

Poetry at the End of the World

by *John Paul Russo*

Written around 1900, Constantine Cavafy's *Waiting for the Barbarians* expressed a widespread fear that the West was in irreversible decline and «on the brink of catastrophic change»¹:

- What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?
The barbarians are due here today.
- Why isn't anything happening in the senate:
Why do the senators sit there without legislating?
Because the barbarians are coming today².

The people are panicky and full of questions; they receive answers from someone speaking in a subdued, flat tone. The senators are cynically resigned or paralyzed by indecision. The barbarians are «due here today», as if by appointment – probably to sweep the civilization away, maybe merely to revivify it with their primitive energy; in either case, drastic change lies in the offing. While the emperor and nobles are at the city gates in the hope of buying off the barbarians with impressive titles and dazzling them with glittering jewels, «distinguished orators» remain behind—the barbarians are «bored» by empty rhetoric: the arts are useless. The day ends without attack and the people return home: «night has fallen and the barbarians have not come»:

And some who have just returned from the border say
there are no barbarians any longer.
And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
They were, those people, a kind of solution.

«Night has fallen» implies a kind of judgment in itself on the inability of leaders to solve the «inborn problems of aging societies»³. One suspects that there are «no barbarians» after all, that this and other decadent cultures need them for the Orwellian purposes of propaganda, internal regulation, and control.

It is likely that Cavafy knew Polybius's story of his conversation with Cornelius Scipio. For years Scipio had opposed the viewpoint of Cato – that

«Carthage must be destroyed» – and argued instead that «Carthage must be left standing, since its existence was necessary to prevent the decadence of the Roman state». After Carthage was destroyed, Scipio turned to Polybius and said, «I am afraid and have a foreboding that someone else will have to give the same news for our country»⁴.

Cavafy's poem anticipates the historical and cultural pessimism that has gripped the West for the past century, a period in which Western decline or collapse has been prophesied by civilizationist historians and sociologists from Arnold Toynbee, Pitirim Sorokin, and Lewis Mumford to Carroll Quigley, Mathew Melko, Stephen K. Sanderson, and Warren Wager, to the point where it has become a cultural myth. An entire field exists by the name of Endist Studies whose practitioners call themselves Endists – it has a Swiftian ring.

Like the civilizationist historians, postmodern American poets have made decline, catastrophe, and apocalypse central to their work, often borrowing from the biblical Books of Daniel and Revelation to confront disaster. In 1964, R. W. B. Lewis said that, while apocalypse had been a recurrent theme in American literature from the time of the Puritans, only after World War II and the atomic bomb did an end-of-the-world scenario impose itself at the center of writers' attention, so dangerously «imminent» that it seemed existentially «absurd»⁵. Three years later, in *The Sense of an Ending*, the book that launched apocalypse studies, Frank Kermode went further: the present state of virtually «ceaseless transition», «crisis», and «meaninglessness» had transformed the sense of apocalypse from some far-off divine event to one of almost daily experience: crisis has become «our way of registering the conviction that the end is immanent rather than imminent»⁶. As Kafka said, the Last Judgment is not at the far end of time, but a court in standing session.

What are the generic components of apocalypse? In his *Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism* Douglas Robinson enumerates the various ways of categorizing apocalypse, from the biblical and «hopeful» approach «involving a transformation by a transcendent God», to the modern, «secular, pessimistic annihilative patterns of an imminent end that brings about no transformation», but possibly just a continuation of the same⁷. Those are the two extremes of apocalypse; other kinds lie on the spectrum between them. Whatever the case, an apocalypse normally involves an impending sense of «cosmic catastrophe», a «movement from an old age to a new age» (which might resemble the old one), a «struggle between forces of good and evil» (angels and demons), «desire for an ultimate paradise», the «transitional help of God or a messiah», and a «final judgment and manifestation of the ultimate». Narratives with these thematic elements, writes David J. Leigh, often contain «visions or dreams by seers or guides», «characters in spiritual turmoil», «mythic imagery», and a «sense of ultimate hope», and «signs of an end-time»⁸.

Between World War II and the breakup of the Soviet Union twenty years ago, the Bomb was the principal subject of apocalyptic poetry, from Denise Levertov and Richard Wilbur to Adrienne Rich and Sharon Olds. «Nearly every poet of the last fifty years», commented John Gery, «has written at least one poem in reference to nuclear weapons»⁹. James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover* is an entire «apocalyptic epic» «whose true starting-point is Hiroshima»¹⁰ – and it is *apocalypse* in the literal sense, an «unveiling» (from the Greek, *apokalupsis*) by spirits from another world, in this case angelic messengers who warn Merrill of overpopulation, plague, and nuclear war through his Ouija board, bringing in the absurdist or comic element. Ken Cooper examines how «African-American and Native American writers (Langston Hughes, Ishmael Reed, Leslie Marmon Silko) figured the atomic bomb as part of a logic of white domination», called «the “whiteness of the bomb”»¹¹. They see the Bomb as «a critique of Western rationality and science with its Faustian drive toward absolute power»¹².

In their fear of catastrophe, these writers do not stand in lonely isolation. Influenced by Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* with its «resigned condemnation of the present state», Beat writers Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, and Allen Ginsberg fashioned a so-called «bop apocalypse»¹³. Ginsberg's *Howl* and *Kaddish* envisage an «urban apocalypse» that brings an end to rampant materialism, sexual repression, and militarism, and ushers in a pluralistic (and psychedelic) paradise and a merging of Western and Eastern religion¹⁴. Not long ago Bob Dylan, whose roots are to some extent in the Beats as well as the Blues, released an album in which he sang (as only he can sing) of his «heart burnin', still yearnin'/In the last outback at the world's end», where «last», «out», «back», and «end» push so far beyond that the very ground seems to be cut out from under. Eco-poets Mary Oliver, Gary Snyder, and Thylia Moss lament the consequences of environmental disaster in apocalyptic terms. Commenting on the AIDS crisis, Richard Dellamora writes that «the signs of the times register apocalypse as an important aspect of gay existence and cultural practice»¹⁵; the «lack of confidence in the possibility of shaping history in accord with human desire(s) provides the bass line of culture – political, economic, and aesthetic»¹⁶. One can even define oneself *against the apocalypse*, to cite the title of David G. Roskies' study of «responses to catastrophe in modern Jewish literature»¹⁷. Holocaust poets Jerome Rothenberg and William Heyen have employed the “khurbn” theme of overwhelming destruction.

Three postmodern American poets, Mark Strand, Jorie Graham, and John Ashbery cannot be categorized in any of the above ways. Yet, like seers, they express a vision of the end of the world, or rather the «ends» of their «particular worlds», and in so doing testify to the continued power of the trope of apocalypse to inspire some of our best writers¹⁸.

In Mark Strand's poem *Always*, a few people sit around a table in a bare room «lit by a single bulb»¹⁹. They are «hard at work» at the business of forgetting both culture and nature. As one thing or another is mentally forgotten, its referential counterpart simultaneously vanishes from the universe. In an ingenious thought experiment that might have been designed by the firm of Fermi, Magritte, and Stevens, the world empties out with each passing line; it is only a matter of time-before nothing is left:

Always so late in the day
 In their rumpled clothes, sitting
 Around a table lit by a single bulb,
 The great forgetters were hard at work.
 They tilted their heads to one side, closing their eyes.
 Then a house disappeared and a man in his yard
 With all his flowers in a row.
 The moon was the next to go.
 The great forgetters wrinkled their brows,
 Then Florida went and San Francisco
 Where tugs and barges leave
 Small gleaming scars across the Bay.
 One of the great forgetters struck a match.
 Gone were the harps of beaded lights
 That vault the rivers of New York.
 Another filled his glass
 And that was it for crowds at evening
 Under sulphur yellow streetlamps coming on.
 And afterwards Bulgaria was gone, and then Japan.
 «Where will it end?» one of them said.
 «Such difficult work, pursuing the fate
 of everything known», said another.
 «Yes», said a third, «down to the last stone
 and only the cold zero of perfection
 left for the imagination».
 The great forgetters slouched in their chairs.
 Suddenly Asia was gone, and the evening star
 And the common sorrows of the sun.
 One of them yawned. Another coughed.
 The last one gazed at the window:
 Not a cloud, not a tree
 The blaze of promise everywhere.

The American belief that Strand invokes in this poem descends from Emerson (and ultimately from the Puritans) through Whitman, Dickinson, William James, and Stevens. The world must be shattered to bits in order

to be re-imagined by the individual, or we are captured by the past and not our own masters. For Harold Bloom, this is a central line in American culture and literature, with its Romantic desire for immediacy and its emphasis on the future²⁰. As representatives of the Emersonian line, the great forgetters turn their back on the previously imagined, humanized, and used-up world. Their agent is imagination, which in its «cold», calculating, Modernist thrust towards «perfection» can both erase or «un-imagine» an old world and create a new one: it may be «cold», but it ignites the «blaze» that both annihilates and gives «promise», that very promise conditioned by annihilation.

The poem expresses an ascetic independence from the past, a scrupulous refusal of allusion, like the bare room lit by a naked bulb and a few people in «rumpled» clothes. The title *Always* calls attention to the permanent possibility of regeneration from ground zero, highlighting an up-beat American optimism («blaze of promise everywhere») over what might otherwise seem to be a tragic loss – all that history and culture. Poetically, «blaze of promise» is a curiously weak phrase; perhaps Strand wants the phrase to do more, to carry more weight than it actually does. This weakness undermines confidence in the utopian future or, at least, indicates that any future is subject to the same destructive conditions that brought it into being. Twice in a short poem, the work of forgetting is called «hard» or «difficult», though nothing in the poem seems to show why. Rather, it looks as easy to forget the past as to do nothing. It is «late in the day»; the forgetters seem bored, «slouched» in their chairs; one of them «yawned». Will the whole thing happen again, tomorrow? When I heard Mark Strand recite the poem, he had the audience laughing, if not at the loss of the world, at least at the way the world was being lost. One wonders what would have happened if Strand made it more difficult for himself by «forgetting» Dante, Shakespeare, the Parthenon, the Taj Mahal, or Chartres. And by forgetting, one does not mean the fading away of the near past, the inevitable result of the onrush of historical time, but a willed, aggressive, self-amputating, self-congratulatory, antihistorical great forgetting. If some one protests that celebrating the loss of historical awareness is all in fun, that we do not in fact forget, one might respond that weak remembering is also a form of forgetting.

A second example of apocalyptic poetry is taken from the work of Jorie Graham, who grew up in Rome and who currently holds the Boylston Chair of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard. In *Erosion* (1983), her second volume of poetry, she published an ecphrastic poem, *At Luca Signorelli's Resurrection of the Body*. Signorelli painted a cycle of frescoes from the Book of Revelation in the cathedral of Orvieto from 1499 to 1503. In this great cycle Signorelli offers one of the foremost expressions of the High Renaissance attitude towards death and the afterlife. Just as Renaissance artists emphasized

the development of the individual (as one recalls from reading Burckhardt), so also they refused to impede self-realization by anything like death. So they rejected the anonymousness of medieval death and focused upon the particular individual's conscious survival in an afterlife. This was not only the popular view of death, but the official version as well. The Fifth Lateran Council (1512-1517), summoned by Pope Julius II, affirmed «the doctrine of individual immortality, which proclaimed personal rather than collective integrity in eternity as well as in history»²¹. In one of the frescoes, *The Resurrection of the Flesh*, two larger-than-life angels blow trumpets to wake the dead, and below them the numerous figures respond by «pulling themselves up» from the ground, some still skeletal, some in the process of reassuming human flesh, others already standing, walking, conversing, even dancing. These individuals struggle to be their biographical selves again in the next world, to put on their former bodies and minds. Creighton E. Gilbert points out that some figures who are embracing «are readily perceived as old friends from life on earth now reunited», the first appearance of this topos in Western painting²². Bring your friends along with you! It's more fun that way—this doctrine inspired artists and thinkers from Signorelli down to J. M. E. McTaggart and Virginia Woolf.

In her poem on Signorelli's fresco Jorie Graham protests this version of the apocalypse. As she interprets the fresco, his human figures merely recycle their old lives instead of putting on or inhabiting a totally new transcendental spacetime and listening to the angels. Why are his figures so eager, so in a hurry to be themselves again?

See how they hurry
 to enter
 their bodies,
 these spirits.
 Is it better, flesh,
 that they

should hurry so?
 From above
 the green-winged angels
 blare down
 trumpets and light. But
 they don't care,

they hurry to congregate,
 they hurry
 into speech, until
 it's a marketplace

Signorelli's figures hurry because they are impatient to inhabit natural space and time: they want to regain «weightedness» and cast shadows; they want «color», «distance», «perspective», «speech». The word «hurry» occurs six times in the poem, hurry being the mark of «our temporal natures»²³, speed being a condition of that very modernity which has its origins in the Renaissance. The word «hurry» in the poem also describes the busy little streets outside the cathedral, «hurrying» in all directions, the real life of the «marketplace». Driven by desire, the figures «do not know how... to stop their / hurrying», as if unwilling to enter another kind of spacetime. Graham wonders if Signorelli is confusing true spiritual renewal with some residue of physical space and human time.

Graham thus rejects Signorelli's stance on the afterlife: hence her question «Is it better, flesh, / that they/should hurry so?». She asks, in Thomas Gardner's words, «Can a home for the spirit ever be fully located in the fixed and weighted body?»²⁴ Her answer is obviously “no” – and this becomes clearer as she identifies with the like-minded tourists who question the figures:

Standing below them
in the church
in Orvieto, how can we
tell them
to be stern and brazen
and slow,

that there is no
entrance,
only entering. They keep on
arriving,
wanting names,
wanting

happiness.

The figures insist on becoming their individual selves, gaining consciousness of their biographical identity («names»), and seeking «happiness». On the contrary, Graham counsels them to be «Stern and brazen / and slow». This slowness, the opposite of hurry, is not just a matter of chronological time; «slow» is the time of eternity, altogether different from the time of those busy figures in the fresco or the streets of Orvieto. One might better intuit the eternal if the rhythm of time could be «slowed» almost to a full stop, as Graham and the tourists desire – or good close readers slowly reading her poem.

Aesthetic time or slow time affords an intimation of eternity. In *Erosion*, the title poem in the collection, Graham employs a metaphor from fresco

painting to state her belief: «it is our slowness I love, growing slower, / tapping the paintbrush against the visible, / tapping the mind». The artist seeks to go beyond or «against» the visible, into the mental space of the invisible. Is not this the «slow time» that Keats associates with eternity in one of the greatest of all ekphrastic poems, mentioned earlier, *The Ode on a Grecian Urn*? «Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness! / Thou foster-child of silence and slow Time». Graham wants the figures (and Signorelli) to realize that there is «no entrance / only entering», no «arrival», only «arriving»: no place, only a process in time: «it seems likely that [Graham's] denial of "entrance" to the souls and of "arrival" to Signorelli», writes Catharine Sona Karagueuzian, «is in fact a function of her own skepticism about the likelihood of divinely orchestrated resurrection» along Renaissance lines²⁵. Further, Graham urges the figures to be «stern» and «brazen»: «stern» implies a needed stoicism and endurance – a resistance to thinking that happiness in eternity would be the same as on earth²⁶. «Brazen» can mean bold, which reinforces «stern», but it also refers to the bronze glow of the muscle and flesh tone of many of the nude figures.

It is only fair to add that Graham endorses certain aspects of Signorelli's afterlife: though the figures seek «distance» and «perspective», that is, three-dimensionality, he painted the fresco with a whitish floor and background so that the vanishing point is «so deep / and receding / we have yet to find it». This denatured, dematerialized spacetime of the spirit resembles the abstract space of Modernist and postmodernist art, going back to Wilhelm Worringer on the distinction between time-free abstraction vs. time-bound naturalistic empathy:

he cut
deeper,
graduating slowly
from the symbolic

to the beautiful. How far
is true?

As the figures, seeking «arrival» had hurried from the inside out into space as quickly as they could, Signorelli moves from the outside inward, «entering» as slowly as possible. Helen Vendler comments that the question «How far is true»? is left «open-ended», but «that it is the poet's duty to take the symbolic through the beautiful into the true is not in doubt»²⁷. She instances Graham's faith in the mind's patience and «its deliberate respect for the resistance of matter» and in Signorelli's (and more generally, the artist's) attention to technique and craft²⁸. But Graham deliberately puts the matter in the

interrogative because the jury remains out. «How far is true»? might mean that the truth depends on how far one takes pains to pursue it; «graduating slowly» is a matter of degree, «slowly» being a positive adverb for slow time, aesthetic and eternal. The phrase «He [Signorelli] cut / deeper» is also positive, lending support to Vendler's position; Signorelli is later praised for pursuing «beauty», meaning that he moved through and beyond symbols into the realm of the beautiful. The phrase «He cut / deeper» also refers to the Florentine tradition of painting that invoked the principle of carving in the drawing of the sharp line and scrupulously outlined forms. But «cut / deeper» also anticipates the final section of the poem.

Graham has questioned Signorelli's Renaissance individualist approach to the apocalypse, with all its physical reminders of space, time, and desire, though she has found areas of agreement. Then, in the final stanzas, she informs that, while painting the frescoes, Signorelli's son had been killed in a nearby town. As Giorgio Vasari reports in *Lives of the Painters* (and as Signorelli's grand-nephew, Vasari might have had privileged information, though the story is much disputed), this son was «a youth of singular beauty in face and person, whom he had tenderly loved»; Signorelli had the body brought to Orvieto where «with extraordinary constancy of soul, uttering no complaint and shedding no tear, he painted the portrait of his dead child»²⁹. Graham has Signorelli instead dissecting the body, an artistic mimesis of the son's violent death:

It took him days
that deep
caress, cutting,
unfastening,

until his mind
could climb
the open flesh and
mend itself.

Signorelli studies death, scientifically, like an anatomist, but also emotionally, like a father. He works slowly («It took him days»), lovingly («caress»), and revealingly («unfastening»), as he approaches the immanence of spiritual time³⁰. While the figures do not «care» in their hurry, Graham implies that it is through «beauty and care / and technique / and judgment» that the artist (and the reader / viewer / listener) might approximate the spiritual. «Climb / the open flesh and mend itself» indicates an upward spiritual movement, at the same time recalling the necessity of climbing up to paint the fresco on the upper walls of the chapel. Yet, for Graham, Signorelli was

closer to the apocalypse when he was dissecting his son than when he was painting his fresco³¹.

Formally, Graham's poem presents an imitation of the subject matter: her lines are short, two to four syllables long, like brush strokes, and the lines move slowly down the page. Some words hang alone, each asking for patient attention. The six line stanzas have a spare, highly chiseled or «cut» appearance of the page³². There is a certain breathlessness that comes in reading the poem aloud, as if one were gasping for air, a bordering between life and death. The whole pacing of this poem is slowed down by these formal devices.

John Ashbery's poetry of apocalypse possesses neither Strand's American wipe-the-slate-clean optimism, nor Jorie Graham's anguish of immanence, nor the traditional catastrophic purgation of evil and falsehood. In his hands the rhetoric of decline, consummation, immanence, terror, the «ecstasy of oblivion»³³, and survival undergoes a surreal distortion, ironic flattening, and cautious, if bemused acceptance. If annihilation is not the subject of his «earlier poetry» comments one scholar, it nonetheless «hovers around the borders»³⁴. By mid-career Herman Rapaport finds that Ashbery is «most at home with the apocalyptic tone»; he «domesticated it»; «catastrophe» is «something pervasive and banal» «muffled in the eerie calm»³⁵. Of his late volume *And the Stars Were Shining*, David Herd writes of the poet's sense of Lateness: «every poem... has an apocalyptic edge to it, every moment carries the potential for catastrophe»³⁶. It appears, then, to be a preoccupation throughout Ashbery's career.

He once said he was «terrified» by having to give a lecture series: «I was worried I would be expected to talk about [literary] theory and [Jean] Baudrillard and so on»³⁷. Yet aspects of Baudrillard's position are congruent with his own – I am not speaking of influence, but of parallel corridors. One thinks of the Baudrillard who says that «the real event of the Apocalypse is behind us, [or] among us, [or we are]... confronted with the virtual reality of the Apocalypse, with the posthumous comedy of the Apocalypse»; the Baudrillard who says that «everything is already calculated, audited, and realized in advance [the simulacrum preceding the real...]»³⁸. From the news media, from politics, from Hollywood, we are so saturated by the language and imagery of crisis, decline, and ultimacy that we feel that we experienced them, that we have been forced to buy and consume them, again and again, and that we dispose of them like waste with other commodities. On this theory, if an endless number of apocalyptic imitations precede the real one, then the real one may be lost in the shuffle. For Baudrillard, there is nothing behind the «unveiling» («apokalupsis») because there is nothing behind the veil, that is, nothing to respond to except what is on the surface of the veil, which in Ashbery can be read for clues and directions³⁹.

Ashbery's poem *Dinosaur Country* reduces the apocalypse to a consumerist fantasy of elderly people, the dinosaurs, who are «wait[ing]» (for death?) in a health club

Everyone waits for the BIG day
 That happened billions of years ago
 Or is definitely tomorrow—take your pick—
 While fending off tunnel vision in the race
 For the sauna. The new purple bath towels
 Are here!⁴⁰

To gather from the tone, the narrator does not appear intimidated by the end of time, either his own or the world's; it might already have happened; capitalizing BIG has the opposite effect, of diminishing the actual day, ironizing or satirizing it. There is something paradoxical after all in waiting for something that may have happened billions of years ago. We know what happened to the real dinosaurs, millions of years ago, and the world came back; «billions» goes back to the BIG BANG that happened according to the current estimate 14 billion years ago. For the dinosaurs like himself, immediate comforts matter more than long-range salvation. The elderly, who should know better, lose their dignity scrambling for the sauna, fending off one another to try to get one of those new bath towels, being overly excited by a new luxury product, highlighted by an exclamation point. The dinosaurs seem to have lost sight of, fended off, thinking about the end: «tunnel vision» indicates a steady focus on last things. Note the sonic texture in those words, «fending», «tunnel», «vision in», «sauna», and «new». A sauna is a hot and steamy place in which a few turns of the dial can make a little hell. But the sauna can also be read as communal purification, like the scene of the steam baths in Fellini's *8 1/2*. This line of analysis is supported by those eagerly awaited new towels whose purple color carries a warning of Lenten penitence, solemnity, death, and resurrection. Trying to fend off tunnel vision to get to the towels first, they run straight into the truth, the fact of mortality and judgment brought home by the color purple.

That same color purple associated with apocalypse appears in other late poems, for example, *From the Diary of a Mole*: «Something then went out of us. In the pagan dawn three polar bears stand / in the volumetric sky's grapeade revelation. / "Time to go to the thoughtful house"⁴¹. What went out of us is life itself or at least the collective spirit's failure of nerve – and has one ever heard or read of such an off-hand way of putting it? In a secular or «pagan» world, the natural «dawn» brings a sense of expectancy. The three polar bears on the celestial backdrop recall the Beasts of the Apocalypse, the monstrous being the «mysterious in gross form»⁴², and the polar symboliz-

ing the cold, darkness, and death associated with the north in pagan mythology. The purple shows up in the grapeade colored sky, grapes being a parody of Dionysian sacrificial drunkenness, loss of the self, and the blood of Christ, the «ade» being a pun on aid. The three polar bears against the grape-colored volumetric sky have an element of cartoon, logo, advertisement, or even diorama, as if the sky itself, the realm of the gods, could be measured on a machine for its volume, packaged and sold – like grape ade. As if unfolded on a cartouche in an ad, there follows the revelation, a text appropriately within quotation marks: «Time to go to the thoughtful house» that is, Hades.

One last purple, from Ashbery's *The Decline of the West*, which is the title in English of Oswald Spengler's famous book, enormously influential on both the Right and the Left⁴³. At the outset the poem employs the language and anapestic rhythms of Robert Browning's *A Toccato for Galuppi*, also a poem on death and the life force, about a composer whose energetic toccata embodies and transcends the spirit of decadent eighteenth-century Venice. What is musical in the meter in Browning, however, becomes comic in Ashbery (anapests in English are often used to produce comic effects). Here are Browning's first lines:

Oh Galuppi, Baldassare, this is very sad to find!...
although I take your meaning, 'tis with such a heavy mind!

Here is Ashbery, first playing with the name as did Browning, then letting the anapestic rhythm run off the rails:

O Oswald, O Spengler, this is very sad to find.
My attic, my children
Ignore me for the violet-banded sky.

His predecessors in the «attic» (among others, T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens) and his «children» or poetic followers, «Ignore» his message because, having read Spengler and his like, their attention is fixed on the horizontal, «violet-banded» twilight, the apocalyptic sign. The title of Spengler's book is *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, better translated according to Spengler himself, as *The Twilight of the West*. The poet does not buy the theory of decline, and bounces back in a jaunty iambic rhythm of his own:

His book, I saw it somewhere and I bought it.
I never read it for it seemed too long.
His theory though, I fought it
Though it spritzes my song,

And now the skateboard stops
 Impeccably. We are where we exchanged
 Positions. O who could taste the crust of this love?

Ashbery «fought» the theory of Spenglerian decline by writing his poetry, even by using Spenglerian «twilight» imagery to enliven his satire. Moreover, «spritzen», a German word, playfully shows Ashbery borrowing from the German historian after all – at least from his language. Ashbery may allude to Catullus 1 who gently mocked the long-windedness of the Roman historian Cornelius Nepos and asserted the power of his slender lyrics to survive the centuries.

Still, this is a poem of about «decline»; and if the poet rejects that larger thesis, thoughts do revert to the theme on a personal level. «And now the skateboard stops / Impeccably». Period. Full stop. With a typical Ashberyan glance towards popular culture, life is likened to skateboarding, fun and risky. If the whole game of life must come to a stop, though, why not stop «Impeccably», clean and sharply, yes, but also «im peccato», that is without a flaw or grave sin; the word stands for emphasis at the head of a line. I also take «impeccably» to mean with technical precision, like the ending of a finely made poem. Having exchanged positions from youth to age, he is left with the mere taste of the staff of life, the crust or dried up remainder of love. It is a question: will love defeat death?

It is the question of *World's End* too⁴⁴. Ashbery looks forward to being one of those who, as in Signorelli's painting, embrace friends at the «world's end», which may be only as far as the local newsstand. If he can «make it», he will hear the «Good News»:

I used to shuffle a lot. Someday
 with luck, I'll make it to the newsstand
 and buy some cherries, greet old friends.

Looking at this passage, I appreciate what Lynn Keller wrote on Ashbery's poetry generally, «Since life's moments of meaning or happiness occur randomly, one cannot anticipate them; one can only strive to be there in the present to receive them if they should appear»⁴⁵. If the narrator used «to shuffle», what is his physical state at the present time? It is one in need of «luck» to be able to go «Someday» to a nearby newsstand. Purple was, according to John Gage, traditionally a color «classed with red, the chromatic representative of fire and light»⁴⁶. An art critic in addition to his being a poet, Ashbery knew the history of color symbolism when he placed those red cherries in the final line of the poem, red being the color «which had, since earliest times, heralded the divine»⁴⁷.

In *And the Stars Were Shining*, the celestial plain is the biblical and mythical backdrop for an apocalypse; even this is mediated through the memory of Puccini's opera *Tosca*⁴⁸. In the final act the tenor sings the aria *E lucevan le stelle*, «and the stars were shining», shortly before he faces a firing squad, so his mind is concentrated on last things. The hothouse is a periphrasis of hell, raising the poet's fears

Still, the hothouse beckons.
 I've told you before how afraid this makes me,
 but I think we can handle it together,
 and this is as good a place as any
 to unseal my last surprise: you, as you go,
 diffident, indifferent, but with the sky for an awning
 for as many days as it pleases it to cover you.
 That's what I meant by "get a handle," and as I say it,
 both surface and subtext subside quintessentially
 and the dead-letter office dissolves in the blue acquiescence of spring.

Someone referred to the «bland amiability» of Ashbery, and the phrase seems perfectly right for this passage, which begins conversationally. The word «unseal» evokes the opening of the seven seals in Revelation, announcing the end of time. The last surprise is addressed to «you», perhaps the reader, who is being read a way of approaching the final doom: «get a handle» familiarizes and reduces it. One could say with Philippe Ariès, the language «tames» death, takes the neurotic or hysterical distortion out of it, and begs a calm acceptance of the natural fact. The poet bids farewell as poet, «as I say it», the surface image and the subtext, the overt and the hidden meanings, together, like a storm at sea, eventually subside into their most essential expression, their spiritual or fifth (quint) essence beyond the four basic elements. Bartleby the Scrivener died in the most famous dead-letter office in American literature; here, however, the seasonal cycle renews itself in the «blue acquiescence of spring». Follow nature, give in without protest, be at rest, acquiesce (from the Latin, "acquiescere"), like the seasons themselves by their successors, with a silent pun on *Requiescat in pacem*.

A Last World, which appeared in 1962, is the first of his long poems on the subject of apocalypse: *A Last World* not *The Last World*, as if to say tentatively, each to his or her own world⁴⁹. In the final section of the poem there is a vision with some of the traditional imagery of apocalypse, with Ashbery's typical hairpin turns from anxiety to acceptance:

We thought the sky would melt to see us
 But to tell the truth the air turned to smoke...
 Somewhere between heaven and no place, and [the friends] were growing
 smaller.

The sky melting is an allusion to the atomic bomb, the fear that it could actually ignite the atmosphere; and we note that the poem appeared in the year of the Cuban Missile crisis, at the height of the Cold War. The sudden shifts in perspective have something of a Dadaist dream sequence; Dante has similar perspectival experiences as he moves through the circles of the planets in the *Paradiso*. The friends grow smaller and smaller as the memory recedes. The language mixes the nursery and death, the beginning and the end:

A last world moves on the figures;
 They are smaller than when we last saw them caring about them.
 The sky is a giant rocking horse
 And of the other things death is a new office building filled with modern furniture,
 A wise thing, but which has no purpose for us.

To a little child, the rocking horse could look like a giant monster in the sky; is this not another one of those beasts of the Apocalypse? The new office building is death because it represents the bureaucratic, technological, anti-septic, impersonal world, necessary but strangely beside the point when the apocalypse beckons.

In many of Fellini's films, the mysterious sound of wind indicates the «sense of an ending», the overpowering forces of nature and destiny as the eternal backdrop of transient human endeavor. Similarly, in the final lines of *A Last World*:

Everything is being blown away;
 A little horse trots up with a letter in its mouth, which is read with eagerness
 As we gallop into the flame.

The giant rocking horse shrinks to the child's toy horse in this deeply personalized apocalypse. The letter lodged in its mouth is perhaps another misplaced toy, a block with letters on its sides by which one learns the alphabet, ultimately the building blocks of a poem⁵⁰. Then, having read the instructions, the speaker jumps on to the horse and gallops into the flame. There is an element of the Western movie («gallop into the sunset») but also Brunnhilde's galloping on Siegfried's horse into his funeral pyre in the immolation scene in Wagner's *Twilight of the Gods*, the great Apocalypse of the Norse mythology. Ashbery has, again, mixed popular and high culture to present his vision of his own «last world». In doing so, he sums up one of the main themes of postmodern culture.

Unlike the period from 1945 to the 1980s when the Bomb supplied the unifying theme and image in American apocalyptic poetry, no such domi-

nant image can claim the field in postmodernism. At present, dystopian technological pessimism is probably its closest representative (indeed, the two themes are closely related), quite common in science fiction and special-effects cinema, but thus far harder to put across in poetry than in prose. The «decline of the West» itself is as at least as much a cultural myth as a possible reality, comments Arthur Herman: one can point to the rise of Western ideas in the furthest recesses of the globe⁵¹. Nor has there been a major revival of religious apocalyptic poetry. At the same time, though there may be no discernible signs of the apocalyptic theme on the horizon, it is unlikely that such a theme will remain in eclipse. As long as the international situation, both economic and political, continues in suspension, and as long as the immensely powerful forces behind and against «globalization» stand starkly opposed, it is unlikely that poets will cease resorting to the imagery of apocalypse to express their vision of the future.

Notes

1. A. Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History*, Free Press, New York 1997, p. 234.
2. C. P. Cavafy, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, in P. Bien *et al.* (eds.), *A Century of Greek Poetry, 1900-2000*, Cosmos, River Vale, NJ 2004, pp. 3-4.
3. M. Holub, *Poetry and Science: The Science of Poetry / The Poetry of Science*, in K. Brown (ed.), *The Measured Word*, University of Georgia Press, Athens 2001, p. 48.
4. Ctd. in S. Mazzarino, *The End of the Ancient World*, trans. G. Holmes, Greenwood, Westport 1976, p. 22.
5. R. W. B. Lewis, *Days of Wrath and Laughter, Trials of the Word*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1965, ctd. in T. Materer, *James Merrill's Apocalypse*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2000, p. 15: «the sense of catastrophic end, which is existentially “absurd”, is “relieved by the partially healing sense of the comic”. When I was growing up, there used to be a famous clock with the minute hand approaching midnight or Armageddon, depending on the relations with the old Soviet Union. When relations got really bad, the minute hand was only two minutes away from midnight; when they were better, it might be ten minutes; it never got better than fifteen minutes, which only goes to show how close seemed the possibility of the end of the world».
6. F. Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, Oxford University Press, New York 1967, p. 101. «The widespread loss of faith in apocalyptic narratives – stories of human history with a beginning and an end – and given also society’s recently acquired capacity for self-annihilation, thinking in the West was no longer marked by a sense of an imminent end but by an immanent end, each passing moment having the potential for catastrophe. The absence of an imminent end, and the presence of an immanent one, had two main effects as Kermode saw it. In the first place, life acquired a certain meaninglessness... [and] in an age anyway characterised by “ceaseless transition”... people were more likely than ever to live in a state of emergency». D. Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry*, Palgrave, New York 2000, p. 218. Cf. P. Larkin, «the long perspectives / Open at each instant of our lives» (ctd. in Kermode, *Sense of an Ending*, cit., p. 179).
7. D. Robinson, *Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, ctd. in D. J. Leigh, S. J., *Apocalyptic Patterns in Twentieth-Century Fiction*, University of Notre Dame Press, South Bend 2008, pp. XII-XIII.
8. S. J. Leigh, *Apocalyptic Patterns*, p. 5.
9. J. Gery, *Nuclear Annihilation and Contemporary American Poetry: Ways of Nothingness*, University of Florida Press, Gainesville 1996, p. 4.

10. Materer, *James Merrill's Apocalypse*, cit., pp. 5, 16, 152.
11. J. Berger, review of *Postmodern Apocalypse: Theory and Cultural Practice at the End*, R. Dellamora (ed.), in "Modern Fiction Studies", 42, 4, 1996, p. 927. «Is America ready to accept anything other than a white finger on the nuclear button?», K. Cooper, *The Whiteness of the Bomb*, in R. Dellamora (ed.), *Postmodern Apocalypse: Theory and Cultural Practice at the End* University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1995, p. 100.
12. B. Comens, *Apocalypse and After: Modern Strategy and Postmodern Tactics in Pound, Williams, and Zukofsky*, University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa 1995, p. 8: «If the Bomb constitutes one of the great demonstrations of the power of rationality, of the ability of science to discover and exploit nature's secrets, then reason and science open themselves to a fundamental questioning as to their value and rationality».
13. J. Lardas, *The Bop Apocalypse: The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana 2001, p. 64.
14. T. Triglio, "Strange Prophecies Anew": *Rereading Apocalypse in Blake, H. D., and Ginsberg*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison 2000, p. 145.
15. R. Dellamora, *Apocalyptic Overtures: Sexual Politics and the Sense of an Ending*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick 1994, p. 195.
16. R. Dellamora, *Postmodern Apocalypse: Theory and Cultural Practice at the End*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1995, p. x.
17. D. G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse 1984, pp. 9-10.
18. «[F]or every subject the end of his world is always the end of the world», E. Morin, *Approaches to Nothingness*, in D. Kamper, C. Wulf (eds.), *Looking Back at the End of the World*, Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series, New York 1989, p. 82. Cf. the plural in the title of M. Bull (ed.), *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World*, Blackwell, Oxford 1995.
19. A single broadsheet *Always* was published by Philemon Press in 1983. The poem was collected in Mark Strand, *The Continuous Life*, Knopf, New York 1990, pp. 30-1; numerous alterations dulled some of the poem's fineness, making it less effective than the original version (cited here).
20. Harold Bloom formulates the ruling principle of this tradition: «Everything that can be broken should be broken» (*Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1977, p. 1). But just because one can break a statue or rip apart a painting, should one do so?
21. «This doctrine provided a context for the colossal egos of both the patron and the artist» (L. Partridge, *Michelangelo: The Sistine Ceiling*, G. Braziller, New York 1996, p. 16).
22. C. E. Gilbert, *How Fra Angelico and Signorelli Saw the End of the World*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park 2003, p. 121: «Nothing like this seems to have been included in earlier images of the Raising of the Dead episode of a Last Judgment. It is astonishing that no note has been taken of this novelty in Signorelli». Philippe Ariès finds this theme in the nineteenth-century Romantic cult of the dead, the belief that friends tend to meet again in future lives (*The Hour of Our Death [L'homme devant la mort]*, trans. H. Weaver, Knopf, New York 1981, p. 471).
23. B. Costello, *Jorie Graham: Art and Erosion*, in T. Gardner (ed.), *Jorie Graham: Essays on the Poetry*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 2005, p. 26.
24. T. Gardner, *Jorie Graham's Incandescence*, in Gardner (ed.), *Jorie Graham*, cit., p. 117.
25. C. S. Karagueuzian, "No Image There and the Gaze Remains": *The Visual in the Work of Jorie Graham*, Routledge, New York 2005, p. 65.
26. «A prominent feature of modernity has been the inflection of religious experience into secular humanist forms» (P. R. Wood, *Beyond the Simulacrum of Religion versus Secularism: Modernist Aesthetic Mysticism; Or, Why We Will Not Stop Revering Great Books*, in "Religion & Literature", 37, 1, 2005, p. 93).
27. H. Vendler, *The Breaking of Style: Hopkins, Heaney, Graham*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1995, p. 77.

28. Karagueuzian, "No Image There and the Gaze Remain", cit., p. 66: arguing against Vendler, Karagueuzian writes that «the symbolic import of the resurrected bodies is very nearly eclipsed by the anatomical detail that Signorelli strove to perfect. His art has thus moved into what is for Graham the dangerous ground of the "beautiful," which always seems to distort "the true"».

29. G. Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, trans. Mrs. J. Foster, Bohn's Standard Library, Bell, London 1878, pp. 352-3.

30. In *The Sense of an Ending*, the next and last poem in *Erosion*, Graham writes that «the terrible insufficiencies of matter in the face / of any kind of spent / time, were better than any / freedom, any wholeness – horribly better – even for a / single hour». The theme of spiritual time as prefigured in aesthetic form is taken up in this poem, whose title recalls Kermodé's book. According to Kermodé, one way we understand apocalypse is as a narrative with a beginning and an end, a narrative of which we are «in the midst» («in medias res, nel mezzo del cammino») (*Sense of an Ending*, p. 7). In *The Sense of an Ending*, Graham describes a personal narrative from her childhood in Rome to the present – her 30s in America, that is, «in the midst». She recalls an immanent experience from childhood in Rome, one that borders on apocalypse. «So the words of the palm came in. So the hiss of / Noon over the umbrella pines and the long insuck / Just as the cicadas started up again». What is especially apocalyptic? Nicholas J. Perella has written that noon in French and Italian poetry is frequently associated with timelessness, silence, the sacred, and death because of the sun's overpoweringness at this hour; but noon may signify, by identification with that power, an infusion of strength. Frequently associated with noon in poetry, the cicadas symbolize midday tension; they do not cancel the silence with their stridulating noise but accentuate it (*Midday in Italian Literature: Variations on an Archetypal Theme*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1979, pp. 13, 14, 191, 201).

31. J. Longenbach writes pertinently that the final lines «suggest that the painter himself is mended not by seeking spiritual wholeness but by confronting the physical evidence of the most unbearable kind of human suffering». (J. Graham's, *Big Hunger*, in Gardner (ed.), *Jorie Graham*, cit., p. 88. This may be too stark an opposition: the spiritual wholeness of being «mended» is a worthy goal, but it is a matter of degree, «graduating slowly», and one had better be aware (and suspicious) of premature closure.

32. Vendler, *Breaking of Style*, cit., p. 75: «They embody a process the poet at times calls erosion, at times dissection in which something is crumbled, bit by bit, to dust; or something is opened, layer by layer, to view».

33. J. Berger, *Ends and Means: Theorizing Apocalypse in the 1990's*, in "Postmodern Culture", 6, 3, 1996, par. 20 reviewing S. D. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric*, Oxford University Press, New York-Oxford 1994.

34. Gery, *Nuclear Annihilation and Contemporary American Poetry*, cit., p. 171.

35. H. Rapaport, *Deconstructing Apocalyptic Rhetoric; Ashbery, Derrida, Blanchot*, in "Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts", 27, 4, 1985, pp. 388, 390, 392, 394, 398-9.

36. Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry*, cit., p. 217.

37. *John Ashbery in Conversation with Mark Ford*, BTL, London 2003, p. 62.

38. J. Witwer (ed.), *J. Baudrillard, The Vital Illusion*, Columbia University Press, New York 2000, pp. 36-8: «Our problem is no longer: What are we to make of real events, of real violence? Rather, it is: What are we to make of events that do not take place? Not: what are we to do after the orgy? But: What are we to do when the orgy no longer takes place – the orgy of history, the orgy of revolution and liberation, the orgy of modernity». Cf. *The Anorexic Ruins*, in Kamper, Wulf, *Looking Back at the End of the World*, cit., pp. 30-1.

39. Berger, *Ends and Means: Theorizing Apocalypse in the 1990s*, cit., par. 3. It is likely that Baudrillard is playing on Hegel's famous remark, «there is nothing behind the curtain other than that which is in front of it» (*The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. A. V. Miller, Clarendon, Oxford 1977, p. 103 [A. III: final para.]).

40. J. Ashbery, *Dinosaur Country*, in *And the Stars Were Shining*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 2002, p. 60. The title poem translates *E lucevan le stelle*, Cavaradossi's aria before he faces the firing squad in Puccini's *Tosca*.

41. J. Ashbery, *From the Diary of a Mole, Chinese Whispers*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 2002, p. 12.
42. R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. J. W. Harvey, Oxford University Press, London 1923, pp. 12-3, 18, 25, 71-2, 82.
43. J. Ashbery, *The Decline of the West*, in *And the Stars Were Shining*, cit., p. 46.
44. J. Ashbery, *World's End*, in *And the Stars Were Shining*, cit., p. 29.
45. L. Keller, *Re-Making It New: Contemporary American Poetry and the Modernist Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, New York 1987, p. 77.
46. J. Gage, *Color and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction*, Little Brown, Boston 1993, p. 26.
47. Gage, *Color and Culture*, cit., p. 26.
48. J. Ashbery, *And the Stars Were Shining*, in *And the Stars Were Shining*, cit., p. 48.
49. J. Ashbery, *The Mooring of Starting Out: The First Five Books of Poetry*, Ecco, Hopewell, NJ 1997, p. 117. The poem appeared in *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962).
50. Gery, *Nuclear Annihilation and Contemporary American Poetry*, p. 171: «This would support Gery's statement that the poem is about the «role of language in constructing memory». Cf. J. Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery's Poetry*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1994, pp. 69-73.
51. Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History*, cit., p. 13.

