

Introduction

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Introduction

The essays in this volume are based on papers given at the Biennial Conference of the Swiss Association for North-American Studies (SANAS) on "Apocalypse in America," which took place at the University of Bern in December 1998. The contemporary appeal of its general topic on the eve of a new millennium is beyond question; not only does the popular imagination seem to gorge itself on threats and promises of apocalyptic changes in the physical, socio-economic, and spiritual worlds, but the academic mind has finally caught on and has found countless ways of addressing issues that can broadly be subsumed under the name of "apocalypse." In view of the great variety of definitions, descriptions, and explanations of the term and the phenomena attributed to it, and in the light of the multiplicity of approaches, methods, and procedures demonstrated in countless books and articles on the subject (cf. the more than 7500 entries in Daniels), it comes as no surprise that the term may appear arcane rather than lucid, especially as it has invaded a multitude of discourses from all walks of life. Yet, this flood of publications has also given rise to some sober, and sobering, clarifications, as well as some attempts to limit the word "apocalypse" and its subcategories to specific phenomena, which offer us, if not a clear-cut way of handling a fuzzy concept, at least some ways of delimiting and approaching an expression of such biblical, cosmic, and yet parochial proportions.

In America especially, the preoccupation with apocalyptic expectation seems to proliferate to an extraordinary degree, not only because of the enormous acceleration of developments in science, economics, and technology that can be observed on that continent, but also because the threat and promise of the apocalypse has informed the interpretation of significant events, from the discovery of the continent itself and the Puritan settlements, to Ronald Reagan's misguided Star Wars project and George Bush's controversial "New World Order." The Great Awakening, the American Revolution, the Civil War, American expansionism and labor unrest before and during the turn of the century, the two world wars and the Great Depression, the nuclear threat in the wake of the Cold War, and the ecological crisis, to mention only a few upheavals in US history, have all given rise to, and have been interpreted in terms of, expectations of catastrophic disaster, at one ex-

treme, or promises of imminent bliss, at the other. But it is especially in the anticipation of the new millennium that sacred and secular, mainstream and sectarian, egalitarian and totalitarian movements, creeds, and programs have inundated the American cultural scene, the media, and even academe.

Although in recent academic assessments and interpretations of apocalyptic thought in America the secular modes predominate, even those are usually in some way or other based on a Judaic-Christian model, as found in the Book of Revelation and its typological references (e.g. the Books of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah). The most significant apocalyptic events prophesied in The Revelation of St. John the Divine are (1) the calamities incurred by God upon the seven churches of Asia, comprising wars, famine, death (represented by the famous four horsemen), and plagues (caused by the breaking of the seventh seal); (2) the reign of the Antichrist through two horrendous beasts; (3) the second coming of Christ and his successful war of Armageddon; (4) the thousand years of the messianic kingdom upon earth; (5) the second brief "loosening" of Satan (accompanied by the hosts of Gog and Magog); (6) God's destruction of the world by fire; (7) the Last Judgement; and (8) the appearance of the new heaven and the new earth (Ketterer 5-7; Lewicki 13). This comparatively brief, and often repetitious, biblical account of the ending of the world, as we know it, has preoccupied the human imagination for almost two thousand years; its imagery has inspired artists and poets to create fascinating and memorable public and private versions of dire affliction and magnificent transformation; and scholars and critics have found formidable tensions between disclosure and obscurity, threat and promise, frustration and satisfaction, satire and prophetic mysticism, etc.

From the biblical sources, the secular branch of apocalyptic thinking has derived some of its most relevant formal and thematic criteria, for instance, the process of revealing or unveiling, the binary value system, and the formal oppositions, conflicts, and dialectical processes ensuing from it (Robinson 10-11; Ketterer 8), as well as the linearity and irreversibility of events, the alternation of instances of catastrophe and deliverance, and the sense of predestination and inevitability that informs apocalyptic expectancy (Wojcik 4). Early interpretations of the term "apocalypse" focused on its function as a literary genre, as a form of narrative about the end of (human) time; later it began to be applied to any "sense of an ending, decline, societal crisis, and transformation, whether associated with actual historical events or expressed as themes in modern literature" (Wojcik 12). But even the hermeneutical controversies concerning the literalness or metaphoricity of the Book of

Revelation, whether it is “historical prediction” or “spiritual allegory” (Robinson 11-24), have not yet been laid to rest in our secular times; the more popular among the modern secular apocalyptic discourses especially thrive on such polemics, and such polemics, in turn, have provided ample material for literary renderings of apocalyptic themes, from West’s *The Day of the Locust* to Coover’s *The Origin of the Brunists*.

For many years, religious scholars have commented on the compensatory function of the proclamations of violent bliss at moments of communal disillusionment or present or impending catastrophe, which may be a major reason why the secular versions of apocalyptic thought, and especially their literary manifestations, provide a counter-movement to mimetic modes of expression on the one hand, and fantastic, i.e. escapist ones, on the other. As David Ketterer puts it, “Apocalyptic literature is concerned with the creation of other worlds which exist, on the literal level, in a credible relationship (whether on the basis of rational extrapolation and analogy or of religious belief) with the ‘real’ world, thereby causing a metaphorical destruction of that ‘real’ world in the reader’s head” (13), and with a few slight alterations, this definition applies to the more general (not exclusively literary) meaning of the term as well. This concerns not only its spatial but also its temporal aspects. Apocalyptic writing is disconcerting, because it must presuppose our belief in linear time in order to be able to suspend our sense of time altogether. The narratological problem this causes is suggested by Charles Strozier’s remark: “Concluding is the central dilemma for anything touching end time” (7).

In a book on postmodern fictional versions of the American Apocalypse, Joseph Dewey proposes a useful – though not unproblematic – classification of “traditional” apocalyptic thinking into three distinct types: the “cataclysmic imagination,” the “millennialist spirit,” and the “apocalyptic temper.” The first type is “the most defiantly despairing”:

Drawn to the big event itself, the cataclysmic imagination ranges over methodology – how-to manuals for species extermination, from traditional natural disasters (earthquakes, floods, colliding comets, exploding stars, misaligned planets) to synthetic cataclysms (ecological, technological, nuclear) to the most inventive scenarios of extraterrestrial or even divine interventions. (12)

It “savors the radical violence of imminent planetary alteration: the buildup and climax of the apocalyptic event itself” (13). The second type, the millennialist spirit, in contrast, “accepts endings most cheerfully because of the

fanatical commitment to better worlds emerging from the ruins." It "merely" begins at the moment of the apocalyptic event

and then builds, steadily and with pioneering determination, the new earth and the new heavens. Contemporary upheavals, the sudden sense of discontinuity, meld into a pattern [which] promises [that] once certain drastic measures are achieved . . . , humanity can step collectively into a new age. The cataclysmic imagination drives headlong toward the horizon; the millennialist spirit maintains itself only by keeping the horizon forever receding. (13)

The "drawbacks" of these types are, in the first case, the reduction of humanity "to the huddled masses waiting for judgment or for simple execution" and, in the second, the imposition on humanity of "an interminable sentence of waiting, or perpetual transition" (13). The third type, the apocalyptic temper, however, "is supremely an act of the moral imagination, a gesture of confidence and even defiance that challenges its own assumptions that history is itself tracked toward endings. The fact of the end serves only to create the urgency and the context for meaningful action in a suspenseful present." It involves collectively coping with the fact that living and dying are terms for the same process, accepts the "agony of history," and asserts "dignity and the reassurance that a dangerous present is fraught as much with hope as it is with danger" (15).

Needless to say, Dewey's book is about the third type. The problem here is that this definition of "apocalyptic temper" gives emphasis to human agency, to the extent that it risks excluding from this moral attitude quite a number of phenomena usually accepted as apocalyptic. It advocates a kind of "active" stoicism that seems the opposite of the fatalism that e.g. Martin Buber considers a prerequisite to apocalyptic thinking (Wojcik 4). This has a lot to do with Dewey's desire to focus on the apocalyptic temper as a way of exclusively coping with the nuclear threat. Moreover, his analysis of individual and public American reactions to the catastrophes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, insightful as they are, stress mainly two aspects: on the one hand, early assumptions of victorious (and nationalistic) apocalyptic righteousness, coupled with pride in, and awe of, the technological achievement and, on the other, the subsequent unease at having unleashed unmanageable forces, together, also, with the fear of retribution the moment other nations showed that they could handle the doomsday technology as well. Although he worries about the American people's "most curious acquiescence to living with imminent destruction" as a "collective act of willed blindness" (9), he strangely passes over without comment the comparative silence of the

American people towards pertinent issues of responsibility, or, to resort to religious apocalyptic terminology, of sin and guilt. As he himself points out, the Americans were the first developers of that horrid weaponry and "the only culture to use it against another" (4). By excluding elements of self-questioning, this apocalyptic temper, this mixture of acquiescence and agonistic witnessing of the events *before* the end, this brave mode of "living with the bomb" is made to appear as a modern-day psychological and political survival strategy, which bears the signs of other typical American inversions and utilitarian reinterpretations of cultural phenomena, from the Jeremiad to the rhetoric of the American Revolution to redefinitions of the defeat in Vietnam, finding in its cultural representations "artifacts of hope for the community of the hopeless" (43). To be sure, Dewey does take into consideration that within the last two centuries a "complicated drift from God" and a growing sense "that the end of the world is a fiction" left Americans with "the dubious possibility of time as mere mutability that mocked apocalyptic endings" (16-17). However, by insisting on the replacement of the religious catastrophe by an aesthetic one, while looking at the fiction of Vonnegut, Coover, Pynchon, Gaddis, and DeLillo, he proposes readings which remain safely within the confines of what one might call the modernist paradigm.

Postmodern thinking, as Jean Baudrillard, for one, points out, proposes a different approach to the processes and expectations of apocalypticism. Above all, it problematizes or re-defines some of the most basic criteria of apocalypticism, such as linearity or cataclysmic transformation, without, however, replacing the sense of dread and fatalism, without ignoring, that is to say, the imminence and omnipotence of Death, which, after all, is the central theme of the apocalyptic imagination. Baudrillard's "Hysteresis of the Millennium" (Strozier 250) observes the "vanishing of history" due to excesses of acceleration, deceleration, and simulation and thus postulates a paradoxical model of linearity which combines the irreversibility of events (represented in turn by the combination of the race towards the end with an eternal deferral of the end) with their "retroversion," their "curving back" (256), mentioning several seemingly post-apocalyptic positions, including the idea of the "sphericity of time," the "end of linearity," "the century itself . . . escaping its end," the impossible need "to leapfrog the shadow of the century, to take an elliptical short-cut and pass beyond the end, not allowing it time to take place" (257), or the empty circularity of things:

The worst of it all is precisely that there will be no end to anything, and all these things will continue to unfold slowly, tediously, recurrently, in that hysteresis of everything that, like nails and hair, continues to grow after death. Because, at

bottom, all these things are already dead, and rather than to have a happy or tragic resolution, a destiny, we shall have a thwarted end, a homeopathic end, an end distilled into all the various metastases of the refusal of death. (258)

...

Our Apocalypse is not real, it is *virtual*. And it is not in the future, it is *here and now*. Our orbital bombs, even if they did not mean a natural end, were at least manufactured by us, designed, as it seems, the better to end it all. But in actual fact, that is not how it was: they were made *the better to be rid of the end*. We have now put that end into satellite form, like all those finalities that, once transcendent, now become purely and simply orbital. (260)

Whether or not they embrace the relentlessness of Baudrillard's position, the essays in this volume seem to me to be touched – some less, some more severely – by this postmodern spirit. Most of them relate to texts or approaches that question linearity, reinterpret revelation, challenge the sense of an ending, emphasize continual repetition, or intimate that the apocalypse may be a fake. In this, I submit, the authors do not look for “retrospective absolution” (Baudrillard in Strozier 258) but they try to “fac[e] up to this radical illusion” (262) of the end, or of the ending of the end.

In the probably most far ranging essay, Donald Pease gives an additional spin to the Americanization of apocalypse by relating the concept to the *end* of “American Exceptionalism.” Certainly, the traditional view connects apocalypse and exceptionalism in America – Douglas Robinson's wry question: “how does one justify discriminations in an egalitarian society?” (xiii) comes to mind –, and Pease derives this connection from the need of “American practitioners [of the apocalyptic imagination] to disavow catastrophic outcomes of its exercise – like the Pequot massacre, or slavery, or the forcible dispossession of entire populations” (Pease 27). Such instances of “man casting out nature” (26) led to a canonical belief in “the United States' unprecedented relationship to history” (25) and of “its messianic role as the world's savior” (27) and in turn gave quasi-religious sanctioning to further acts of political, legal, and social violence practised by the state. The Cold War especially fostered millennial expectations accompanied by eschatological rhetoric. But when “the ‘evil empire’ collapsed from within” (30), Pease argues, the “narrative of US Exceptionalism was dismantled” and appropriate closure was denied, which led to “crises in the state's legitimate use of force” (31). Pease finds a striking example of such a legitimation crisis in the ill-fated confrontation of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF) with an apocalyptic sect around David Koresh outside Waco, Texas in 1993. As he tells it, the conflict revolved around contradictory concepts of the law regarding actual and symbolic violence and around the state's right to

use deadly force, a right which the "Branch Davidians" claimed for themselves. In this conflict the authorities denied their opponents' apocalyptic claims as religious fanaticism, claims which, however, had been used by the state for centuries. The ensuing confusion and insecurity about the justification of violence undermined the state's legitimate deployment of force and caused further cataclysmic confrontations such as the Oklahoma City bombing and the call for the death penalty for its perpetrator. The reciprocal denial of each others' apocalyptic legitimation seems to have led the authorities and their various opponents to persistent re-castings of the same apocalyptic scenarios, again implying an empty circularity of events. And in a final step to his argument, Pease comments on a recent televised retracing of de Tocqueville's journey across, and reflections about, the United States, emphasizing the aspect – and the problematic – of simulation, which Baudrillard, with his view of America as the post-apocalyptic space par excellence, and Patricia Yaeger with her view of America as "themed space," have declared instances of a new kind of apocalypticism which grows out of the cataclysmic ending, or endings, of the previous apocalyptic conceptualization of American Exceptionalism.

While Donald Pease sees the end of US Exceptionalism as a threshold to a postmodern mode of apocalyptic thinking in America, Agnieszka Soltysik relates this new mode to a popular as well as academic awareness of what she calls "The End of Progress." Tracing interactions of Darwinist thinking and American ideological narratives along several selected "points of contact," from the Turner Thesis to present-time genetic research, she observes an increasing belief in scientific progress up to the 1960s, when it begins to topple over into visions of human regression, ecological breakdown, species disaster, or genetic collapse, which stand in ironical contrast to the ostensibly ideologically neutral stance of recent evolutionary research. Beginning with Darwin's original resistance and later prudent and hesitant acceptance of the concept of evolution in biology, she traces the idea of progress in Social Darwinism and its reception in America from Spencer via Carnegie, Fiske, and Turner to post-Civil War racism as it was demonstrated during the Chicago World Fair of 1893 and as it was theoretically underpinned in the writings of Frederick L. Hoffman. Soltysik recognizes early signs of "apocalyptic pessimism" (Soltysik 49) during the decades around the turn of the century in the fears voiced about the dangers to American national and social cohesion of increasing numbers of poor, illiterate and unskilled immigrants from Eastern Europe, the biological competitiveness of the "dark races," and the "yellow peril" from the Far East. In the early twentieth century, when the serious

scholars in the social sciences turned to psychology and culture, Social Darwinism and biological racism found a new home in the eugenics movement and in Robert Yerkes's psychobiology; capitalism gladly accepted this racial ideology in its celebration of the progress of modern life.

After World War II, but especially after 1960, evolutionary biology developed a different rhetoric, predicting an end to human linear development. Desmond Morris popularized the results in his pessimistic primatological theses, and his warnings of a world catastrophe caused either by overpopulation or by an explosion of suppressed biological urges paralleled and probably also influenced similar regressive speculations in American movies; Edward O. Wilson's "reductionist" socio-biological theories postulated an apocalyptic version of ecological entropy. While the recent generation of evolutionary researchers seems to have returned to a certain degree of optimism or at least neutrality, their concern, as Soltysik claims, has abandoned topics such as progress – or human development altogether –; for them the gene has replaced the organism "as the unit of self-reproduction" (Soltysik 55). Likewise, popular culture, while retaining a "traditional" apocalyptic bent, has turned to species-related narratives; "species disaster movies" counterbalance the cataclysmic extinctions of humans with the survival of other species, or with colonization by higher forms of life from other planets, but also disguising by their extra-terrestrial imagery very real – and old-fashioned – political, economic, or racial anxieties. These may be remnants of Cold War thinking, for, as Soltysik suggests, in a period of multiculturalism and globalization, linear narratives such as those of progress or apocalypse may be out of date.

Writing of the "Disillusionment of Apocalypse," Boris Vejdovsky returns to the Greek meaning of the word as uncovering or unveiling and, extending this definition to include sexual parts of the human body, he proposes a gendering of the term, which allows him to find in modernist poetry alternatives to the melodramatic linearity of apocalyptic thinking. Vejdovsky starts with Ruskin's late Victorian fascination with the apocalyptic quality of romantic cloudscapes, which he calls "a unified trope to designate modernity," and utilizes the critic's phrase "the service of the clouds" (for modern landscape art) to discuss the relationship of modernity and eschatology in a poem by Wallace Stevens. In Ruskin's concerns about the obscurity of modernity and in his demand that a work of art should reveal its moral and sensuous immediacy he finds a fitting matrix for his examination of Stevens's modernist critique of the grandiose "cosmic and universal apocalypse" (Vejdovsky 65).

In the opening of Stevens's poem "Sunday Morning," Vejdovsky sees a "voyeuristic attitude" of the speaker turning the woman into "the representation of a representation of femininity" (67), but this stance soon gives way to an "uncovering" of Stevens's multiple selves in the poem, notably his feminine voice, appearing in an uneasy relationship to the dominating one of the virile young poet. In fact, as Vejdovsky shows in his detailed interpretation of the poem, the desires for beauty and rebirth – which he defines as male urges – are combined with a mixture of Oedipal desire and death wish, directed towards the female, the mother, but disturbing (in the speaker's mind) the woman's reverie and evoking a sense of loss and disillusionment. Against this the "gift" of the feminine consciousness offers an "intangible" form of resistance. Thus, the "revelation" results in an "uncovering of a part of [the] self that precisely resists the apocalyptic myth of revelation," and the poem moves back and forth between apocalyptic images of male regeneration and suggestions of courageous female resistance in the form of "patience, passion, and passivity" (73).

In her analysis of the beginning of the "Rocket Raising" section of *Gravity's Rainbow*, Inger Dalsgaard concentrates on Pynchon's criticism of "mythic and historical revisions of linear and parabolic models of technological progress" and on his "ambivalent attitudes towards so-called 'natural' and 'vicious' cycles in history" (Dalsgaard 77). Questioning the linearity of the illusory belief in technological progress that dominated American thinking during his formative years, and drawing impulses from his fascination with Spengler's *Decline of the West*, Pynchon, in this novel, "raise[s] the specter of ecologically-sound cycles being taken over, vampire-like, by malevolent and parasitic synthetic cycles – not so much diseased as un-dead – at the behest of profit-hungry transnational corporations organized into a pervasive yet intangible 'System'" (78). In the section analyzed, two movements are counterpoised: the "failed" linearity that finds its expression in a parabola (the trajectories of the rocket and of Slothrop's flight in a hot air balloon) and the circular movement, represented in the ritual of the rocket's resurrection or "raising" and by Slothrop's "resurrection" as "Raketemensch" (79), respectively. The first movement illustrates the restraining influence of gravity on "the upward linear vector of technological aspiration" (83), symbolized by the smelly swamp inside Slothrop's bowels and by the marshland, the site of the Schwarzkommando's search for the crashed rocket; the second movement represents the mythic cycle of Herero history, symbolizing the tribe's illusory hope to recover linearity and actually enact a repetition of their mythic rebirth. Yet neither linear nor circular movement work: "Paro-

dying the Freudian return of the repressed, Pynchon through the rocket dramatizes the return of the depressed" (83).

The reason for the failure of mythical regeneration Dalsgaard finds in Pynchon's assumption "that a natural cycle of death and rebirth has been hijacked by 'Them' or 'the System'" (85), an agency which imitates life, i.e., provides a mere simulacrum of linearity and circularity: "The novel's perfect rocket is left permanently pending, or hanging, on the final page: perpetually approaching, perpetually off-setting its (and humanity's) fate" (86). The stage for these events may be post-war Germany, but the "System" is a global one, and its headquarters are implied to be in America, not the country of freedom and democracy, however, but a "Death-kingdom," a realm that has inherited the "totalitarian diseases" that had caused the war in the first place. Worse than that, the "System" provides a simulacrum of "that ever-looming Doomsday" in order to ensure its own eternal survival, which is, paradoxically, the survival of Death. Even the promise of destruction, of apocalypse, creative as it may appear in this context, may be a mere illusion: if the rocket ever falls, "it will be only be to spread [its] cancerous infection in a new life form, sustaining a corrupted cycle of life mutated into deadly growth" (87).

Don DeLillo, apocalyptic author par excellence (Strozier 6), has, in *Underworld*, written the novel about America's experience of the Cold War, epitomized in his conflation of the stories of baseball and the bomb. Henri Petter reads *Underworld* as a piece of "composite fiction," as a Bakhtinian "many-voiced narrative" (Petter 90), in which the interaction of subdivisions predominates over the linearity of plot. Although the novel provides a captivating kaleidoscope of everyday life in the Tranquilized Fifties, apocalyptic themes are of central importance. Victory and defeat are manifested in the famous "shot" at the Giants-Dodgers baseball game of October 3, 1951 and ambiguously prophesied in the news, on the same day, of Russia's successful explosion of an atomic bomb. Both shots, reverberating through the next fifty years of American history, serve to link snippets of everyday life to facets of somber as well as absurd apocalypticism, such as, for example, J. Edgar Hoover's paranoid fear of contamination by microscopic carriers of disease, his violent hatred of political and ideological opponents, his fascination with Breughel's painting of "The Triumph of Death"; the Demings' worries about "things we haven't been told," i.e. above all, incidents of radioactive contamination; several characters' preoccupation with waste and its disposal; and above all, the inundation of the media by reports of earthquakes, floods, plane crashes, serial killings, and assassinations. Petter draws attention to

DeLillo's fascinating use of polyvalent words, especially to the multi-referential title of the novel, but also to his use of unreliable signifiers, some of which reflect his concern with paranoia, with the endless repetition of events, but also with the ambiguity of endings. The concluding pages, tying a series of hydrogen bomb explosions on the Internet with the appearance, in cyberspace, of the final word "Peace," cast a great doubt on the prophecy of the millennium.

This doubt is amplified in the last contribution to the present volume. Starting out with Stanley Fish's by now famous "climactic denunciation" of Alan Sokal's hoax about "Science Studies" in *Social Text* of Spring 1996, Elizabeth Kaspar treats the hoax in American letters as the "flip side" of apocalypse, suggesting not only that "the American tradition of hoax is apocalyptic" but also implying, perhaps, that much apocalyptic writing may be more closely related to the hoax than we are usually willing to concede. She defines the successful hoax as an "'unsuccessful' parody, a spoof not detected and hence accepted by those hoaxed" (Kaspar 103), and emphasizes three important characteristics: "the hoax is an act of aggression" and thus political; it involves the disciplines or the professions (104), above all of the philosopher and the scientist; and it is "open-ended," i.e., it generates responses that perpetuate its effect. Her theses are elaborated by comments on the famous hoaxes of Orson Welles and Edgar Allan Poe.

The example of Poe in particular reveals some of the problematic aspects of this mode, but it also allows us to compare nineteenth-century public reaction with that of our own age. Analyzing his hoaxes calls for particular emphasis on his hack writing, on the "social" or "low" tales, which demand spatial and temporal precision and which, in the terminology of Frank Kermode, might also be called "myths" inasmuch as they ask for absolute rather than "conditional" belief. Poe's form of hoax is, in his own words, "an attempt 'to deceive by verisimilitude'" (110); it is, however, jeopardized by his fatal tendency to wink and banter, as in "Von Kempelen and his Discovery," or to exaggerate, as when the protagonist of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* frightens himself in the mirror in his disguise as a risen corpse. Kaspar's remarks on the "technical realism used to sustain the fantastic element" in Poe's hoaxes, exemplified in the ironic tale of reverse resurrection, "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" (111), offer an interesting variation on Ketterer's above-mentioned difference between the apocalyptic mode and the mimetic and fantastic ones. And her assessment of the media response to Poe's "Balloon Hoax" shows that in contrast to present-day moral condemnations, the nineteenth century readership tended to judge the hoax according

to its entertainment value, but even at that time, the ironic stance was still considered detrimental to the author's intentions. All this, she suggests, may even apply to certain texts in his "high" art form, such as *Eureka*, Poe's "most apocalyptically prophetic text," whose high seriousness is invaded by "low humor" (114).

Returning to our own century, Kaspar concludes by juxtaposing the "apocalyptic" arguments of two eminent scholars, C.P. Snow and Frank Kermode, in order to highlight a pattern that "echo[es] very strongly in the exchanges between scientists and humanities professors that have followed on and extended the Sokal affair" (119), arguments concerning the historical contingency (and potential malleability) of scientific laws, which invest (and infect) our professional discourses. Philosophical, literary, and cultural scholars, she submits, may be engaged "in a kind of indefinite postponement of the End, of that moment when theory demands to coincide or be congruent with the world," whereas scientists (and especially physicists) may refuse to accept this attitude and insist "on forcing the End" (119-120). "Such a state of suspension in our professional lives," she concludes, "is one most receptive or vulnerable to the hoax" (121). Her two categories may, in a final simplification, be loosely related to Dewey's "millennialist spirit" (accepting the ceaseless postponement of the end) and the "cataclysmic imagination" (forcing the climax). Could it be, then, that in the last decade of our millennium, Dewey's third type, the "modernist" "apocalyptic temper," is to be replaced by the postmodern hoax?

Bern, August 1999

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