Introduction: Aspects of Apocalypse

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‘What does the Apocalypse matter, unless in so far as it gives us imaginative release into another vital world? After all, what meaning has the Apocalypse? For the ordinary reader, not much.’¹ D. H. Lawrence’s questions pave the way for an argument to demonstrate that the Apocalypse does matter because it gives us access to a near-defunct symbolistic mode of thought whose rediscovery can re-energize the individual’s relation to the cosmos. In his own slim volume Apocalypse (1931) he engages in a process of excavation to gain access to the ancient pagan work he is convinced lies embedded within the biblical text building up to a rhapsodic climax celebrating connectedness: ‘I am part of the sun as my eye is part of me’.² Of course, Lawrence is here pursuing a strategy common to other Modernists of rediscovering (and idealizing) aspects of ancient culture in order to expose absences in the present. More generally, he sets a twentieth-century keynote in interpreting Apocalypse to suit his own preconceptions, and by so doing approaches an oxymoron which will recur throughout this collection: ‘secular apocalypse’. Paul Alkon has argued that Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville’s Le Dernier Homme (1805) secularized apocalypse by altering the relation between ideas and narrative in his work so that, for instance, resurrection was figured as a gradual process, not an instantaneous one.³ For Alkon the crucial change is an increased narratization of apocalypse, but for the moderns speculative reinterpretation is even more crucial. Lawrence’s 1931 work could be read as a guide to those willing to take the trouble to look afresh at the Bible. Similarly Bram Stoker’s The Jewel of Seven Stars (1903) draws extensively on apocalyptic symbolism to dramatize a revelation of how the religion of Ancient Egypt might live on in Edwardian England. The speculative core of that novel lies in a chapter (Powers – Old and New) that was cut out of the 1912
reprint, which uses recent discoveries like radioactivity to undermine a crudely materialistic worldview, and which speculates on the possible similarities between the state of knowledge at the turn of the century and in Ancient Egypt. Where Lawrence rejects science in favour of a cosmic vitalism, Stoker breaks down presumed distinctions between matter and force, ruminating that even astrology might turn out to be a science after all.

Both these writers juxta pose at least two radically different ways of viewing the world and it may be that one feature of the transition into the modern age was a pluralizing of paradigms. H. G. Wells, such a crucial figure in defining the modern age, as Patrick Parrinder shows here, combines different models to speculate on the fate of mankind in his early scientific romances: Christian, Promethean and evolutionary. The result is a hybridity in his narrative commentary, one which can be found in other science fiction stories from the turn of the century. Simon Newcomb’s ‘The End of the World’ (1903), for instance, describes the imminent collision between Earth and another planet. The protagonist, a professor, and a small group of associates are saved by being in a subterranean chamber when the other planet passes near enough to destroy the surface of the Earth but not the whole planet. Emerging to contemplate the smoking ruins of civilization, the professor glosses the event as inevitable (‘such is the course of evolution’) and then rationalizes it by reference to a being who is God in all but name: ‘to the Power which directs and controls the whole process the ages of humanity are but as days, and it will await in sublime patience the evolution of a new earth and a new order of animated nature’.4 The human observers did not possess access to this guiding power except in the most general sense and their ignorance of one direction reflected in their miscalculation of the other.

Newcomb’s story plays on the two senses of ‘end’ which inform modern representations of apocalypse: terminus (ending) and telos or ultimate aim. Since the latter remains inscrutable in our most secular fiction, terminus tends to stand in for telos. In The Sense of an Ending (1967) Frank Kermode identifies what he calls a ‘pattern of anxiety’, a recurring perception that we are living at the end of an era.5 Leslie Fiedler entitled his survey of modern American fiction Waiting for the End (1964), reflecting not so much any pre-apocalyptic temper in his chosen writers as his own loss of confidence in an identifiable readership he could any longer address. So he concludes: ‘I am inclined to believe that the history of the genre is