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Ordinary Chronicles of the End of the World

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Introduction. Chronicles of the End of the World: The End is not the End

Arnaud Schmitt

- 1 It seems that after all, the end is not the End. This seeming paradox is perfectly encapsulated by the word “chronicle”; contrary to an overpowering narrative, such as the one of a whole world about to die, causing the demise of millions of people, a chronicle is a factual record of daily events. As opposed to canonical and *macro-narratives* of major apocalypses,¹ chronicles of the end of the world offer *micro-narratives* of daily lives, of their mundanity and physicality; they depict the way these lives are impacted but not necessarily upended by the, or more precisely by *an*, apocalypse that eventually turns out not to be irremediably apocalyptic. Indeed, some of the apocalypses mentioned in the works studied in the essays that follow are not imperiously final: they certainly don’t bode well for the future, but they don’t put an end to the world as we know it; they simply radically (or not) alter its physical, environmental or political order. In other words, they should be seen more as *states* than as *outcomes*, more as *stases* than as eschatological fireworks, and the characters described in these chronicles are shown adapting to these states, not being engulfed by them. They justify the distinction between major and minor eschatology, because, with the latter, changes might be major but the effects they entail and the adaptation techniques required are not totally remote from what we do in our current, pre-crisis lives.
- 2 Laura Kasischke goes even further and shows in *In a Perfect World* (2009) that the end can be an opportunity for personal development, to find who we really are and what we can do to help others—a *meaning* in other words. The world she describes is different from ours in that it progressively deprives people of the commodities they take for granted (a common denominator to many narratives mentioned in this issue), but it is first and foremost a better world for her main character: forced to be responsible for the first time, to take charge in the prolonged absence of her husband, she thrives on an ending world that doesn’t feel like it is ending: “Now that Jiselle knew she could kill an animal, and that her mother could clean it and cook it, the world could start all over

again, full of possibilities. The whole house seemed radiant with these possibilities” (Kasischke 302-3). Kasischke’s strategy in this novel is to go against the current of the most famous cases of post-apocalyptic narratives and de-dramatize the end. She actually pays little attention to the end *per se*, and flippantly brushes it aside at the beginning of her story: “No one had said the word *epidemic* yet, or the word *pandemic*. No one was calling it a *plague*” (5), and, in a way, the author never gives the impression that she wants her readers to know more: “Full of curious weather, meteor showers, and the discovery in rain forests and oceans of species thought to be extinct, it was the kind of year you might associate with an apocalypse if you were prone to making those kinds of associations, which more and more people seemed to be” (6). Is the apocalypse a state of mind, a mere flight of fancy? No, dramatic events, radical alterations take place, even in *In a Perfect World*, but the strategy is no longer to “blow the narrative out of proportion” and rely essentially on Thanatos on a grand scale, it is rather to see the apocalypse through a more practical, less dramatic prism. In *Into the Forest* (1996), Jean Hegland also deals with The Cause of the current or looming apocalypse in a similar nonchalant manner: “Last winter when the electricity first began going off, it was so occasional and brief we didn’t pay much attention” (12); “For a long time it was a rare day when the power came on” (13); “It’s amazing how quickly everyone adapted to those changes [...]. Of course, there was a war going on” (15). The information about the war seems to come out of the blue and will never be developed. Both authors clearly signal their readers that they are willing to acknowledge the end as a narrative background, but that is as far as they will go in terms of “apocalyptic voyeurism.”

- 3 Kasischke’s and Hegland’s novels are just two examples of a new post-apocalyptic trend that appeared at the turn of the twenty-first century, a time when post-apocalyptic films and novels were booming, probably because “[t]he ends of centuries or millennia inevitably lead to questions, speculations and pronouncements about what has ended and what might be beginning” (Heffernan 131), but also because of a relatively new approach to the idea of the end of times: “with the emergence of modernity in the eighteenth century, apocalypse shifted from its origins as the story of the annihilation of a sinful human world to become, in novel form, the story of the collapse of modernity itself” (Hicks 2). However, this new breed of eschatological narratives seems to regard the end more as a narrative alibi than as an end in itself. As a matter of fact, the expression post-apocalyptic does not seem relevant anymore. These novels are not taking place after the End, but during a lasting and more subdued form of apocalypse, one, as noted above, that does not put an end to the world but makes adjustments to it, and forces us to see it differently: because it certainly is different, but also because we have ceased to take it for granted and this simple fact gives us a different perspective. It is almost as if the end had become a way of living, another stage in the history of mankind, until the next one. In one of the most recent and most extreme (because extremely banal) forms of minor eschatology, Lucy Corin uses the apocalypse as a ubiquitous, but in no way uncontrollable, form of living. In a way, what she describes in *One Hundred Apocalypses, and Other Apocalypses* (2013) is, quite ironically, the apocalyptic everyday life: it’s almost business as usual, but with a global epidemic or a nuclear accident in the background. She explores all the possible meanings of the word “apocalypse,” ranging from anecdotal incidents to environmental phenomena. But even when the crisis is global, the reaction remains low-key and personal, thus relative: “Again, he feels cozy. He can’t help it. California is burning, the fire gobbling Eureka, all that marijuana up in smoke, people and animals are dying, the air is poisoned, the

ocean is boiling, fishes making for Hawaii as far as their flippers will carry them, rock tops exploding from sea cliffs like missiles, and he feels cozy, trying to figure out if maybe he's attracted to Sara" (Corin 66). Patrick's feeling of "coziness" echoes Jiselle's sense of fulfillment: the apocalypse is not the end of the game, it simply provides a new set of rules and some people are better at this new version of the game than they were at the previous one.

- 4 Does this shift towards minor eschatology sound the death knell for the most spectacular forms of apocalypse? The constant flow of global disaster movies (recent examples include *World War Z* [2012] by Marc Forster and *Independence Day: Resurgence* [2016] by Roland Emmerich, which epitomize two major trends among apocalyptic movies: zombie and alien invasions) and the success of transmedial franchises such as *The Walking Dead* indicate just the opposite, certainly because "the paradigms of apocalypse continue to lie under our ways of making sense of the world" (Kermode 26). A high-brow novel such as Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011) is also a perfect example of the way an ambitious fiction can recycle tropes imported directly from zombie narratives, probably because, as noted by Peter J. Rabinowitz, "the more a writer wishes to undermine tradition, the more imperative it is that the tradition be understood to begin with. This may explain why so-called serious avant-garde authors so frequently turn to formulaic popular fiction as a skeleton on which to hang their own works" (Rabinowitz 58). Whitehead was aware of the most common post-apocalyptic tropes when he decided to use them as the foundation for his novel, and was then able to take liberties with them in order to carry out his real project: to use the ghost of New York to reflect upon the city's current issues. Less interested in describing the new state of the world, *Zone One* is primarily about what was *before*, what is missing, the *now* of the reader: "He missed the stupid stuff everyone missed, the wife and the workhorse chromium toasters, mass transportation and gratis transfers, rubbing cheese-puff dust on his trousers and calculating which checkout lines was shorter [...]" (198), and the list goes on. But *Zone One*'s dismal and barren world bears no resemblance to the one depicted by Kasischke and Hegland which can still be described as a familiar environment: Whitehead opted for a major form of apocalypse where the end is very much the End, a sudden and abrupt one: "It was happening again: the end of the world. The last months had been a pause, a breather before the recommitment to annihilation. This time we cannot delude ourselves that we will make out alive" (318). It is particularly important to stress that the choice remains between these two forms of eschatology for any author who wants to write a story about the end of our world, or simply dabble in the apocalypse. There are now two ends (the end and the End) and this underlines the fact that the trend we have decided to bring to light has an altogether different rationale, with its own set of thematic and aesthetic stakes. Needless to say that some works retain features of both trends, wavering between the fascination for destruction on a large scale and the description of daily survival on a small one. Among these narratives, *The Road* has a special status, spearheading this hybrid option.

The Anthropocene

- 5 If global disasters and survival stories still fascinate us, and will continue to do so probably for a long time, simple chronicles of the end of the world attract us for different reasons. They certainly represent an enticing form of defamiliarization as

they retain the narrative edge of danger linked to any representation of the apocalypse, even minor ones. But they also offer an opportunity to look at our world from different angles and reflect upon the changes it is undergoing. Among these changes, our entry into the Anthropocene—an era characterized by the impact of human activities on the earth’s biological systems—seems to be the most prominent thematic feature: “In the last few years, literary responses to climate change have proliferated, to the extent that a new term—‘cli-fi’—has been coined to identify this new body of work that centrally addresses the issue of climate change and its associated environmental consequences” (Hughes & Wheeler 2). Among this “cli-fi” sub-genre, one example stands out as a perfect illustration of the mundane, almost undramatic nature of minor eschatology: Karen Thompson Walker’s *The Age of Miracles* (2012). The novel’s opening lines could almost serve as a manifesto for this new literary movement: “We didn’t notice right away. We couldn’t feel it. We did not sense at first the extra time, bulging from the smooth edge of each day like a tumor blooming beneath skin” (Walker 1). Actually, this tumor will remain benign for most of the novel, affecting lives, but not in a fundamental way: *The Age of Miracles* is above all a novel about what it means to be a teenager in an ever-shifting and uncertain environment, not about this ever-shifting and uncertain environment. Similarly to Lucy Corin’s short story mentioned above, the narrative remains essentially focused on the subtle variations of these teenage lives. In the end, the climatic changes will be too important to ignore, but the characters will be adults then, and this future will never be explored: “As I write this account, *one ordinary life*, our days have stretched to the lengths of weeks, and it’s hard to say which times are most hazardous now: the weeks of freezing darkness or the light” (my emphasis; 368). In fact, Karen Thompson Walker’s novel is not directly about climate change. In this story, the Earth’s rotation starts to slow, a phenomenon called the “slowing,” causing days and nights to become progressively longer, and eventually having logical consequences on the climate. The reason for this slowing is never made explicit, even if readers are free to suspect that the Anthropocene might have set things in (slow) motion. The dramatic core of the novel lies elsewhere, in a different type of gravity: “But the new gravity was not enough to overcome the pull of certain other forces, more powerful, less known—no law of physics can account for desire” (53). Above all, the “slowing” enhances the main character’s teenage angst, the apocalypse exaggerates the ontological unease felt by most teenagers around the world; put differently, the apocalypse is in Walker’s novel an *enhancer*: “In the post-apocalypse, desire and fear find their true objects; we see what we most want and most abhor” (Berger 11).

- 6 If “the apocalypse is a recurrent theme in environmental discourse” (Veldman 1), literature echoes this discourse in different ways. Robin Globus Veldman tells us that “[a]s with other forms of apocalypticism in the history of religion, environmental apocalypticism is characterized by certain shared beliefs about the past, present and future” (4). Concerning these “shared beliefs” about the possible future of our planet, she goes on, there are two options: one she calls the “fatalistic mode” that she describes as the belief that “there is nothing humans can do to avert catastrophe, and the most realistic course of action is to start preparing now for a post-apocalyptic world,” and a second one, less dramatic, that “could be called the avertive mode ☞...☞ the story concludes by warning that humans can prevent catastrophe, but only if they act soon, and decisively” (5). When it comes to the second kind, the sort of lesser apocalypses one can find in literature and other media, this post-apocalyptic world comes in many

guises and its environmental dysfunctions vary greatly from one story to another. One can reasonably claim that indeed, up to a certain extent, some cli-fi novels or films have a political agenda, or at least demonstrate a will to sensitize people to the negative effects many of our industrial activities have on our planet. Robin Globus Veldman gives the example of a woman she interviewed who, after reading Daniel Quinn's philosophical novel *Ishmael* (1992) about the human race's short-sighted exploitation of natural resources, drastically changed her way of life in order to be "more consonant with environmental principles" (14). Harry Harrison's *Make Room! Make Room!* (1966), a novel with a similar theme, probably had a comparable objective: to raise awareness about humanity's unreasonable carbon footprint. This novel and its 1973 film adaptation *Soylent Green* belong to the long tradition (started with the Bible) of major eschatology: the characters' lives no longer resemble ours, as opposed to the examples previously mentioned, and civilization is either doomed or condemned to start from scratch. Many "contemporary eco-dystopias" (Hughes & Wheeler 3) tap into the fear of extinction and the guilt of being generally responsible for such a dramatic outcome. As noted above, *The Age of Miracle's* stakes are much more restricted. And sometimes, climate change and eco-dystopias can only and quite simply be a pretext for poetic expressions, such as the descriptions of the Dune Sea in Claire Vaye Watkins's *Gold Fame Citrus* (2015). In this novel's possible world, the desertification of the American West has led to the creation of a giant dune sea that progressively spreads across the rest of the territory. Instead of dwelling on the potential fatality of this climatic shift, Claire Vaye Watkins concentrates on its poetic premise and promise, on the experience of living in this world, going as far as providing quasi-documentary representations of this "neo-fauna" (drawings included). Here again, our social and physical environment is altered, but not annihilated; readers are confronted with defamiliarization instead of annihilation, and although the defamiliarization provided by Watkins's novel is more challenging than the one found in *The Age of Miracles* for instance, it nevertheless keeps at bay the obvious Thanatos syndrome most post-apocalyptic narratives suffer from (or/and draw their energy from) and instead focuses on the quirky dimension and even eccentric features of this dystopian world: "So instead of going home to the heartland he liberated a surfboard from someone backyard and made his home in the curl. He had a mind to surf through all crises and shortages and conflicts past and present. [...] He was surfing the day they pronounced Colorado dead [...]" (Watkins 20).

- 7 Minor eschatology is a matter of degree; in other words, this type of eschatology is more or less minor. For instance, the world described by Watkins is much more chaotic than the one found in *In a Perfect World*:

He surfed as the Central Valley, America's fertile crescent, went salt flat, as its farmcorps regularly drilled there thousand feet into the unyielding earth, praying for aquifer but delivered only hot brine, as Mojavs sucked up the groundwater to Texas, as a major tendril of interstate collapsed into a mile-wide sinkhole, killing everybody on it, as all of the Southwest went moonscape with sinkage, as the winds came and as Phoenix burned and as a white-hot superdune entombed Las Vegas. (Watkins 20-21)

- 8 But what both texts have in common is that their authors decide to underplay the chaotic elements and emphasize the realistic potential of this unfamiliar world. Yes, we find the familiar tropes of destruction, but in the case of cli-fi fiction, they are not caused by monsters or zombies, but simply by humanity's stubbornness; what's more,

these tropes only provide a *narrative background*, one we will consider below. To sum up, many narratives predicting Mother Nature's wrath certainly have a "political" agenda, but in the case of *The Age of Miracles* or *Gold Fame Citrus*, the emphasis is laid elsewhere, principally on the poetic dimension of this changing world.

- 9 Minor eschatology is not only a matter of degree, it is also a matter of nature. I have chosen the Anthropocene as a possible motive for the sudden rise of cli-fi fiction, however, more than its obvious relation to climate change, our era illustrates humanity's entry into an uncertain period regarding its future, maybe for the first time in history (more exactly, for the first time in history, it has valid reasons to be concerned). The Anthropocene perfectly echoes the logic of minor eschatology. This is why this new era's evocation should not be restricted to cli-fi fiction as it is also useful to understand the similar rise of post-pandemic fiction for instance. Although the latter is related primarily to health issues, and not directly to climate change, it also taps into the well of globalized fear or uncertainty that the Anthropocene quite certainly epitomizes. Granted, post-pandemic literature dates back to Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) and even further back: "the one hand, unlike nuclear war or ecological catastrophe, pandemic has a venerable historical pedigree that leads back from current bestsellers such as Pierre Ouellette's *The Third Pandemic* (1996) to the medieval horrors of the Black Death and indeed to the Book of Revelation itself" (Gomel 407). But it has recently taken a new turn, reminiscent of Camus's *La Peste* (1947): rather than offering narratives of global pandemics on course to devastate the world (such as Stephen King's *The Stand* or Jim Grace's *The Pesthouse*), they simply are the chronicles of the lives of people in a still familiar environment, during and after the pandemic, maybe because "[u]nlike fantasies of global annihilation, pandemics are a matter of record" (Gomel 408), and as such, they are steeped in reality. For instance, in Laura Van Den Berg's *Find Me* (2015), the spread of a disease that triggers memory loss and ends with death logically has consequences on the life of the main character, notably because she is immune to the disease and is kept in a research center for the first half of the novel. Once she leaves, she discovers a world that is only slightly different. As for the disease, it remains in the narrative background. The apocalyptic atmosphere described at the beginning of the book is actually based on real events or policies: "For as long as I could remember, the weather had felt apocalyptic. Y2K fever and the War on Drugs and the War on Terror" (Van Den Berg 16). Furthermore, rather than turning Joy's life upside down, the disease almost has the opposite effect: "I thought I knew about boredom in my old life, but I was wrong. I knew about lulls in the action, stretches of stillness, but I did not know what it was like to feel time become a wet, heavy thing. I did not know days so long and familiar, you find yourself holding your breath until you're dizzy and flushed, all for your own amusement" (41). In a way, *Find Me's* first hundred and fifty pages are anticlimatic, even anti-apocalyptic. As for the rest of the novel, the main plot is Joy's search for her mother, to some extent made more complicated by the disease, but only to some extent. The world she discovers once out of the hospital is more static than chaotic: "In the Hospital, I imagined the cities were once again filled with brightness, the clatter of alive bodies, but this one looks dark and hollow, an underground system that's just been pulled into the light" (159). On her way to Florida, where her mother supposedly lives, she will encounter some minor threats, some unfamiliar scenes but nothing openly apocalyptic. Emily St. John Mandel's superb *Station Eleven* (2014) presents us with a much more menacing world, after a sudden and devastating pandemic. The novel also contains common tropes of apocalyptic and post-

apocalyptic fiction, such as the rapid and deadly spread of the virus, the desperate means of survival, violent hordes and crazy prophets. But they remain regularly toned down in the novel, as almost half of the novel is composed of analepses and consists in the description of the lives of the main characters before the outbreak. In the final analysis, *Station Eleven's* most original and poignant passages rely more on the evocation of the past (the readers' present) than on the imaginary construction of a dystopian future, as the latter inevitably follows the beaten track: those clinging to civilization against those ready to jettison it and enjoy a hedonistic chaos.

- 10 All these novels share one feature: they are always about something more important than the apocalypse and they end up conjuring up more traditional genres such as the *bildungsroman* or the great road trips of American literature, for instance. If in major eschatology, “[t]he modes of future-history – Utopian, dystopian, arcadian and post-apocalyptic – tend to pose a world in which the individual either disappears into an abstraction or is granted special status as the last representative of a world gone wrong” (Wheeler 2), we have seen examples where the opposite happens: the individual remains the individual as we know it. The damages inflicted on our world by climate change, wars or pandemics turn out to be *controlled* damages, allowing our reality to remain visible, recognizable so that these narratives can still provide windows into our world.

The End as Narrative Drive

- 11 What is the point, then, of imagining an apocalypse if the purpose of the narrative is ultimately to focus on the present time? In other words, what purpose does minor eschatology serve? The answer lies in narrative and genre dynamics. Peter Brooks stated that “[n]arratives portray the motors of desire that drive and consume their plots, and they also lay bare the nature of narration as a form of human desire: the need to tell as a primary human drive that seeks to seduce and to subjugate listener [...]” (61). The apocalypse is no doubt a strong tool of seduction. In the case of minor eschatology, the seduction is not as overwhelming, but it would be naïve to overlook its narrative power of attraction. Although their purpose is to remain focused on the mundane reality of characters living in a world that has not yet disappeared, the novels referred to above still seek to “subjugate” their readers by exploiting the macabre pull of global extinction. Knowing that humanity has been obsessed with the concept of apocalypse since the birth of civilization, now that we actually have the means to destroy our planet (or have done enough to damage the environment irreversibly), it is unlikely that this fascination will subside, hence the subjugation inherent in any novel toying with the End. If Peter Brooks writes that “plot is the internal logic of the discourse of mortality” (22), in the various cases above mentioned, one could instead state that mortality, especially on a grand scale, is the internal logic of plot; put differently, the simple evocation of a possible apocalypse, even one as remote or abstract as in Lucy Corin’s (very) short stories, provides the author with an immediate plot and the possibility to revisit much-explored topics such as coming-of-age stories without losing the interest of the reader. More than a pretext, the End looming ahead is a literal transcription of Brooks’s definition of the narrative drive: “What operates in the text through repetition is the death instinct, the drive toward the end” (102). Of course, conversely to Brooks, the end we are discussing here is not the end of the text,

but the end of the world, which is essentially the means for these authors to reach their end: a familiar defamiliarization, or a moderate uncanny. However, more than a simple mimetic background, the apocalypse remains a deeply compelling background, one that immediately draws (and sustains) the reader's attention, from a distance. Even when the author only provides a simple hint of an end, of any end of the world, this immediately becomes compelling, maybe because, "[t]he absence of an end does not obviate our wanting one. Or creating one" (Zamora 75). In fiction, we are prompt to imagine or exaggerate apocalyptic signs because we crave the fear and drama.

- 12 And yet, more than a "narrative life insurance" guaranteeing readership, this very specific form of realism provides the author with the possibility of making the real unfamiliar. Only up to a certain point. Not unlike magic realism, minor eschatology thrives on the discrepancy between its apocalyptic setting and a reality that still resembles ours. Charles Burns's *Black Hole* (2005) epitomizes this discrepancy: the "bug," or "teen plague," evokes pandemic fiction, but its scope remains very much local and Burns's narrative centers on a group of teenagers with preoccupations similar to other teenagers', with *one* major difference: the threat of the disease and the graphic representation of these deformities that give Burns's work its unique graphic signature and narrative tension.
- 13 Like other genres relying on a contradiction, or at least a discrepancy, minor eschatology is "apotropaic," according to the definition given by J. Hillis Miller: "It is a throwing away of what is already thrown away in order to save it. It is a destroying of the already destroyed in order to preserve the illusion that it is still intact" (Miller 97-98). J. Hillis Miller's main topic is realism and the realistic function of characters, but his remarks may be applied more generally to any mimetic representation of our world, with a slight modification: the various possible worlds in the novels that we have briefly studied are *not yet* "already destroyed." They might soon be, or not, but it is the uncertainty that gives these narratives their original tone, and this uncertainty provides the characters with an almost paradoxical stability, allowing them to carry on with their lives, at least for a little while longer. In more classical post-apocalyptic narratives, this "little while longer" has already ended.

Contributions

- 14 Much remains to be explored regarding this new trend of minor eschatology, for instance the fact that most of these novels are written by women, their link to our collective psyche or their intertextuality: "From its earliest roots in the ancient Near East, apocalyptic literature has been profoundly intertextual, consistently borrowing and adapting material from earlier texts" (Hicks 3). The essays collected in this special issue of *Transatlantica* certainly help us understand the various (political, ecological, narrative) stakes and the poetic scope of this peculiar vision of an end that refuses to be the End.
- 15 As I pointed out before, minor eschatology is a question of degree and the following essays support this claim: from Richard Powers's *The Echo Maker* to Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, there is a (colliding) world of difference. **Zachary Tavlin's *The Ubiquity of Strange Frontiers: Minor Eschatology in Richard Powers's The Echo Maker*** sees in Powers's novel an echo of the United States' rampant eschatological culture, the "ever-present links between Puritan millennialism, American Romanticism, and the

settlement of the American continent,” but “Powers subverts the major eschatologies that populate American literary and cultural history, often stemming from Puritan typologies.” Even if there is no apocalypse *per se* in the American novelist’s narrative (only a “subtle apocalypse or minor eschatology of the strange”), there is, according to Tavlin, the constant denial of the American millennium, the will to turn the typical national narratives the U.S. is built on, Manifest Destiny as well as its visual counterpart (the sublime), upside down. In *The Echo Maker*, major American eschatologies are undermined and the everyday as the unfamiliar here and now is reinstated. If there is one apocalypse in Powers’s novel, it certainly is the one sounding the death knell for the feeling of exceptionality of a whole nation and, more generally, of major humanist paradigms; there remains instead the unfamiliar and cerebral experience of the everyday: “In other words, eventually, whenever we write about people and their psychologies we will be doing nothing more than describing—in as economical a way as possible—the neurochemical activity underlying their feelings and behaviors.”

- 16 In a similar fashion, **Brian Chappell’s Writing (at) the End: Thomas Pynchon’s *Bleeding Edge*** underlines another major American novelist’s deconstructionist strategies with regard to eschatological myths, an author who is in a privileged position to do so, because “[m]ore so than any other American author of the twentieth century, Pynchon documents in fiction the tectonic movements of American history, to the extent that his entire *oeuvre* can be viewed as a historical meta-text.” By examining how Thomas Pynchon concludes his novels, *Bleeding Edge*, in particular, Chappell aims at bringing to the fore the novelist’s humanist edge in a narrative set in the age of terror, surveillance, domination, and dehumanization and argues that “Pynchon’s endings convey most clearly and ardently his ‘hard-won humanism’ and exhibit his ‘mighty powers of consolation’.” Both *The Echo Maker* and *Bleeding Edge* present minor cases of eschatology: a world that has certainly gone awry, a sense of dread, a global anxiety and even a looming—but unidentified—catastrophe. But Chappell approaches the genre from a different angle and eventually argues that “[a] wide definition of spirituality and postsecularism makes room for a holistic approach to Pynchon’s response to what he perceives as invisible forces that move history.”
- 17 The three other essays collected in this issue examine narratives of a world gone over the edge: the apocalypse has started but the former world retains a presence and resurfaces occasionally. **André Cabral de Almeida Cardoso’s Apocalypse and Sensibility: The Role of Sympathy in Jeff Lemire’s *Sweet Tooth*** focuses on Jeff Lemire’s graphic novel that describes a world in which “most of the population has been killed by a devastating plague [50]...[50], and the few survivors have mostly reverted to a savage predatory behavior.” In this world however, “all children born after the plague are human-animal hybrids who are immune to the disease that continues to infect the rest of the population.” Focusing on the representation of violence, Cardoso differentiates between empathy and sympathy and brings to light one of the key aspects of eschatological literature: the reader’s response to various representations of danger and violence. Contrary to other more extreme post-apocalyptic narratives, *Sweet Tooth* doesn’t neutrally depict raw violence and characters who try to survive by any means in a moral vacuum. Quite the opposite. “The post-apocalyptic setting of *Sweet Tooth*, far from blocking the possibility of sympathy, offers the conditions for its manifestation by presenting situations of crisis in which sympathy can be most emphatically represented.” Even more importantly, Lemire’s use of “hybridity” opens

an interval which is both the past and the future, pre-apocalyptic and the End: a world that is radically different and yet, probably for a brief moment, still ours.

- 18 Finally, two essays explore Cormac McCarthy's iconic novel, *The Road*. This novel sets new standards for post-apocalyptic fiction in the way it uses the most extreme tropes of the genre (cannibalism, global [nuclear?] catastrophe) while shifting the reader's attention to the basic human experience: survival in the simplest terms (food, heat, shelter...), father-and-son relationship, bereavement. To a certain extent, McCarthy's novel unfolds a micro-narrative set in a context of global destruction. **Stephen Joyce's *The Double Death of Humanity in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road**** focuses exclusively on the tragic and existentialist dimensions of the novel and on how individuals would survive day-to-day in a post-apocalyptic world (summed up by these four words: "darkness, cold, barrenness, and hunger"). *The Road* certainly is a survival story, but it is much more than that: "[...] the post-apocalyptic genre, with its profusion of not-quite human others such as zombies, mutants, and robots, has been groping its way toward a question that is central to *The Road*: what is the difference between human and inhuman?" The novel's gripping tension is the product of the constant back and forth between "[t]he ordinary details of survival in a post-apocalyptic world" and its existentialist dimension.
- 19 **Yves Davo's "A single gray flake, like the last host of christendom': *The Road* ou l'apocalypse selon St McCarthy"** addresses the religious dimension of McCarthy's quest for survival and examines the author's use of biblical metaphors and images, more particularly how the narrative is built upon a tension between the secular and the religious. Davo sees an obvious parallel between eschatological literature and theological writings. But even more importantly, Davo underlines the messianic role of the child in *The Road*, and shows how McCarthy toys with the myth of exceptionality but also that of constant renewal inherent in the mythology of his country: In spite of its tragic character, Davo concludes that McCarthy's thaumaturgical novel (dedicated to his young son, John) offers a glimmer of hope at the end of a long and godforsaken road.

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NOTES

1. These grand narratives being often in the collective unconscious cinematic (even though some of these films are adapted from novels): for example, *The War of the Worlds* and its various versions or the geopolitical *The Day After* (1983) and the ecological *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004).

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