

n e w w o r l d o r d e r s: millennialism in the western hemisphere

## CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN DRAMA DISCOVERS APOCALYPSE

A paper prepared for the annual conference  
of the Center for Millennial Studies  
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In a review essay surveying millennium scholarship in the November 8 New Republic, Anthony Grafton concludes, with a curious amalgam of relief and longing, that "The Apocalypse is decidedly not now, not for us, not really. It is a curiosity, a script idea, a marketing strategy, something to generate magazine theme issues with relentlessly upbeat tones and mildly ironic stories about scholarly debates" (82). For Grafton, there appears to be no imaginative space between the paranoid literalism of fundamentalist sects and the distanced discourse of the scholarly conference. A thoughtful reader must ask whether the entire imaginary of Millennium, in its catastrophic as well as its salvatory phases, can be embraced between Grafton's either-or of rapt credulity and (in his construction) essentially idle curiosity.

One great territory in between is of course poetic imagination, whose millennialist workings in the field of theatrical art I have been tracing through the past century from the last fin-de-siecle to our own. The 20th century theatrical journey begins in Europe. Despite a few early harbingers, such as Thornton Wilder's Skin of Our Teeth, it travels to the American theatre only when the world begins again, in the 1960s. However, I hope you will forgive a short European excursus in a conference on the Americas, as I believe it will help to set the American recuperations and variations in context. Let me take five minutes of our time then to return briefly to Paris at the turn of the last century.

Between the mystery play cycles of the late Middle Ages and Wagner's final conflagration in Götterdämmerung theater had little interest in apocalyptic myth. But after Wagner it spreads in a number of directions, carried by the symbolist movement at the end of the century: in Paris the notorious Alfred Jarry represented King Ubu, his image of pure appetite and pure destruction, as Antichrist; in Norway, Ibsen--the great exponent in drama of a millennialist Third Kingdom fusion of pagan and Christian--delivered his ecstatic/ironic final testament, When We Dead Awaken, a liebestod that ends in catastrophic avalanche; Strindberg, then living in Paris, published Coram Populo!, the six-page epilogue to his history play Master Olof, in which God goes mad and destroys the earth; even Chekhov, among a number of far more mystical Russian playwrights and poets, turns not entirely mock-apocalyptic in The Seagull, in which his tortured young poet Treplev presents a mystery play set hundreds of millennia hence in a frozen wasteland of earth where all life has been extinguished by solar death.

Fin-de-siecle European playwrights found in millennialistic symbolism a poetics that expressed their hope but mostly their forebodings about the future. "After us," wrote William Butler Yeats, on attending the first performance of Jarry's Ubu Roi in 1896, "the Savage God." A generation later this same apocalyptic poetics is no longer a poetics of

future dread but of present shock. Marinetti and his merry band of Italian Futurists promise the destruction of all culture and extol the purifying powers of war. In the brief heady moment of the 1917 revolution between enthusiasm and disenchantment, Mayakovsky writes and designs Mystery-Bouffe. Its end-of-the-(bourgeois)-world by flood ends happily in a Bolshevik New Jerusalem set in a Moscow bursting with the man-made equivalent of the shining New Jerusalem of Revelation--universal electrification. The Great War above all summoned the myth of Biblical apocalypse, which offered language and imagery on a scale that could approach the war's unprecedented destruction and horror. Apocalypse appears in the work of several German-language playwrights of the period, and nowhere more forcefully than in the mammoth drama, The Last Days of Mankind, by the Viennese editor and essayist Karl Kraus. Kraus's 800-page attack on the hypocrisy and venality of the Central Powers, the officer and mercantile classes, newspaper correspondents and publishers, and almost everyone else, written in short semi-documentary sketches, grows increasingly direct, almost hysterical, in its apocalyptic references, culminating in "The Last Night," the thunderous Epilogue in which a Voice From Above announces the final destruction of earth as punishment for its four-year killing spree accompanied by meteor showers, shafts of flame, and "world thunder."

In the millennialist poetics of these works, one found references to the classic apocalyptic texts and saw them played out on the immense vertical landscape that is the setting for those texts. Such, for instance, was Antonin Artaud's miniature surrealist drama, The Spurt of Blood, which with its great Whore, war in heaven, and hint of the New Jerusalem, seems to have been drawn directly from Revelation. In the end-of-the-world plays written after World War II, however, the motifs shrank and the immense landscape collapsed, convincing some that the mythic schema was dead at last.

The change is most obvious if one compares the scenography of pre- and post-World War II plays of world catastrophe. The most striking change is the closing down of the vertical landscape. The dead flat planet of Endgame, where "all is corpses"; the sea-level catastrophe of Heiner Müller's Hamletmachine, which opens with the famous end of European culture, "I was Hamlet. I stood at the shore and talked with the surf BLABLA, the ruins of Europe behind me"; the death-camp, necropolitan inversion in Grotowski's Akropolis with its black ashen stage; the burning Valley of the Bones in Liliane Atlan's Mister Fugue: these images of the end of the world are impacted nuclei of the apocalyptic universes of early modernism, as if their poetic imaginary were being held in cryogenic suspension--perhaps for another generation of writers.

It would seem surprising at first that the revival of apocalyptic, with its extravagant terrors, hopes, and landscapes, would appear in the American theatre. Surprising, because for the most part, American playwrights have had no interest in millennialist visions, either catastrophic or triumphant. In this they have markedly distanced themselves from the concerns of American popular film, which has gorged on fantasies of the End for decades. It could be argued that the general avoidance of metaphysics permitted the American theater to cultivate the worst of both worlds, managing to be superficial without being popular. But it is also not surprising that the millennialist vision, for good or for ill, if it was going to reinflate in any western theater in the latter part of the century, would do so here, in the American theater.

Americans found in the World War II experience of vanquishing European evil and the

national aspiration to make the world anew, a reinscription of the country's foundational dream. Such pride clashed painfully with disappointed ideals of social justice in the South, the Cold War arms buildup, and Vietnam. One theatrical result was the Living Theatre's Paradise Now, first seen at the Avignon Festival in 1968. Trained young in Erwin Piscator's New School workshop in New York, Julian Beck and Judith Malina created a work much indebted to German expressionism. The massed bodies of the stage photos with their outstretched hands are reminiscent of the ecstatic massed scenes of the earlier German political theater. And yet, the Living's heterogenous mix of Kaballah, yoga, anarchist revolution, alchemy, and a Joachite faith in earthly transformation was thoroughly American.

The group described the performance as a "vertical ascent toward Permanent Revolution," a progression up "rungs" of consciousness and action that was to be interior and exterior, spiritual and political. When Beck and Malina wrote the piece down after performing it for a year, it was outlined like classical apocalypse as a series of "visions," eight in their case, hinged in the middle by a condition they termed "Apokatastasis" after a line in a poem by Allen Ginsberg. The term was used by both Ginsberg and the Living to signify a reversal of consciousness, revolution without violence, a transformation of demonic into celestial forces.

Paradise Now may have been the most genuinely millennialist performance of the century. Far more seriously than Marinetti ever imagined, without the self-promotion of a "movement" and the bad faith of anti-democratic politics, the Living aspired to break the boundary between art and life, to use theatre to promote an intensely believed-in total social and personal transformation, a transformation they actually attempted to model in the course of the theatrical experience by inviting the audience to strip naked along with the actors and then take to the streets.

Another attempt at an apocalyptic dramaturgy, spurred in part by political revulsion against the drift of American capitalism and militarism, may be found in the last plays, some still unpublished and others left unfinished, of Tennessee Williams. A surviving fragment of the play he was working on in 1982 just before his death features an explosively erupting volcano while a "Wild Voice" offstage screams "FINE del mondo, fine del mondo!"

As the 1980s went on, other American playwrights and performance artists, spurred by the environmental and urban crisis as well as the AIDS epidemic, found a language of protest in the imagery and especially the scale of millenarian apocalypse. And now suddenly the American theatre, for the first time in its admittedly comparatively short history, becomes host to many visions of the End, some ending with the End, and some carrying beyond the end to visions of new beginnings.

Rachel Rosenthal, who came to the United States with her family as a refugee from Hitler in her 'teens--and now for many decades a Los Angeles-based writer and performer of her own performance pieces, set her 1986 L.O.W. in Gaia on the California desert, a setting from which to contemplate the prospective desert being made of the earth through environmental insult, especially the production and disposal of nuclear waste.

Throughout the hour-long performance, Rosenthal--then a handsome woman of sixty with shaved head, wearing army fatigues and an intriguing collection of earrings, adopted the double persona of a camper on a nature retreat and also of the Earth itself. As Earth, Rosenthal prophesied an apocalyptic end to all life on earth by the year 4000. To a

clanging musical score against dark, swirling rear projections, she intoned the curse of the Earth on humankind, in a prophetic discourse not heard on a stage since Karl Kraus's The Last Days of Mankind. I give you just a few lines of this Shelley-like descent into the negative sublime--

I am the Jaws of the Abyss  
I am the final going into the Shadow.  
I am the Mistress of the Wolf-Dog of Death...  
The end of the world comes when I unlock his chains.  
Tremble for you push me hard.  
My anger will devour the world.

Rosenthal creates a feminist version of an apocalyptic landscape. Unlike Kraus, it has no reach into the open heavens, but its lower cavities are alive and boiling with the now poisoned energies of Gaia, and as full of potential crushing punishment as John's heaven. In this stern warning, there is no promise of salvation, no regenerative child to help life start over again, as is hinted even in the almost unrelievedly dark Endgame. The African-American playwright Adrienne Kennedy, known for her fierce, impacted one-act plays of the 1960s and '70s, wrote her "elegy for the American twentieth century," in the early '90s, an anti-mystery mystery play entitled Motherhood 2000. The first-person narrator of events, a black woman writer, describes an urban apocalypse. Anarchy has been loosed in New York City, food is almost unavailable, hordes of homeless refugees are pouring across the river from New Jersey. The general disorder is haunted by an earlier personal event: the brutal police beating of the writer's son, and her inability after years of effort to obtain justice.

But now the play veers madly from its seeming realist beginnings. At the corner, in Riverside Park, a group of homeless men performs a Passion Play, every night the same performance, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Our narrator has discovered that the leading roles are being played by the very cabal of men who turned her son into a martyr and the mother into a futile seeker for redress. The very policeman who beat her son plays the Saviour. But gradually the writer is drawn to this group, and soon is performing the role of a soldier in the play. In the lilt of Yorkshire Middle English, the group begins to perform the Crucifixion scenes. And then, with an abruptness so stunning that it must hold the entire meaning of the play, the soldier/mother smashes the head of the ex-policeman playing Christ with a hammer. The play is over.

Of all the American theater that can be gathered under the rubric of apocalypse, this may be the most disturbing. It layers the Passion over a secular account of the Last Days, then shatters the Christian narrative with the central gesture of Revenge Tragedy. Kennedy even follows the revenge pattern in having her protagonist attack during a metatheatrical performance within the larger play. And she of course leaves us in just the kind of moral confusion with which revenge tragedy is always associated. The extreme discordance of the two genres, apocalyptic mystery play and revenge tragedy, itself becomes a dramaturgical analogue to the moral chaos of the millennium that provides the play's setting.

If the women, Rosenthal and Kennedy invoke apocalypse with some of the punishing energy associated with the form's classical mode, two male playwrights, Jose Rivera and Tony Kushner, retrieved some millenarian hope from apocalyptic discourse. Their two

plays, which brought angels crashing down onto the stage, were written without knowledge of each other, and appeared almost simultaneously in the early 1990s. In Marisol, Jose Rivera depicted urban chaos in the Bronx as a mirror of a war in heaven against a senile God whose blood, if he was vanquished, would renew the world. The victorious angel returns with God's crown at the end, and offers it to the audience. Rivera thus has his apocalypse, one might say, and eats it too: he invokes the miracle of the transformational dream, yet at the same time turns the decidedly unmiraculous hard work of social change over to the individual or collective efforts of his spectators.

Tony Kushner's Angels in America, the two-part, eight-act-plus-Epilogue meditation on living and dying in America at the turn of the millennium, offers a far more nuanced invocation of apocalypse. The dark and light sides of millennium are a constant point of reference in Angels in America, something like the wild duck in Ibsen's play of that name, the organizing symbol to which each character nevertheless ascribes different meanings. Orthodox forms of religious and political millenarianism are sympathetically invoked but firmly rejected in the Mormon and Bolshevik story-lines of this multiple-narrative "fantasia." Kushner's oldest living Bolshevik, Akelsii Antedilluvianovich Prelapsarianov, makes an impassioned case for the impossibility of solving the "Great Question before us"--"Are We Doomed?"--without (like Apocalypse itself) a totalizing theory.

You who live in this sour little age [he lectures] cannot imagine the grandeur of the prospect we gazed upon: like standing atop the highest peak in the mighty Caucasus, and viewing in one all-knowing glance the...order of creation. You cannot imagine it. I weep for you....What have you to offer now, Children of this Theory? Market Incentives?...Show me the [new] words that will reorder the world, or else, keep silent.

Kushner's most avowedly political character, the intense Jewish intellectual Louis, ends up conceding the insufficiency of single-theory socialism but brings to Gorbachev and Perestroika some of its millenarian excitement: "The whole time we were feeling everything, everywhere was stuck, while in Russia! Look! Perestroika! The Thaw! The whole world is Changing! Overnight!" (143) The valium-popping, disappointed young wife Harper is in the grip of environmental apocalypse. Without benefit of religion or politics, she foresees the end of the world in the hole in the ozone layer, imagines starting the world afresh in Antarctica, and much later envisions a new beginning in a rising of dead souls who conjoin to mend the hole and save the earth. The dead soul who does rise, Ethel Rosenberg, warns Roy Cohen that millennium approaches, and he will roast in hell. The angels who see the only chance of world survival in a program of anti-migration, social and geographic stasis, mourn the "spiraling apart of the Work of Eternity," and promise "more horror than can be borne....before that last dreadful daybreak...bears all life away" (132).

Prior, the AIDS-stricken hero of the piece, rejects the Prophetic Angel's command, returns her sacred Book, and demands more life. He espouses his own kind of gradualist millennium in the Epilogue, standing beneath the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park--the fountain pointedly dry, because the play takes place in a slowly-thawing winter. The horizon of angels is needed, Prior says, even if they commemorate death, because "They suggest a world without dying" (145). The mythic must survive to give us hope. Without at least a flicker of millennial aspiration, Kushner seems to say, we Americans just cannot

do life--or politics. This is what Matthew Smith calls Kushner's "progressive apocalypse," and what Stanton Garner describes as Kushner's "millenarianism ...not imaginable outside history."

In The Sense of an Ending Frank Kermode writes that the true-believing apocalyptics, those committed to the cleansing power of violence, tend to engage the apocalyptic motifs as myth, while artists for the most part--he is discussing Yeats at this point--are content to invoke them as fiction. "Myths call for absolute, fictions for conditional assent," Kermode says. The late century returnees to the myth in the American theater all see the approach of the End and its forestalling as events within history. Why is Apocalypse then not dispensable and even what Brecht--himself not at all exempt when it comes to millenarian thinking--would call mere mystification? (Kushner has been criticized on just these grounds.) But from a poetic point of view I would argue that these writers borrow the forms of myth precisely to lend historical urgency to their fictions, especially in America where they know that the ear is always already prepared for such a reception. Apocalypse and millennium to these writers are not, as Grafton witheringly writes, just a "script idea." Rather to them the old script--as Stephen D. O'Leary calls the discourse of apocalypse--is not fully exhausted, and they are not prepared to entirely hand over its remaining poetic power to those who exploit it only as fiction, or dangerously invoke it as incontrovertible truth.

#### NOTES

1. See Elinor Fuchs, ed., The Apocalyptic Century, special journal issue of Theater, 29:3 (Fall, 1999).
2. See Linda Dorff, "Babylon Now," and the fragment, "The Lingering Hour," in Fuchs, ed., The Apocalyptic Century, pp.115-123.
3. Rachel Rosenthal, L.O.W. in Gaia (Performing Arts Journal #30, vol.xi, no, 3), pp.76-94, 90.
4. Bonnie Marranca, ed. and intro., Plays for the End of the Century (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1996), p.xvi. Motherhood 2000 appears on pp.1-8.
5. Tony Kushner, Perestroika, Part Two of Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1996), pp.13-14.
6. Matthew Wilson Smith, "Angels in America: A Progressive Apocalypse," in The Apocalyptic Century, pp.153-166.
7. Stanton B. Garner, "Angels in America: The Millennium and Postmodern Memory," in Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), pp.173-184, 182.

8. Frank Kermode, The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p.39.