal interpretation of the figures. But once established it showed, and continues to show, a vitality and resource that suggest its consonance with our more naïve requirements of fiction.

Men, like poets, rush ‘into the middest,’ *in medias res*, when they are born; they also die *in mediis rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems. The End they imagine will reflect their irreducibly intermediary preoccupations. They fear it, and as far as we can see have always done so; the End is a figure for their own deaths. (So, perhaps, are all ends in fiction, even if represented, as they are for example by Kenneth Burke, as cathartic discharges.)

It is sometimes argued—as by those very different critics, D. H. Lawrence and Dr. Austin Farrar—that behind Revelation there lies a strictly inexplicable set of myths that have been overlaid by later topical applications; but what human need can be more profound than to humanize the common death? When we survive, we make little images of moments which have seemed like ends; we thrive on epochs. Fowler observes austerely that if we were always quite serious in speaking of ‘the end of an epoch’ we should live in ceaseless transition; recently Mr. Harold Rosenberg has been quite seriously saying that we do. Scholars are devoted to the epoch, and philosophers—notably Ortega y Gasset and Jaspers—have tried to give the concept definition. The matter is entirely in our own
hands, of course; but our interest in it reflects our deep need for intelligible Ends. We project ourselves—a small, humble elect, perhaps—past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle.

Apocalypse depends on a concord of imaginatively recorded past and imaginatively predicted future, achieved on behalf of us, who remain ‘in the midst.’ Its predictions, though figurative, can be taken literally, and as the future moves in on us we may expect it to conform with the figures. Many difficulties arise from this expectation. We ask such questions as, who is the Beast from the Land? the Woman Clothed with the Sun? What is meant by this number, and to what events do the Seven Seals refer? Where, on the body of history, shall we look for the scars of that three-and-a-half years’ reign? What is Babylon, who is the Knight Faithful and True? We may be sure that we can from our special point of vantage work out the divisions of history in accordance with these figures, and that we must be right, if only because the state of the world shows so clearly that the second coming is at hand, donec finiatur mundus corruptionis. The great majority of interpretations of Apocalypse assume that the End is pretty near. Consequently the historical allegory is always having to be revised; time discredits it. And this is important. Apocalypse can be disconfirmed without being discredited. This is part of its extraordinary resilience. It can also absorb changing interests, rival apocalypses, such as the Sibylline writings. It is patient of change and of historiographical sophistications. It allows itself to be diffused, blended with other varieties of fiction—tragedy, for example, myths of Empire and of Decadence—and yet it can survive in very naïve forms. Probably the most sophisticated of us is capable at times of naïve reactions to the End.

Let us look for a moment at some features of naïve apocalypticism. The early Christians were the first to experience the disconfirmation of literal predictions; it has been said that the apostasies of the second century were the consequence of this ‘eschatological despair,’ as Bultmann calls it. But literal disconfirmation is thwarted by typology, arithology, and perhaps by the buoyancy of chiliasm in general. Thus a mistaken prediction can be attributed to an error of calculation, either in arithmetic or allegory. And if you insist that Nero is Antichrist, or Frederick II the Emperor of the Last Days, you need not be too depressed if your choice should die too early, since at this level of historical abstraction you can always believe he will return at a convenient season; and you will even find Sibylline texts to support you.

Given this freedom, this power to manipulate data in order to achieve the desired consonance, you can of course arrange for the End to occur at pretty well any desired date, but the most famous of all predicted Ends is A.D. 1000. It is now thought that earlier historians exaggerated the ‘Terrors’ of that year, but it need not be doubted that it produced a characteristic apocalyptic-crisis. The opinion of St. Augustine, that the millennium was the first thousand years of the Christian era, supported the feeling that the world was reaching its term, and that the events of Apocalypse, already given memorable iconographic form, were to ensue. The Terrors and Decadence are two of the recurring elements in the apocalyptic pattern; Decadence is usually associated with the hope of renovation. Another permanent feature of the pattern was also illustrated in
the crisis of the year 1000, and this I shall call clerkly scepticism. The Church frowned on precise predictions of the End. One such protest was the Libelius de Antichristo of Adso. He was a monk who in 954 argued that the end of the world cannot be predicted, and in any case cannot come until the full restoration of the Empire (ultimately a Sibylline doctrine). It can only happen after a Frankish emperor, following a peaceful universal reign, has deposited his sceptre on the Mount of Olives. The Church persistently tried to de-mythologize Apocalypse, though obviously Adso was discrediting arithmological fictions by substituting what seem to us equally fantastic imperial fictions. In fact the mythology of Empire and of Apocalypse are very closely related. Anyway, there was something that might be called scepticism among the learned—a recognition that arithmetical predictions of the End are bound to be disconfirmed.

When the year 1000 came, there were some portents, and there was a brief but Sibylline entente between Emperor and Pope (Otto III and Sylvester II, so much hated by Protestant historians). Seals were issued bearing imperial legends; one had an allegorical figure of Rome and the inscription renovatio imperii Romani. The Emperor's coronation robe was embroidered with scenes from Apocalypse. And Henri Focillon, in his book L'An mil, can argue that the year actually was significant, marking an epoch, even though it lapsed without universal catastrophe. Naturally there were those who simply thought the calculations were wrong, that we should perhaps count 1000 from the Passion rather than from the Nativity, so that the Day would come in 1033. And this is something that occurs regularly in the literature; the Protestant com-

mentators sometimes counted from the last of the persecutions, sometimes from the conversion of Constantine, in order to defer that interesting date, the moment of the loosing of the Beast, to a time when he could be identified with some intolerable papal presumption or with some particularly vicious pope. More sophisticated calculations, based on the Seven Seals, or the period spent by the Woman Clothed with the Sun in the wilderness, could produce other dates as near one's own moment as desirable.

Focillon's treatment of the year 1000 reflects his interest in the way not only the millennium but the century and other fundamentally arbitrary chronological divisions—we might simply call them saecula—are made to bear the weight of our anxieties and hopes; they are, as he remarks, 'intemporal,' but we project them onto history, making it 'a perpetual calendar of human anxiety.' They help us to find ends and beginnings. They explain our senescence, our renovations; when we associate them with empire we are celebrating our desire for human kinds of order; when we find rational objections to them we indulge our powers of rational censorship in such matters; and when we refuse to be dejected by disconfirmed predictions we are only ascerting a permanent need to live by the pattern rather than the fact, as indeed we must.

There are famous saecula, Ends of which everyone is aware, and in which we may take a complex comfort, as in the nineteenth-century fin-de-siècle, where all the elements of the apocalyptic paradigm clearly co-exist. But there are many others less famous, to show how radical an element in our thinking about the world's design this brooding on apocalypse must be. The Bible and the Sybiline oracles, mingled with Neo-Platonic speculation and
with any other mysterious data available, will provide any date for the End, and the necessary supporting evidence is always available. A.D. 195 was a Sibylline conjecture: 948, 1000, 1053, 1296, 1260, 1367, 1420, 1588, 1666 are other guesses. We must count Dante and perhaps Shakespeare among the major poets interested in the signs of historical apocalypse, and among the mathematicians, Napier and Newton. And as Focillon observed, the world sometimes seems to collaborate with our apocalypse; students of the English sixteenth century will recall that the novae, especially the one in Cassiopeia in 1572, and the solar eclipse of the late years of the century, seemed to confirm that upon men who thought themselves to be living 'in the dregs of time' there had come 'the signs of the approaching of the Lord to judgment.' They will also remember the sceptics of the period, and reflect that after so much talk of senescence there was soon to be a great outburst of renovatory chiliastic. And perhaps they will also reflect upon the interesting revival of imperial mythologies at both the French and the English courts of the period.

There is an instance of the way in which apparently unrelated fin-de-siècle myths grow together. But there is one important element in this apocalyptic pattern which I have as yet hardly mentioned. This is the myth, if we can call it that, of Transition. Before the End there is a period which does not properly belong either to the End or to the sæculum preceding it. It has its own characteristics. This period of Transition seems not to have been defined until the end of the twelfth century; but the definition then arrived at—by Joachim of Flora—has proved to be remarkably enduring. Its origin is in the three-and-a-half-year reign of the Beast which, in Revelation, precedes the

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Last Days. Joachim, who died in 1202, divided history into three phases, a division based on the Trinity; the last transition would begin in 1260, a date arrived at by multiplying forty-two by thirty, the number of years in each generation between Abraham and Christ. This was accordingly taken to be the date of the coming of Anti-christ, and consequently of the figure called the Knight Faithful and True, fidelis et verus, identified with the last emperor. These prophecies had a long life; not only Dante, at the end of the century, but Hegel and others much later, took them seriously. In the mid-thirteenth century the prophecies were of the utmost urgency. Frederick II was cast as Beast, or as fidelis et verus, depending on whether you adhered to one party or the other. The Benedictines argued that the figure who corresponded, for the third age, to Adam in the first and Abraham in the second, was Saint Benedict. The Spiritual Franciscans said it was St. Francis. The Emperor was important to all interpretations; this was the age of the Dies Irae, in which the Sibyl is coupled with David as an authoritative witness to the Last Days.

The death of Frederick ten years early, in 1250, could not halt Joachite speculation. It was condemned in 1260, and subsequently thrived best in unorthodox contexts. Its evangelium aeternum was transmitted by the Brethren of the Free Spirit, by the Anabaptists and by Boehme, by the Family of Love and the Ranter. The Jesus of Blake's Everlasting Gospel is the Christ of Joachim's third phase. Some aspects of this brand of apocalypse survive in D. H. Lawrence. More dangerously, the ideology of National Socialism incorporated Joachite elements; "the Third Reich" is itself a Joachite expression. And the notion of an
End-dominated age of transition has passed into our consciousness, and modified our attitudes to historical pattern. As Ruth Kestenberg-Gladstein observes, 'the Joachite triad made it inevitable that the present become "a mere transitional stage,"' and leaves people with a sense of living at a turning-point of time.

Thus apocalypse, which resumes the Bible, projects its neat, naive patterns on to history. Simplifying, and leaving out much I was tempted to gossip about, I will now say a word about apocalyptic doctrines of crisis, decadence, and empire, and of the division of history into mutually significant phases and transitions; with a word on disconfirmation, the inevitable fate of detailed eschatological predictions.

The imperial aspect is greatly illuminated by Norman Cohn's book, The Pursuit of the Millennium, with its account of the popular survival of Sibylline emperor cults. The tradition of those passionate artisan prophets, who assumed the role of the Emperor of the Last Days and led their free-spirited followers in search of the new Jerusalem, was still alive in the nineteenth century, as a sort of proletarian parallel to the more sophisticated imperialism of the ruling classes in Germany and England. Eric Hobsbawm's book, Primitive Rebels, studies several such movements. Lazzaretti, for example, prophesied the coming of a monarch who would reconcile church and people; later he proclaimed himself the Messiah, preaching a modified Joachism, which said that there had been Kingdoms of Grace and of Justice, and that we were in the transition between the second and the third Kingdom, that of the Holy Ghost. He nominated 1878 for the crisis; and in that year died both Vittorio Emmanuele I and Pius IX. Lazzaretti moved to succeed them both, and was killed in the attempt. Thus a popular uprising of only ninety years back repeats the pattern discernible in the relations between Pope and Emperor in the year 1000, a relation both Sibylline and Joachite. Hobsbawm can even add that the attempt on Togliatti in 1948 was taken by some Italian Communists as a signal that the Day had come; they were surviving members of the Lazzaretti movement, still, against all expectation, persisting underground, presumably with the date recolculated.

The study of apocalypse can be a heady one. For instance, there appeared in 1963 a book by Fr. Cyril Marystone entitled The Coming Type of the End of the World. This work is dedicated to the Woman Clothed with the Sun, 'the Mother of Christ and the Church—who is persecuted by the Great Red Dragon.' The author divides future history into three periods, the present 'modern anti-Christian,' the 'Period of the Universal Victory of the Christian Church on Earth,' and the 'Period of the Great Apostasy.' Published in 1963, the book predicts atomic war and world victory for Communism in 1964. The Great Monarch will come in 1966, and in consort with the Great Pope will achieve world victory, the reform of the Church, the conversion of the separated, and a universal Holy Roman Empire. Later on there is to be a Great Apostasy, and Antichrist will reign for three and a half years, whereupon the Last Days supervene.

In a world not short of crazy sects, and perhaps in no need of spurious apocalypses, such a work may seem unworthy of your attention. But it will bear thinking about, if only as a full statement of this potent imperial myth. It is a well-written book, with an exceptionally valuable sur-
vey of earlier apocalyptic prophecy; and one could well take it to be an expression, in traditional figures, of a widely shared sense of crisis. Shakespeare and Spenser would have understood its language. Father Marystone is quite capable of a rational compromise between his predictions and those of doctrinaire Marxism, and he is familiar with the more sophisticated modern apocalypticism of such as Berdyaev. But he works the vein of naive apocalypse. His list of former prophecies includes those of Hrabanus Maurus and Adso, who held that the last Emperor must be a Frankish king. Instead of saying they were wrong, he argues that this figure must be the present heir to the French throne; and with the utmost urgency (since the time is so short) he joins in the old argument as to who this might be. The book—half of which is in the form of appendices added in haste, because there was no time to rewrite it when fresh material came up—the book is a paradigm of crisis, of a way of thinking about the present as being what theologians call totally end-directed. We may be sure that the failure of 1964, or even, so far, of 1965, to produce atomic war and the burning of Paris will not have dismayed the author; his book is founded on centuries of disconfirmed apocalyptic prediction.

This indifference to disconfirmation was the subject of some interesting research, a few years ago, by the American sociologist Festinger. He found a thriving sect and infiltrated some of his research students into it. This group believed that the end was at hand, and that they would be flown off in flying saucers just before the cataclysm. The students attended all meetings, and retired nightly to hotel bedrooms to write up their reports. They were present at the final countdown, on the Day, and were able to observe that for most of the members of the sect disconfirmation was quickly followed by the invention of new end-fictions and new calculations. Festinger had previously noted that such sects characteristically sought to restore the pattern of prophecy rather than to abandon it, and on this erects a general doctrine, very interesting in the present connection, of what he calls consonance.

In fact this desire for consonance in the apocalyptic data, and our tendency to be derivative about it, seem to me equally interesting. Each manifests itself, in the presence of the other, in most of our minds. We are all ready to be sceptical about Father Marystone, but we are most of us given to some form of 'centurial mysticism,' and even to more extravagant apocalyptic practices: a point I shall be taking up in my fourth talk. What it seems to come to is this. Men in the midst make considerable imaginative investments in coherent patterns which, by the provision of an end, make possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and with the middle. That is why the image of the end can never be permanently falsified. But they also, when awake and sane, feel the need to show a marked respect for things as they are; so that there is a recurring need for adjustments in the interest of reality as well as of control.

This has relevance to literary plots, images of the grand temporal consonance; and we may notice that there is the same co-existence of naive acceptance and scepticism here as there is in apocalyptic. Broadly speaking, it is the popular story that sticks most closely to established conventions; novels the clerisy calls 'major' tend to vary them, and to vary them more and more as time goes by. I shall be talk-
ing about this in some detail later, but a few brief illustrations might be useful now. I shall refer chiefly to one aspect of the matter, the falsification of one’s expectation of the end.

The story that proceeded very simply to its obviously predestined end would be nearer myth than novel or drama. Peripeteia, which has been called the equivalent, in narrative, of irony in rhetoric, is present in every story of the least structural sophistication. Now peripeteia depends on our confidence of the end; it is a disconfirmation followed by a consonance; the interest of having our expectations falsified is obviously related to our wish to reach the discovery or recognition by an unexpected and instructive route. It has nothing whatever to do with any reluctance on our part to get there at all. So that in assimilating the peripeteia we are enacting that readjustment of expectations in regard to an end which is so notable a feature of naïve apocalyptic.

And we are doing rather more than that; we are, to look at the matter in another way, re-enacting the familiar dialogue between credulity and scepticism. The more daring the peripeteia, the more we may feel that the work respects our sense of reality; and the more certainly we shall feel that the fiction under consideration is one of those which, by upsetting the ordinary balance of our naïve expectations, is finding something out for us, something real. The falsification of an expectation can be terrible, as in the death of Cordelia; it is a way of finding something out that we should, on our more conventional way to the end, have closed our eyes to. Obviously it could not work if there were not a certain rigidity in the set of our expectations.

The degree of rigidity is a matter of profound interest in the study of literary fictions. As an extreme case you will find some novel, probably contemporary with yourself, in which the departure from a basic paradigm, the peripeteia in the sense I am now giving it, seems to begin with the first sentence. The schematic expectations of the reader are discouraged immediately. Since by definition one seeks the maximum peripeteia (in this extended sense) in the fiction of one’s own time, the best instance I can give is from Alain Robbe-Grillet. He refuses to speak of his ‘theory’ of the novel; it is the old ones who talk about the need for plot, character, and so forth, who have the theories. And without them one can achieve a new realism, and a narrative in which ‘le temps se trouve coupé de la temporalité. Il ne coule plus.’ And so we have a novel in which the reader will find none of the gratification to be had from sham temporality, sham causality, falsely certain description, clear story. The new novel ‘repeats itself, bisects itself, modifies itself, contradicts itself, without even accumulating enough bulk to constitute a past—and thus a “story,” in the traditional sense of the word.’ The reader is not offered easy satisfactions, but a challenge to creative co-operation.

When Robbe-Grillet wrote Les Gommes he was undoubtedly refining upon certain sophisticated conventions developed by Simenon in the Maigret novels; but in those the dark side of the plot is eventually given a reasonable explanation, whereas in Robbe-Grillet the need for this has gone. Rival versions of the same set of facts can co-exist without final reconciliation. The events of the day are the events of the novel, and on the first page we are told that they will ‘encroach upon the ideal order, cunningly intro-
writing with an eraser. The story ends where it began, within the immediate perceptual field of a narrator. It is always not doing things which we unreasonably assume novels ought to do: connect, diversify, explain, make concords, facilitate extrapolations. Certainly there is no temporality, no successiveness. In Robbe-Grillet’s latest novel the same character is murdered four times over (an extension of the device already used in Les Gommes). This is certainly a shrewd blow at paradigmatic expectations.

Still, this is very modern and therefore very extreme. As a method Robbe-Grillet’s owes a good deal to those of Sartre and Camus, and it is obvious that both La Nausée and L’Étranger are strikingly original and unconventional fictions; yet in the view of the younger man, Camus was incapable of breaking completely with the old myths of narrative, the old anthropomorphism, and Robbe-Grillet calls him a tragic humanist. Sartre in his own way is just as old-fashioned, his world ‘entièremment tragifié.’ And it is true that even in these novels, and much more in Les Chemins de la liberté and in La Peste, Sartre and Camus are less contemptuous than Robbe-Grillet of paradigm and expectation.

For example, the first chapter of La Peste is not so different from one of Scott’s leisurely overtures; it talks about the ‘setting,’ Oran, and although it contains what might be called typological ironies—indications of the ways in which Oran, in the book, might stand for any community, or for some particular communities (France, for example, on the eve of the Occupation)—these are not obtrusive. The ‘real’ opening follows, and striking though it may be—‘When leaving his surgery on the morning of 16 April, Dr. Bernard Rieux felt something soft under his foot’—

providing an occasional inversion, a discrepancy, a warp, in order to accomplish their work.’ The time of the novel is not related to any exterior norm of time. So, in La Jalousie, the narrator is explicitly ‘unconcerned with chronology,’ perceiving only that here and now in which memory, fantasy, anticipation of the future may intrude, though without sharp differentiation. The story does move forward, but without reference to ‘real’ time, or to the paradigms of real time familiar from conventional novels.

It is a question how far these books could make their effect if we were genuinely, as Robbe-Grillet thinks we should be, indifferent to all conventional expectations. In some sense they must be there to be defeated. Thus, in another novel, In the Labyrinth, the soldier who is the central figure only slowly emerges (in so far as he does emerge) from other things, the objects described with equal objectivity, such as the mysterious packet he carries (why is it mysterious? that is a conventional expectation, to be defeated later) or a street, or wallpaper. The soldier has a mission; as you expect to hear about it you are given minute descriptions—of snow on windowsills, of polish on a boot, of the blurred rings left by glasses on a wooden tabletop. There is an unhelpful child, who comes in again and again, confusing one about one’s way, asking questions. There is a woman who gives the soldier food, and a photograph mysteriously (why?) related to the soldier himself and what he is doing. It seems he has arrived at the unknown place he seeks; but no, he has not, for he is back at an earlier point in the story, though he does not seem to have been dreaming. He even sees himself in the street. The book makes its own unexpected, unacceptable designs; this is écriture labyrinthine, as Les Gommes is
it is no great departure from the famous norm of an opening sentence, 'The Marquise went out at five o'clock.' So at the end; the end of the plague might seem a natural close, but it goes on, and Rieux, now known to be the narrator, adds a few words to moralize the situation: in happy cities which do not like death it is easy to ignore the existence of the plague bacillus, and so on. This is, however, not the old ending that panders to temporal expectations, the sort described (in its comic mode) by Henry James as 'a distribution at the last of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs, and cheerful remarks.' In fact Camus has put the conventional opening and close to original use; for without the opening and the close it would certainly be less easy to argue, as is commonplace, that the book is 'really about the Occupation, or 'really about' more abstract issues. The peripeteia is there all right, but it bears more directly upon the conventions which make it possible. La Peste is what the analysts call 'over-determined,' is susceptible to multiple readings, because of the slightly extra-paradigmatic way of proceeding I have tried to sketch in. There is other evidence; it even contains the opening of a rival novel, intensely conventional, and the sermons are also peripetias. La Peste is much more like a 'novel' than Dans le labyrinthe, but it has anti-novelistic devices; as all good novels, on the French definition of the anti-novel, must have.

Let me, to get the situation clearer, choose at random one more novel, an older one again, which has the advantage of being universally regarded as a remarkable masterpiece: Dostoevsky's The Idiot. To put it at its lowest, this novel abounds in surprising things. But it starts off with the Warsaw train rapidly approaching St. Petersburg 'at about nine o'clock in the morning at the end of November,' and tells us that the train contains Prince Myshkin and Rogozhin. They are elaborately described, and the other principal, Nastasya Filippovna, is discussed in some detail before the train gets in. Even Lebedev is there. The prince is called a 'holy fool.' It seems that nothing in the story is being held back. And indeed the book ends, thirteen or fourteen reading hours later, with Rogozhin and Myshkin together beside the dead Nastasya, the corpse with its one hovering fly, the murderer, and the idiot consoling him. Or so it would end, were it not that Dostoevsky found the paradigms convenient in their place; he writes a 'conclusion,' completely perfunctory and traditional, in which he tells you what became of the surviving characters, one of those ends so despised by Henry James.

It would be of little use at this point to introduce more examples. In the nouveau roman of Robbe-Grillet there is an attempt at a more or less Copernican change in the relation between the paradigm and the text. In Camus the counter-pointing is less doctrinaire; in Dostoevsky there is no evidence of any theoretical stand at all, simply rich originality within or without, as it chances, normal expectations.

All these are novels which most of us would agree (and it is by a consensus of this kind only that these matters, quite rightly, are determined) to be at least very good. They represent in varying degrees that falsification of simple expectations as to the structure of a future which constitutes peripeteia. We cannot, of course, be denied an end; it is one of the great charms of books that they have to end. But unless we are extremely naive, as some apoca-
lyptic sects still are, we do not ask that they progress towards that end precisely as we have been given to believe. In fact we should expect only the most trivial work to conform to pre-existent types.

It is essential to the drift of all these talks that what I call the scepticism of the clerisy operates in the person of the reader as a demand for constantly changing, constantly more subtle, relationships between a fiction and the paradigms, and that this expectation enables a writer much inventive scope as he works to meet and transcend it. The presence of such paradigms in fictions may be necessary—that is a point I shall be discussing later—but if the fictions satisfy the clerisy, the paradigms will be to a varying but always great extent attenuated or obscured. The pressure of reality on us is always varying, as Stevens might have said: the fictions must change, or if they are fixed, the interpretations must change. Since we continue to 'prescribe laws to nature'—Kant's phrase, and we do—we shall continue to have a relation with the paradigms, but we shall change them to make them go on working. If we cannot break free of them, we must make sense of them.

If this is true of literary ends, it is also true of theological responses to apocalypse. For if I am right in my argument, the sceptical modification of a paradigmatic fiction ought to be visible in the apocalyptic of the theologians as well as in other spheres. There has always been some caution about taking Revelation too simply, and an early insistence that the End was not subject to human prediction. The earliest Christians had a sharp experience of disconfirmation, and the text of St. Mark, the least favoured of the gospels in early days, became important: 'of that day or

that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.' They had, as Bultmann puts it, abolished history in favour of eschatology; but it was a premature abolition. Already in St. Paul and St. John there is a tendency to conceive of the End as happening at every moment; this is the moment when the modern concept of crisis was born—St. John puns on the Greek word, which means both 'judgment' and 'separation.' Increasingly the present as 'time-between' came to mean not the time between one's moment and the parousia, but between one's moment and one's death. This throws the weight of 'End-feeling' on to the moment, the crisis, but also on to the sacraments. 'In the sacramental church,' says Bultmann, 'eschatology is not abandoned but is neutralized in so far as the powers of the beyond are already working in the present.' No longer imminent, the End is immanent. So that it is not merely the remnant of time that has eschatological import: the whole of history, and the progress of the individual life, have it also, as a benefaction from the End, now immanent. History and eschatology, as Collingwood observed, are then the same thing. Butterfield calls 'every instant...eschatological'; Bultmann says that 'in every moment slumbers the possibility of being the eschatological moment. You must awake it.'

Variants of this position are common in modern eschatology. It is true that they have early precedents. St. Augustine speaks of the terrors of the End as a figure for personal death, as Winkler calls each death a recurring parousia. But apocalypse, which included and superseded prophecy, was itself to be included in tragedy; and tragedy lost its height and stateliness when the single unritualized
death became the sole point of reference. Literary and theological apocalypse have alike chosen to concentrate upon what was only an implication of the original apocalyptic pattern; this is the way they have responded to modern reality. Of course it should not be said that all modern theologians have departed so far from the archetype. Lawrence leer'd at Archdeacon Charles for calling the Kaiser Antichrist, but Josef Pieper, in our own day, is less likely to be scorned for saying that many have been called Antichrist because many have indeed been Antichrist, or types of him, so that Nazism is a 'milder preliminary form of the state of Antichrist,' and so is any other tyranny. And even here we can see that the older, sharply predictive apocalypse, with its precise identifications, has been blurred; eschatology is stretched over the whole of history, the End is present at every moment, the types always relevant.

Karl Popper, in a biting phrase, once called historicism the 'substitution of historical prophecy for conscience.' But of modern eschatology one can say that it has done exactly the opposite, and substituted conscience, or something subtler, for historical prophecy. We shall later notice analogies in modern literary fiction. Meanwhile we can say, I hope, that in talking about our theological analogue we have reached the position of Jaspers, who remarked that to live is to live in crisis; in a world which may or may not have a temporal end, people see themselves much as St. Paul saw the early Christians, men 'upon whom the ends of the ages are come'; and these ends bear down upon every important moment experienced by men in the midstest. We can see how what I called naive apocalypticism has been modified to produce (under the pressure

and relevance of great new systems of knowledge, technological and social change, of human decision itself) a sense of ends only loosely related to the older predictive apocalypse, and to its simpler notions of decadence, empire, transition, heavens on earth. Granted that the End becomes a predicament of the individual, we may look back at these historical patterns with envy, but without any sense that they can ever again be useful except as fictions patiently explained.

Death and election are individual matters and became so early enough in the story. The disconfirmation of the primary eschatological predictions threw the emphasis on personal death as well as on to the sacraments; it has been said that Christianity of all the great religions is the most anxious, is the one which has laid the most emphasis on the terror of death. Reformation theology strengthened this emphasis. In the very period when epic poets were reviving the Sibylline eschatology for imperial purposes, the End grew harder and harder to think of as an imminent historical event, and so incidentally did the beginning; so that the duration and structure of time less and less supported the figures of apocalypse which blossomed in the glass and the illuminations of the Middle Ages. This was the moment when the terrors of apocalypse were absorbed by tragedy. The Renaissance equivalent of the long Beatus tradition—in sculpture, manuscript, sermon, and church painting—is King Lear. And the process of sophisticating the paradigm continues. Tragedy, we are told, must yield to Absurdity; existential tragedy is an impossibility and King Lear is a terrible farce. It would be interesting to see what a modern painter—Francis Bacon, perhaps—might make of the Beatus types; they might
have terror enough, but the paradigms would be, one feels, deeply submerged.

In the nature of the case this must be so. Yet these old paradigms continue in some way to affect the way we make sense of the world. The notion of crisis, for instance; we are all too familiar with it, and too familiar with the difficulties attending any discussion of it; yet there is a myth of crisis, a very deep and complex one, which we should make more sense of if we could reduce it from the status of myth to the status of fiction. Later on I shall try to do this, and talk about what Focillon calls 'centurial mysticism' and some other elements in crisis-myth—the co-existence and flourishing of many apparently disparate apocalypse-themes like decadence and empire at historical moments otherwise apparently unrelated, though for one reason or another thought 'critical.' The Joachite 'transition' is the historical ancestor of modern crisis; in so far as we claim to live now in a period of perpetual transition we have merely elevated the interstitial period into an 'age' or saeculum in its own right, and the age of perpetual transition in technological and artistic matters is understandably an age of perpetual crisis in morals and politics. And so, changed by our special pressures, subdued by our scepticism, the paradigms of apocalypse continue to lie under our ways of making sense of the world.

I have used the theologians and their treatment of apocalypse as a model of what we might expect to find not only in more literary treatments of the same radical fiction, but in the literary treatment of radical fictions in general. The assumptions I have made in doing so I shall try to examine next time. Meanwhile it may be useful to have some kind of summary account of what I've been saying. The main object is the critical business of making sense of some of the radical ways of making sense of the world. Apocalypse and the related themes are strikingly long-lived; and that is the first thing to say about them, although the second is that they change. The Johannine acquires the characteristics of the Sibylline Apocalypse, and develops other subsidiary fictions which, in the course of time, change the laws we prescribe to nature, and specifically to time. Men of all kinds act, as well as reflect, as if this apparently random collocation of opinion and predictions were true. When it appears that it cannot be so, they act as if it were true in a different sense. Had it been otherwise, Virgil could not have been altissimo poeta in a Christian tradition; the Knight Faithful and True could not have appeared in the opening stanzas of The Faerie Queene. And what is far more puzzling, the City of Apocalypse could not have appeared as a modern Babylon, together with the 'shipmen and merchants who were made rich by her' and by the 'inexplicable splendour' of her 'fine linen, and purple and scarlet,' in The Waste Land, where we see all these things, as in Revelation, 'come to nought.' Nor is this a matter of literary allusion merely. The Emperor of the Last Days turns up as a Flemish or an Italian peasant, as Queen Elizabeth or as Hitler; the Joachite transition as a Brazilian revolution, or as the Tudor settlement, or as the Third Reich. The apocalyptic types—empire, decadence and renovation, progress and catastrophe—are fed by history and underlie our ways of making sense of the world from where we stand, in the midst.

But the more learned the cleric, whether theologian, poet, or novelist, the 'higher' the kind he practises, the
more subtly are these types overlaid. That which seemed
a straightforward prediction becomes an obscure figure.
As the predictions go wrong, it emerges that it is not merely
upon the people of a certain moment but upon all men
that the ends of the world have come. Apocalypse, which
succeeded prophecy, merges with tragedy; the humble
elect survive not all the kings of the earth as in Revelation,
but the one king whose typical story is enacted before
them. When tragedy established itself in England it did
so in terms of plots and spectacle that had much more to
do with medieval apocalypse than with the *mythos* and
*opus* of Aristotle. Later, tragedy itself succumbs to the
pressure of 'demythologizing'; the End itself, in modern
literary plotting loses its downbeat, tonic-and-dominant
finality, and we think of it, as the theologians think of
Apocalypse, as immanent rather than imminent. Thus,
as we shall see, we think in terms of crisis rather than
temporal ends; and make much of subtle disconfirmation
and elaborate peripetia. And we concern ourselves with
the conflict between the determinist pattern any plot
suggests, and the freedom of persons within that plot to
choose and so to alter the structure, the relations of begin-
ning, middle, and end.

Naively predictive apocalypses implied a strict concor-
dance between beginning, middle, and end. Thus the open-
ing of the seals had to correspond to recorded historical
events. Such a concordance remains a deeply desired ob-
ject, but it is hard to achieve when the beginning is lost
in the dark backward and abyss of time, and the end is
known to be unpredictable. This changes our views of the
patterns of time, and in so far as our plots honour the
increased complexity of these ways of making sense, it
complicates them also. If we ask for comfort from our
plots it will be a more difficult comfort than that which
the archangel offered Adam:

How soon hath thy prediction, Seer blest,
Measur'd this transient World, the race of Time,
Till time stands fix'd.

But it will be a related comfort. In our world the material
for an eschatology is more elusive, harder to handle. It
may not be true, as the modern poet argues, that we must
build it out of 'our loneliness and regret'; the past has
left us stronger materials than these for our artifice of
everness. But the artifice of eternity exists only for the
dying generations; and since they choose, alter the shape
of time, and die, the eternal artifice must change. The
golden bird will not always sing the same song, though a
primeval pattern underlies its notes.

In my next talk I shall be trying to explain some of the
ways in which that song changes, and talking about the
relationship between apocalypse and the changing fictions
of men born and dead in the midst. It is a large subject,
because the instrument of change is the human imagina-
tion. It changes not only the consoling plot, but the struc-
ture of time and the world. One of the most striking things
about it was said by Stevens in one of his adages; and it is
with this suggestive saying that I shall mark the transition
from the first to the second part of my own pattern. 'The
imagination,' said this student of changing fictions, 'the
imagination is always at the end of an era.' Next time we
shall try to see what this means in relation to our problem
of making sense of the ways we make sense of the world.
CHAPTER I

NOTES


7: in the midst. '... a poet thrusteth into the midst, even where it most concerneth him, and there recourseing to the things forepast, and disuing of things to come, maketh a pleasing analysis of all.' Sir Philip Sidney, Apology for Poetry.


22: *Henry James*. In the Preface to *Roderick Hudson*.


