

## THE ENDS OF THE EARTH: DEFINING AN AUSTRALIAN SENSE OF AN ENDING

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Both Patrick White and D. H. Lawrence are writers obsessed with the sense of an ending. Critics have already begun to explore the primary function of apocalypse in much of their respective work; thematically and structurally, it is not hard to see that both authors were haunted (or hounded) by Christian eschatology, and that the apocalyptic types are major sources for interpreting their works.

What has received less attention is whether their understandings of, and employment of, apocalyptic themes and types differ. More broadly, can apocalypse theory be employed to distinguish and refine our understanding of Australian modernism and British modernism? This brief paper takes a step towards answering that question, offering first some preliminary thoughts on the connection between secular apocalypse and Christian eschatology; then presenting in some detail aspects of the apocalyptic world of *Voss*; and finally proposing (without room for extended argument) some points of contrast between the visions of the end in *Voss* and *Women in Love* which illustrate larger differences between Lawrence and White.<sup>1</sup>

### THE END NOW

20th century dwellers have not waited until the century's close to become apocalyptic. We have been living under the shadow of the end right from the beginning. Two World Wars, the nuclear threat, the environmental threat: in no other century has global, ultimate crisis been so 'everyday'.

From this mood is derived the idea that 'the End is with us', now, immanently. In Christian eschatology this is sometimes referred to as 'the now and not yet', where the resurrection and ascension of Christ has not only heralded but, at the same time, brought in the Last Age. In this construction of history (and especially in an a millennial theology), there is nothing that need occur before the end of time, before the return of Christ, the judgement and the new heavens and new earth. The End is Now. John Henry Newman provides a valuable image for this idea:

[The course of things] has (if I may so speak) altered its direction, as regards His second coming, and runs, not towards the end, but along it, and on the brink of it; and is at all

times near that great event, which, did it run towards it, it would at once run into. Christ, then, is ever at our doors.<sup>2</sup>

There are, here, I think, valuable parallels to current literary and cultural theory regarding the End. Perhaps unexpectedly, Frank Kermode echoes Newman in his seminal book, *The Sense of an Ending*: 'Eschatology is stretched over the whole of history, the End is present at every moment, the types always relevant.'<sup>3</sup>

This sense of apocalypse runs through modern literature. Postmodern immersion in death, doom and hopelessness, in nihilism and catastrophe, and in the revelation of the End, be it infernal or a new Golden Age, provide an eschatology not as dissimilar to the Christian depiction of the Last Days as might first be thought. Postmodern endlessness is not greatly different to the concept that 'the end is here and now'. Writers such as Lawrence and White, with their pervasive apocalyptic tones, have conditioned us to live with this sense of the never-ending presence of the End, which need not be anti-Christian (although, of course, it can be).

#### THE APOCALYPSE IN VOSS

According to David Marr, White began work on the outline of *Voss* whilst convalescing in Royal North Shore Hospital, Sydney, in 1955. Doctors told Manoly Lascaris that White's lungs would give him only another five years. White sensed the end approaching, with so much to write and so little time. During this period, White was struggling to find a publisher for, and then coping with the reaction to, *The Tree of Man*. He considered it a time of great personal suffering and began *Voss* with a sense that the end was nigh.<sup>4</sup> I'll examine two aspects of how the presence of the apocalypse affects *Voss*: the role of the landscape, and the metaphorical use of personal destruction.

#### Landscapes of the apocalypse

The landscape is a major source of apocalyptic imagery and tone in *Voss*. The desert, mud and clay, water, sun and moon are major apocalyptic symbols, and *Voss* is replete with them. White intended that we experience *Voss* like a painting or a musical composition. He wrote in an early essay, 'When I was writing *Voss* I tried to make it *look* like a Blake drawing, on the mystical, and a Delacroix on the worldly plane.'<sup>5</sup> White himself never went to central Australia; rather, he 'came to the Australian desert through Nolan's eyes',<sup>6</sup> so he is working with the painter's imagination. This allows

for an intensifying of the symbolic power of his imagery, as what he sees and what he thinks originate from the same source.

Light and darkness are, therefore, major factors in establishing the novel's effects. There is in *Voss* an explicit darkness, with conspicuous moments of light. Voss himself is dark of temperament, 'a prophetic figure in his dark clothes' (p.182)<sup>7</sup>. Characters blush darkly; White draws our attention to the blackness of Aboriginal flesh. Onto such a canvas, he then throws explosions of light, such as a 'mob of cockatoos... clattering, shrieking, white and sulphur light' (p.172). Against the clay-coloured landscape, with its dead trees in shadow, White notes the presence of 'thin lips of light, compressed, yet breathing at the rim of the world' (p.179). His descriptions evoke, and sometimes allude to, paintings, usually a Nolan, whom White asked to do the dust jacket for *Voss*.<sup>8</sup>

The final stage of Voss's journey is a descent into the desert's 'inferno' (although White always denied Dante's influence). Voss's hell is a natural one, of heat, fire, blood and dust. But it also reveals Old Testament imagery for Hades (the place of the dead), such as sores, sweat, dogs, worms and vermin, and the orgiastic slaughter of the pack animals. The apocalyptic images may be less explicit than in *Lawrence*, but they are undoubtable.

The landscape is, finally, for Voss, a foreboding and forbidding force. It only permits him to act in certain ways. Not only does he lose his physical well-being, but he cannot find humility when he most needs it, face to face with unmerciful aboriginals: 'Because he was not accustomed to the gestures of humility, he tried to think how Palfreyman might have acted in similar circumstances, but *in that landscape, in that light*, not even memory provided a refuge.' (p.365, italics mine)

It is noteworthy that the hellish landscape is an inspiration to Voss before his exploration begins, and the kind words of human souls grate upon him: 'Deadly rocks, through some perversity, inspired him with fresh life. He went on with the breath of life in his lungs. But words, even of benevolence and patronage, even when they fell wide, would leave him half-dead.' (p.18) However, when he is enduring that hell and longing for Laura, one suspects his preferences have become reversed.

Simon Schama's major study *Landscape and Memory* explores the particular influence of landscape upon national and regional beliefs and priorities. Such an influence suggests that there will be a distinct and non-transferable experience of the land for its inhabitants. For example, in David Tacey's opinion, *Lawrence* did a poor job in his novel *Kangaroo* of genuinely portraying the Australian's relationship with the outback:

There is an enormous psychic gap between the consciousness of Europeans and the primal reality of Australian landscape. The gap is so great that consciousness could be swallowed up if it is attempted to cross the gap in search of psychic roots in the local soil.<sup>9</sup>

This is precisely what happened to Voss, the German explorer, as he took on the continent (although, it must also be said that the same fate was met by his Aboriginal guide, Jackie). The particular influence of landscape upon cultural and national conscious requires further attention.

### Personal oblivion as an apocalyptic metaphor

In *Edge of the Sacred*, Tacey suggests a Jungian structure of archetypes in which Voss and his party are fulfilling a 'death-wish', a repressed 'need to sacrifice' to the voracious demons of the land.<sup>10</sup> It is certainly clear that the party members seek more than their own deaths. Their demise is, as Tacey claims, archetypal. They represent the End, the disintegration of the self and the self's shell - the body and the land. Whether Christian or Jungian symbolism more completely conveys the novel's meanings is not in question here. Be they devoured by the Earth Goddess or caused to bow the knee by the spirit of Christ, Voss, Palfreyman, Le Mesurier and the others are apocalyptic figures.

This is apparent in the first meeting of the exploring party (ch. 2), which is tangibly apocalyptic, both in their conversation and in the subtleties of White's descriptions. As I read it, I felt a sense of despair, of dread, but also of resignation to disaster, and something of a thirst for annihilation. The friendship of Voss and Le Mesurier begins with the suggestion of a death-wish:

"Do you care to come, Frank?"

"I", exclaimed Le Mesurier.

And he pitched a particularly savage tone.

'No,' he said, lingeringly. 'I am not sure that I want to cut my throat just yet.'

'To make yourself, it is also necessary to destroy yourself,' said Voss.

He knew this young man's as he knew his own blacker thoughts.'

Harry Robarts, the simple, enthusiastic Christian lad, is a counterpoint to Le Mesurier: he neither knows, nor seeks, any destiny. He has merely 'come'; he kills flies on the window sill. They are joined by the drunken Turner, half-profligate, half-crazy-Nebuchadnezzar, promising to do the dirty work and eat grass, desperate in his own debasement. The men drink, eat, belch and slop about in a kind of decadent, hopeless Last Supper. They harden

themselves against the future. The scene is set for self-destruction. Later, Voss would muse to himself about the perfection of annihilation:

Mediocre, animal men never do guess at the power of rock or fire, until the last moment before those elements reduce them to—nothing. This, the palest, the most transparent of words, yet comes closest to being complete. (p.61)

White exploits the power of the word 'nothing' repeatedly throughout the novel. Judd, the convict, tells Voss 'I am nothing to understand', that he has 'nothing to lose' and owns 'nothing of importance'. Voss asks him a question which, without too much fancy, can be construed as an invitation to annihilation: 'Then you wish to leave all this [Judd's property], all that you have found, and all that you have made, for the possibility of nothing?' (p.149) Voss himself is acutely aware of the metaphorical power of the landscape to express his personal condition: 'He was sitting in the middle of nowhere. Which, naturally, was of too fantastical a nature, too expressive of his nothingness.' (p.215)<sup>11</sup>

Even Palfreyman, a somewhat pathetic Christ-figure, believes that 'paradise may well prove to be a mirage' (p.260) He admits this while he and Voss are looking at a butterfly collection. 'Even dead, the butterflies were joyful', Palfreyman muses. His uncle is researching a key to the *Revelation*. He prevented his sister, a hunchback, from committing suicide, 'denying her the Gothic splendours of death' (Voss's words). White's description of Palfreyman's conversation with Voss drips with 'doomsaying' and glorious decline, the human journey towards ruin: 'The evening in which the two men were sitting had dissolved into vast oblivion.' (p.263)

Just as powerful as the landscape images of apocalypse is this metonymical power given to each poor, fated character in *Voss* to represent the greater movement of humanity towards its own end.

#### CONTRASTING VISIONS IN VOSS AND WOMEN IN LOVE

It remains to turn briefly to a contrast between the apocalyptic visions of Lawrence and White, with brief reference to *Women in Love* (WIL). WIL is the more obviously apocalyptic novel; Lawrence himself said the novel frightened him because it was 'so end-of-the-world, and at one stage it was to be called *The Latter Days*.<sup>12</sup> However, I have endeavoured to demonstrate that the apocalypse is also primary to *Voss* in its themes and effects. Both novels are misanthropic, destructive and violent, future-denying.

So where are the apocalyptic contrasts? Although they are presented here as overly schematic and general, here are some I find significant.

#### The ends of class

Lawrence had no money and was a miner's son, but he honours the elite; White was wealthy, but despised them. *WIL* locates intellectual resistance with the privileged; *Voss* denies them any substantial intellectual life. White's elite are, in fact, oblivious to the apocalypse, being obsessed by the world of objects. Like those who ate, drank and married right up to the Great Flood in the biblical story of Noah and the Ark, society lights such as the Bonners cannot imagine the End. Mrs Bonner cannot imagine a future in which 'her agreeable life might be so rudely shaken' (p.56). Mr Bonner considers himself 'Safe in life, safe in death' (p.349). White saves his most savage words for Bonner.

For Lawrence, the apocalypse means the end of civility; for White it indicates the destruction of social sham.

#### The ends of history

*WIL* is a wartime novel and its preoccupations reflect this. Lawrence's apocalyptic tone is associated strongly with historical circumstances, at his own admission. His sense of doom, his pessimism, his rage against dehumanization and Christian morality all are clearly social and historical reactions. In contrast, *Voss* fictionalises past events in Australian history (e.g., Leichardt's expeditions, which were a source for *Voss*), but uses them abstractly to explore the human condition. A white Australian, such as White, has not had the powerful historical circumstances which often motivate and energise apocalyptic writings.

#### The ends of the earth

Further attention needs to be given to landscape as a major differentiating element in modernism. In *Voss*, the landscape is inescapable, of God and nature - the inevitable background upon which the characters and story are painted. The backdrop for *WIL* is largely one of human creation, an imposed landscape of coal-dust, blackened trains, 'mechanical necessity'. It is a landscape the characters are resisting in *WIL*, and submitting to in *Voss*. Gerald seeks 'a savage freedom' whereas *Voss* and Laura give in to the country. To Lawrence, the landscape is unreality (as Ursula says at the end of *The Rainbow*). To White, the landscape is

inescapably real. Both authors see the land as metaphysically important: White sees it as the killer; Lawrence as the killed.

### An actual end

In his essay on Lawrence and the apocalyptic types, Frank Kermode is convinced that Lawrence's vision of the end was a literal one - Lawrence, according to Kermode a Joachimite, believed the end really would come, and a new heaven and new earth would then emerge.<sup>13</sup> It is far less clear that Patrick White had such a belief. In later life, he was certainly terrified of nuclear war and considered it humanity's greatest threat, but this may not have amounted to a belief in Armageddon.

*The Tree of Man* ends with the sentence, 'So that, in the end, there was no end'. The idea that there is no end has taken over from the *fin de siècle* boding that Lawrence lived through. The mood is now one of postmodern endlessness, where language, the self, the universe itself, can never be finalised. What remains is the enduring sense of an ending, with no actual end in sight; what Derrida has called 'an apocalypse without vision' and 'an end without an end'.<sup>14</sup>

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### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> This paper represents the beginning of work towards a dissertation on the function of apocalypse in the modern novel.
- <sup>2</sup> J.H. Newman, 'Waiting For Christ' (*Parochial and Plain Sermons*, London, 1896), p. 241, cited in I.H. Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (NICNT, Eerdmans, 1978), p. 149.
- <sup>3</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, (Oxford University Press, New York, 1967), p. 26.
- <sup>4</sup> See David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life*, (Jonathan Cape, London, 1991), pp. 299-311.
- <sup>5</sup> Quoted in G.A. Wilkes, *Ten Essays on Patrick White selected from Southerly (1964-67)*, (Angus Robertson, Sydney, 1970), p. 37.
- <sup>6</sup> Marr, *op.cit.*, p. 316.
- <sup>7</sup> References to *Voss* are from Patrick White, *Voss*, (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1960).
- <sup>8</sup> Marr, *op.cit.*, p. 316.
- <sup>9</sup> David Tacey, *Edge of the Sacred*, (HarperCollins, North Blackburn, 1995), p. 82.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 90ff.
- <sup>11</sup> Examples are plentiful, and include p.401 - Mercy will give Maud 'nothing'; p. 406, Mrs de Courcey asks the Colonel: 'Did you find nothing?'
- <sup>12</sup> See Sarah Urang, *Kindled in the Flame: the Apocalyptic Scene in D.H. Lawrence* (Studies in Modern Literature series, No. 21, UMI Research Press, Michigan, 1983), p. 33.
- <sup>13</sup> Frank Kermode, 'D. H. Lawrence and the Apocalyptic Types' in *Continuities*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1968), pp. 122-136.
- <sup>14</sup> Cited in Krishan Kumar, 'Apocalypse, Millenium and Utopia Today' in M. Bull (ed), *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World*, (Blackwell, Oxford, 1995), p. 207.