

CHAPTER EIGHT

APOCALYPSE AND DYSTOPIA IN CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN WRITING

GILLIAN ANIA

To explore the womb, or tomb, or dreams; all these are usual
Pastimes and drugs, and features of the press:
And always will be, some of them especially
When there is distress of nations and perplexity
Whether on the shores of Asia, or in the Edgware Road.
Men's curiosity searches past and future
And clings to that dimension.¹

Eliot here embraces several common elements of what we might understand by 'apocalypse'. The original Greek term is concerned with 'revealing', with searching "past and future", the better to understand what has happened and will happen. Yet although St John's book of Revelation is concerned primarily with explaining his eschatological vision of the 'last things', both to encourage the early Church (of final reward) and to act as a stern warning (against increasing corruption and apostasy), it is the powerful notion of *the violent or cataclysmic end of all things* that has persisted and most influenced our perception of 'apocalypse' through the ages, as represented in literature. Dystopia, a term of relatively recent coinage (although the concept itself is not new), is closely linked with apocalypse—as indeed with its opposite, or the imagined ideal, utopia—all terms featuring prominently in contemporary fiction and discourse: the last twenty years have seen a spate of books, plays and films with 'apoca-

¹ T. S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages" (212). The verses allude to the book of Daniel chapter 12, and, especially, to Luke 21: 25-26.

lyptic' themes and/or titles, as also of scholarly essays seeking to represent or explain some aspect of our world in terms of the biblical prophecy.²

In order to situate and discuss contemporary—and specifically Italian—trends, there are a number of questions that need to be addressed, all of which relate to the central issue of why 'apocalypse now'; this essay will seek to determine, for example, whether the turn of the second millennium is a significant point in history or simply an arbitrary, numerical point, whether religious belief (for those who adhere to the Christian calendar) has become mere superstition,³ whether mankind has always feared 'The End'. As far as Europe, at least, is concerned, reports (or propaganda) would suggest that we are experiencing sustained economic and technological growth, extensive public services, accelerated communications and increased individual leisure time which, in different degrees, the utopias of the past all aspired to. Yet it is also true, and far more relevant to our theme, that scientific and technological progress has been accompanied over the last half century or so by increasing bewilderment, unease, frustrations and fears, which partly account for this proliferation of apocalyptic visions (or predictions) of 'The End' (or of a 'premature' end).

We also need to address the different dimensions (and definitions) of apocalypse and dystopia, and their relation to the Italian literary tradition. It is important to point out, furthermore, that rather than looking at 'absolute' apocalypses—the canonical Judeo-Christian apocalypse has a very precise narrative form, found solely in the Bible,⁴—what concerns us

² It is nevertheless true that apocalyptic terms are lamentably over-used, as part of the newspaper-led populist sensationalism—nothing, it seems, 'sells' quite like catastrophe. However, as Reddish states (19), few people are now familiar with the works from which such terms and ideas originate (largely Daniel and Revelation; see note 4).

³ The concept of one final apocalypse is not compatible with most Eastern religions; see Zimbaro: 12. Kermode (in Bull: 251-55) discusses the 'pull' of 'dates' and the connection in this respect with Christianity.

⁴ Most scholars cite the definition of Collins: "'Apocalypse' is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another supernatural world" (9); see also Reddish: 23 and Kermode in Bull: 251-52. The main Old Testament source is Daniel (especially 7-12), though also Isaiah 24-27, Ezekiel 38-39, Joel 2-3 and Zechariah 12-14, while in the New Testament it is Revelation, though also Mark 13, Luke 21, and 2 Thessalonians 2. For most critics (e.g. Reddish: 35), apocalyptic literature is symbolic, poetic and abstract rather than factual, to be taken seriously though not literally.

here are writings that use apocalyptic or dystopian elements, visions that may or may not have teleological implications for their authors. Following on from this, the central focus will be those writers whose sense of disquiet, or alarm about the ways of our world reveals itself in apocalyptic paradigms or discourse: two in particular, namely Paola Capriolo and Tullio Avoledo, but also Sebastiano Vassalli and Guglielmo Pispisa. In this context we will explore the writers' impulses and motivations, their different representations of apocalypse and dystopia, and the particular ways in which the novels resolve, if they do, the poignant and/or dramatic issues at stake.

When looking at portrayals of dystopia or utopia, it is useful to bear in mind that the terms are not so distinct as they might seem. Immediately apparent, of course, are the opposite characteristics they embody. Utopia is the best of all imaginable worlds, dystopia, the worst. Utopia looks, *a priori*, to a future 'dream' world, to new bearings and beginnings, and to capturing an ideal which is static; dystopia relates to, or originates principally in the present, taking a linear form, or 'advancing' trajectory. Utopia thus focuses on an escape from present reality, from time itself; dystopia portrays that very reality, which is immanent. Utopia does not, or cannot exist: it is the projection of a non-place, not just a good place;⁵ dystopia is portrayed as all-too-real, albeit often with some distortion. And while utopian writers believe in progress as a positive force, looking forward (in both senses) to the attendant freedom/s, dystopian writers tend to show the unwanted or unforeseen consequences of progress. Utopia, then, is an expression of desire, optimism, hope; dystopia of fear, pessimism, revolt. However, precisely since utopia implies an unsatisfactory present, and realizations or fabrications of utopia inevitably fall short of the original conception, there is some blurring of these distinctions so that certain works of literature can find themselves classed as examples of both utopia (or anti- or negative utopia) and dystopia; Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) is a classic case.⁶

Dystopia, in its turn, often provokes apocalypse (in the sense of the ultimate cataclysm), which, in its turn, may usher in the final utopia. So the sequence, following the model, would be dystopia > apocalypse > utopia, and writers, in their representations, present either the whole progression, or focus on one or two 'thirds' of it: on the dystopian vision that provokes

⁵ Spagnoletto (7) summarizes it as a *non-sense* become sense. The term was first used by Thomas More in his book *Utopia* (1516), the archetypal modal for all future literary utopias; see Fortunati and Trousson: 156, 287.

⁶ Swift shows very clearly that utopia is impossible; see Trousson: 24.

the catastrophic event, on the event itself, and/or on the lessons for the future laid bare by the event (and thus, the idealized or utopian society that might survive it).

Apocalyptic literature, then, in its widest sense (and diverse configurations) emerges whenever a sense of imminent end or impending disaster grips the imagination of a society—or an individual writer—“whether on the shores of Asia, or in the Edgware Road” (Eliot: 212). Italy, indeed, has a long tradition of apocalyptic literature, grounded in the early Middle Ages and coinciding with the close of the first millennium and its expectations of the end of the world: for the oral, religious traditions of expression (Ascetics, Flagellantes, etc.), God would sweep away the old and diseased and, through the ‘second coming’, usher in the new, innocent, pure world promised in the scriptures. This notion reaches its apogee in Dante’s journey through the three realms of the after-life, in a new Revelation of the consequences of sin, which, in his view, was intensifying to infect every aspect of human life. It is present in the Black Death of the mid-14th century, the starting point for the escape to the utopian haven of Boccaccio’s ten story-tellers. It is there too, though in different kinds of contexts, in Machiavelli, Manzoni and Leopardi, each writer offering an ‘apocalyptic’ response to contemporaneous “distress of nations and perplexity” (Eliot: 212), as they saw it: to, respectively, the collapse of the Soderini Republic, the plague as a god-sent ‘cleanser’, or fears of natural or moral desolation.

In the ancient and medieval world, total apocalypse (the end of the world), could only be brought about by God (or the gods)—usually operating through nature (the flood of Noah or Gilgamesh, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, plagues, etc.), while in the modern world, man himself has become capable of such destruction (nuclear or biological weapons, terrorist bombs), so that in the total sense of the destruction of the world, man has become as one of the gods. The shift in emphasis between the end of the first millennium and the second is due on the one hand to the gradual dismissal of god(s) as necessary explanation of cataclysmic events, through the encroachment of rationality and the advancement of scientific knowledge about natural processes, and on the other to man’s growing confidence (over-confidence?) in his ability to control the world and its fate to the point where, at the mere touch of a button, the world, a country, a city, *frazione*, street or house, can be utterly obliterated. This sense (and, indeed, reality) of human power—and knowledge of the physical extent of our world—has made total or zonal apocalypses entirely possible. This, it seems to me, is the historical context of modern apocalyptic literature: at its most negative it concerns only destruction and

unimaginable cruelty, at its most positive it also contains a vision of an infinitely better future.⁷

In the 20th century, tragedies such as the Holocaust, Hiroshima/Nagasaki and Vietnam have been portrayed in literature, as apocalyptic. In Berger's words (5), such events function as "definitive historical divides, as ruptures, pivots, fulcrums, separating what came before from what came after" and reveal "the true nature of what has been brought to an end". The '60s, for example, a period of increasing political awareness and polarization in much of Western Europe, generated a whole succession of apocalyptic and dystopian scenarios in Italy in the following decade, the substance of writers' fears and fantasies (identifiable in works such as Italo Cremona's *La coda del cometa* [The comet's tail], Sebastiano Vassalli's *Il millennio che muore* [The dying millennium], Paolo Volponi's *Il pianeta irritabile* [The irritable planet], Guido Morselli's *Dissipatio H. G.*).⁸

The last twenty years, with the intensifying nuclear threat, AIDS epidemics (the modern 'Black Death'), global warming, advanced technological developments, overweening media power, political corruption and the collapse of political systems, and the marginalization of races through migration, have provided writers with all manner of fears to expose and decry, exemplified, as far as Italy is concerned, in the admonitory literature of Vassalli, Capriolo, Avoledo and Pispisa. In seeking to explain some aspect of the world in terms of apocalypse—either from a religious perspective or in wholly secular terms—implicit in their depictions are suggestions of how and why society might take another path and find, or indeed recapture, a sense of wholeness, however this is defined. Two novels which illustrate a different paradigm, and lend themselves to close analytical, and apocalyptic, readings, are Capriolo's *Il sogno dell'agnello* [Dream of the lamb] of 1999 and Avoledo's *L'elenco telefonico di Atlantide* [The phone directory of Atlantis] of 2003. Capriolo, living in Milan, is an established writer, known and appreciated for her mythical and eternal (largely sober) themes and preoccupations, while Avoledo, from Friuli, is a newcomer to the literary scene, a teller of contemporary tales that are bleak though characterized by a zany humour. And yet, despite their very different backgrounds, styles of writing, and types of narrative, they use

⁷ As Kumar notes: "The apocalyptic myth holds, in an uneasy but dynamic tension, the elements of both terror and hope. The apocalyptic ending will also signal the millennial beginning" (in Bull: 202).

⁸ On Volponi and Morselli, see, for example, Mussgnug, and Fioretti. Writers in West Germany and Austria were exploring similar themes and fears; see Cornils.

apocalypse to voice their concerns about the present state of society and its future.

That the year 1999 marked a turning point in Paola Capriolo's narrative—with the publication of her eighth novel, *Il sogno dell'agnello*—should not, in one sense, have been surprising to her readers and critics, given the author's publicly expressed views: her repeated condemnations of the superficiality and rapid pace of modern life and her fears for the future of society. And yet, not only does *Il sogno* express an overtly apocalyptic theme, but it is also Capriolo's only novel to reveal a modern orientation, with events unfolding in a gadget- and computer-dominated world—inconceivable as a setting for her previous protagonists. Apocalyptic hints are assuredly present in certain of her earlier novels (allusions to the Holocaust and to the all-pervasive influence of “La Compagnia” in *Il nocchiero* [The ferryman], 1989, for example, or the portrayal of a tsunami in *Il doppio regno*, 1991, *The Dual Realm*, 2000),⁹ but up to 1998 her work featured isolated and idiosyncratic protagonists in timeless environments, caught up in largely solipsistic and especially artistic pursuits and obsessions. The restless protagonists, often with no ‘proper’ name, all seek an escape from their everyday reality. As the author has said, “they are looking for something else: for another world or another dimension”, but all seem to find that either this dimension does not exist or that it is commensurate with their destruction.¹⁰

More recent novels echo this trope and further develop the apocalyptic theme, although all are situated back in the past. Capriolo herself observed in 2004: “From *Il sogno dell'agnello* on, and including *Qualcosa nella notte* [Something in the night], all I have been doing, in effect, is writing about the apocalypse that seems increasingly to be hanging over us (not literally, of course, but in the sense of an inevitable loss of our human substance: last year was ample proof of this).”¹¹ Following *Il sogno dell'agnello*, which takes the reader into a quiet village, cut off from the rest of the world and its evils, as would befit a utopian city (or island, in the original conception of Thomas More, as that of Aldous Huxley's *Island* of 1962), the author returns to myth or to ‘ancient’ texts for inspiration

⁹ The “Company” of *Il nocchiero* is reminiscent of the “Machine” of E. M. Forster's dystopian short story, ‘The Machine Stops’ (1909); *Il doppio regno* focuses on the survival of the protagonist in what could be interpreted as a post-apocalyptic world.

¹⁰ Ania 1998: 318. All translations from the Italian are my own.

¹¹ Personal communication from Capriolo, May 2004; in 2003 a series of floods and hurricanes ravaged America, for example. See also Ania 2005: 146-48.

partly, it would seem, in an attempt to understand the dystopian present, and in this sense the ‘social’ theme continues. *Una di loro* [One among them] (2001) and *Una luce nerissima* [Darkest of lights] (2005) examine the plight of oppressed minorities (racial and religious), both novels highlighting themes of persecution and exclusion, and the latter ending with cataclysmic destruction, while *Qualcosa nella notte* (2003) reinterprets the Sumerian legend of Gilgamesh, and his dreams of catastrophes such as the Flood.

Tullio Avoledo also looks at the contemporary world in terms of dystopia and the imminence (or actuality) of apocalypse. His first work *L’elenco telefonico di Atlantide* was written as a direct result of his experiences in the year 2000: “that extraordinary year which, to a child born in 1957, seemed to be the culminating point of everything wondrous, the threshold of tomorrow’s world. The year 2000 disappointed me, as did Europe and as did the euro, this Monopoly-like money” (personal communication from Avoledo, November 2006). The initial draft of the novel was completed in just two months, witness to his ardent indignation: “My flat became the scriptorium of a medieval monk possessed by the apocalypse.” A further four (lengthy) novels have since followed, the most recent appearing in March 2007. Avoledo’s stories, like those of Capriolo, feature protagonists who are isolated from those around them and are obsessive in their ways, but to date all their problems are firmly embedded in contemporary reality, in the worlds—and scandals—of big business, banking, politics, and modern seats of learning, rather than in the more abstract, mythical environments favoured by Capriolo.

Of *L’elenco telefonico di Atlantide* Avoledo has stated: “My novel could be read as a *summa* of the themes characterizing the end of the millennium” (personal communication, November 2006). While it is the text that most addresses apocalyptic sensibilities, as we shall see, Avoledo’s subsequent novels also refer, implicitly or explicitly, to man’s fragile condition at the dawn of the new millennium; they portray mysterious happenings, horrific events and corruption of all kinds, as well as touching on questions of personal safety and individual versus societal responsibility. *Mare di Bering* [The Bering Sea] (2003) deals specifically with the nuclear threat and the consequences of global warming, as well as with the scandals of honorary degrees and commissioned degree theses, producing a highly satirical portrait of the academic world; the novel also alludes to the ‘last days’, and to the apocryphal or ‘hidden’ gospels. Avoledo’s third novel, *Lo stato dell’unione* [State of the Union] (2005) focuses similarly on present-day society as dystopia, this time in the dual context of Northern Italian separatist movements and the nefarious power of ad-

vertising; within this he highlights the inanity (and mis-use) of political ‘correctness’, public opinion surveys, millennium celebrations—and endless meetings. *Tre sono le cose misteriose* [The three mysterious things] (2005) relates the story of a prosecutor occupied with the high-profile trial of a prominent leader on a warcrimes charge—a Leviathan, or “Monster”, as he is referred to; the prosecutor is fully aware of the importance of his role, and yet also of the cost both to the State of his 24/7 protection and to his family and private life.¹²

While Capriolo’s prose is meticulously crafted and controlled (not, however, without subtle touches of humour and irony), Avoledo’s style is largely informal, fresh, light and colloquial, his humour linguistic as much as situational. A particular characteristic of his writing, indeed, is a facility to tease his reader—who just begins to believe s/he has unravelled some puzzle when a new angle is presented—as well as to ridicule the modern hyperbolic use of language. For Capriolo, the form of words is of capital importance, form, indeed, being (consciously) integral to her content, and her idealistic protagonists are all made to measure their words with care; furthermore, references and allusions to writers, poets, composers and philosophers of the classical tradition abound. Avoledo’s writing is also permeated with references to the classics, but most especially to popular culture/film (including Coppola’s 1979 film *Apocalypse Now*) and science fiction; while being five years Capriolo’s senior, he is generally more modern in terms of his points of reference.¹³ His characters, tending also to be idealists (and thus harassed by the world around them), are, however, impetuous, irritable and impatient; they have frequent recourse to contemporary slang, English or American ‘loan’ words, jargon and expletives, partly, it would seem, as a form of authorial irony. Moreover, while none of Capriolo’s books has a precise geographical or historical setting or context, Avoledo’s novels are all expressly set in Northern Italy (or Switzerland, in one case).

The writing of younger author Guglielmo Pispisa bears certain similarities to that of Avoledo. *Città perfetta* [The perfect city] (2005), his first novel, is the story of the construction—and promotion—of a perfect

¹² The prosecutor is nameless, emphasizing his essential anonymity, while his son is Adam, a name which has apocalyptic as well as biblical resonance (the ‘Testament of Adam’ is considered a non-canonical apocalyptic text; see Reddish: 32). Avoledo’s 2007 novel, *Breve storia di lunghi tradimenti* [A brief tale of long betrayals], re-introduces characters from *L’elenco telefonico*, though on the whole, I feel, less engagingly.

¹³ Both Capriolo and Avoledo allude or refer to Plato, a common point of reference for utopia writers after Thomas More.

city for the (already) privileged in society—appearing almost as the pre-utopia of Capriolo's *Il sogno dell'agnello*. The story has two largely separate story-lines, the world of the apparently incongruously-named Giona and his colleagues (the biblical Jonah often figuring in utopian/dystopian narrative), who work for a small computer company, and that of Ganimede Borsch, desperately trying to see that his apparently unintelligent and vacuous daughter Dorotea is prepared for the examination to gain membership of the perfect city, as conceived by business tycoon Lorenzo Morgan; all names are endowed with multi-layered symbolic significance. In terms which invert the biblical codes, the public invited to consider applying to enter the city is openly (if mockingly) urged: “Abítuati al privilegio. Vivi in prima fila, non metterti in fila” [Get used to privilege. Live at the front, don't queue] (82), or “Abitua i tuoi figli fin da piccoli a camminare dal lato giusto della strada” [Ensure your children learn when very young to walk on the 'right' side of the street] (165). The two worlds meet through a virtual reality created by Giona and his colleagues in the form of Daryl Domino, a guru whose ideals Dorotea and her friends loyally believe in to the extent that one girl commits suicide, as then does a colleague of Giona's; the team is pressurized to 'eliminate' Daryl, although not before he has exposed the base, expansionist intentions behind Morgan's creation, provoking a popular revolt. While examining the desire to create, or to belong to an otherworldly utopia, as does Capriolo's *Il sogno dell'agnello*, more than anything *Città perfetta* is, like *L'elenco telefonico di Atlantide*, a satirical portrait of the modern world of big business and mass advertising, of office life, takeovers, commercial interests and manipulations, all of which crush the individual.

Vassalli, a long-established author renowned for his historical novels, set in eras ranging from the 17th to the 20th century,¹⁴ altered his focus in 1995 to examine the 'future', with his novel *3012: L'anno del profeta* [The year of the prophet]—as does H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, of a century earlier (1895). *3012* looks 'back' at life at the beginning of the fourth millennium, in the “età della pace” [age of peace] (which had followed a whole series of catastrophes including volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and a Third World War) and in which the West no longer exists. Yet while there are no more wars or foreign enemies, the period, ironically, is one of severe moral debasement, corruption and senseless urban violence: the government is a military dictatorship (“la più ipocrita di tutte le dittature [the most hypocritical of dictatorships], 101), the police, or

¹⁴ *La chimera* (1990; *The Chimera*, 1993) is set in 17th-century Piedmont, *Marco e Mattio* (1992) in 18th-century Belluno, and both *Il cigno* (1993; *The Swan*, 1997) and *Cuore di pietra* [Heart of Stone] (1997) are set in the 19th and 20th centuries.

“pacificatori” [peacemakers], are hostile and corrupt, able to sense—and thus punish—any aggression in people’s thoughts (163), and the rich can pay for protection, and even for extended life (using body parts stolen from the young). As in *Città perfetta*, virtual reality plays a part in *3012*, since people can also pay to live out episodes of eroticism, power or bravery in a “*centrovita*”, or LifeCentre. Indeed, the only way to experience the ‘normality’ of a tranquil evening among friends is to pay, to live it electronically, and the secret dream of many is to earn enough money to be able to take refuge in such a program permanently. In this age of peace, life had never been so dangerous and difficult—politicians are represented in public by specially-created doubles, “uomini e donne fotocopie” [photocopy men and women] (90)—but energy is plentiful, since it is harnessed from all the hatred expressed. With increasingly dark irony Vassalli shows (as did Volponi before him), how humans have been reduced to little more than monsters, sharing the world with all manner of hybrid creatures, diversity knowing no limits, including the “Ci Acca (Changing Humanity) [...] che la gente normale chiamava mostri” [which normal people called monsters] (9). And thus, through the thoughts, poems and sayings of his protagonist, the prophet Antalo, Vassalli reveals a grim future for fragile (and mediocre) human beings, and the need for a final, cleansing apocalypse.

We turn now to look at the two central texts. *Il sogno dell’agnello* is the first of Capriolo’s novels to portray a linear as well as a modern world, the narrative embodying a definitive sense of progression. The inhabitants of the ‘utopian’ village have no names, being referred to merely by letters, and Capriolo makes it clear that it is irrelevant whether she refers to X, Y or Z as they have no distinguishing characteristics whatsoever. All the men are employed by the local “Centro”, where sophisticated products are made using equally sophisticated methods, in a sheltered and quiet, but also smart atmosphere; this is indeed clean, light work in a wholly sanitized society. Furthermore,

I begli uffici adorni di piante, i vasti candidi laboratori sembrano avere in sé la propria giustificazione, vivere una propria vita piacevolmente isolata e immemore di qualsiasi contatto con l’esterno, esattamente come il villaggio situato a breve distanza che il Centro irradia per così dire delle sue virtù più essenziali. (18)

[The fine plant-decorated offices and the large spotlessly white laboratories seem to exist purely for themselves, pleasantly cocooned, and with no memory of the outside world, just like the nearby village to which the Centre transmits, as it were, its most essential qualities.]

The women are attentive to their husbands and children, preoccupied with cleanliness, order and appearances, genteel in their manners and speech; the children are all obedient and docile. In the evenings the families all gather in front of their television sets to watch their favourite programmes (or those they have been ‘programmed’ to prefer), with nothing to trouble or disturb them:

Tale spensieratezza, sarà opportuno spiegarlo, si deve a una saggia misura adottata dalla direzione, che ha provveduto a far installare un dispositivo speciale in grado di interrompere la trasmissione sull’intero territorio del villaggio non appena in essa sia menzionato, o peggio ancora mostrato, qualche soggetto spiacevole. Grazie a questo accorgimento guerre e carestie, epidemie e attentati terroristici sono banditi dai televisori e sostituiti [dal]’oscurarsi degli schermi, [dal] gentile risonare di note d’arpa. (19)

[They owe their carefree existence, we should point out, to a sensible measure adopted by the Management: every television in the village is fitted with a special device that interrupts programmes whenever something unpleasant is mentioned or, even worse, shown. Thanks to this precaution, wars, famines, epidemics and terrorist attacks are never broadcast; instead the screens go dark and soft harp music is played.]

The fact that this seems to be happening more and more, sometimes even throughout a whole news broadcast, causes the villagers to realize that the situation “out there” is deteriorating rapidly, but this only confirms them in their intent to avoid all contact with it; and anyway, the inhabitants possess no critical or mental abilities to enable them to question the rules. Theirs is an exclusion zone, a privileged (we are not told on what merits, unlike the ‘academic’ prerequisites for admission to Pispisa’s ideal city), safe, bright existence. They are “gli eletti del piccolo paradiso” [the elect of this little paradise] (18), contented, protected from illness, sheltered from death; in other words they live in a ‘perfect’ world. Here, however, as is also patently obvious in *Città perfetta* and *3012*, the author’s irony is apparent from the start.¹⁵

Biblical undertones and hints are likewise not long in coming to the fore. All the citizens show “lo stesso zelo privo di entusiasmo” [the same zeal devoid of all enthusiasm] (32), doing the same things at the same

¹⁵ In Vassalli’s case irony is also contained in the footnotes added by the supposed ‘editor’, to explain the most baffling aspects of life 2000 years ago, such as elections, democracy, the Catholic Church, and parking. It is also present in the fact that only two languages have survived: new Russian and ‘airport English’—the latter understood by all except the British.

times, with the same bland, orthodontically perfect smiles. Only the young child Sara stands out from the crowd, a loner and an orphan, a misfit in a village where intelligence is a handicap, individual thinking/reasoning non-existent and imagination unknown or frowned at. She is also, notably, the only citizen to whom Capriolo has given a name.

The starting point of the tale is the arrival of a tramp—or “Principe” [Prince], as he wishes to be addressed (we later see he seems to have been an Emeritus professor)—a sign (in retrospect) that something is about to change. With his strange appearance and ways, his willingness to ‘lower’ himself to do all the less pleasant tasks, the intruder is initially a source of curiosity, then merely tolerated, as ‘difference’. His prophet-like pronouncements, or mumblings, mostly from the book of Revelation, will be rejected by all.

Sara is the only one who befriends him, and as they spend time together talking, and the Prince reads ‘stories’ to her from the Bible, Shakespeare and Plato, she starts to understand her situation. The pair seek to detach themselves from the order and control, the lukewarm sentiments and ignorance, but are faced with incomprehension and mounting hostility, and gradually the environment itself undergoes change—initially, the onset of increasing darkness, one of the apocalypse’s most significant characteristics. The book, indeed, is dedicated “*Ai non tiepidi*” [To those who are not lukewarm], a direct allusion to John’s words in Revelation 3, which the Prince echoes on several occasions.¹⁶ And so the citizens begin to suffer a series of discomforts, or ‘plagues’, with a clearly apocalyptic message; at very least this is divine intervention against the lukewarm, at worst, these are the end-of-the-world ‘tribulations’, although also of relevance is the story of the plagues visited upon the Egyptians.¹⁷ While the purpose of such plagues, in biblical terms, was to shake people from complacency or from immorality, Capriolo’s citizens are quite unable to imagine any cause behind their troubles: the death or disappearance of all the pets, water tasting bitter (of wormwood), and invasions of mosquitoes, cockroaches, scorpions and spiders. Incidents are reported to the “*dirazione*” [Management] which sends representatives to reassure the citizens and restore order, yet their words and actions are quite ineffectual.

¹⁶ “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth” (Revelation 3: 15-16); see *Il sogno*: 80, 107. See also *Il sogno*: 127 (and Revelation 3: 17).

¹⁷ See Exodus chapters 1-12. The Prince is heard to mutter, for example: “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 7: 3; *Il sogno*: 96).

One night, all (apart from Sara and the Prince) are visited by the same dream, that of a lamb bleeding from a deep wound. The lamb, indeed, is one of the most prominent symbols in the book of Revelation; it is the wrath of the Lamb, in John's vision, that causes the various events unleashed by his opening of the seven seals: earthquakes, fires, darkness, the death of living creatures, waters turned to wormwood, scorpion-like stings, locusts the size of horses.¹⁸ Although the citizens complain about the mosquitoes, becoming more and more uneasy, they do not understand the Prince's reaction or passivity, and, even with their limited mental faculties, begin to see him as a viper in their midst, someone they have assisted (minimally), but whose arrival in their village has set off the chain of events. While the Prince's role in the story is not explicit (is he a prophet, like Vassalli's protagonist, or merely an observer of events?) he certainly never attempts to influence any of the other citizens, perhaps since they are beyond redemption. While his title—Prince—has various literary associations, he appears more as a sort of Jeremiah figure who reiterates the biblical prophecies and bemoans the citizens' ignorance (rather than wickedness), or as a Jonah sent (and obeying somewhat reluctantly) to save the 'one human being of worth', that is, Sara.¹⁹

Raw and violent emotions now come to the surface, as the villagers openly blame the two 'misfits' for these apocalyptic outbreaks (to which the latter are immune: the lamb 'passes over' them) and turn aggressively on each other. Witnessing all around them "il crollo del paradiso terrestre" [the collapse of the earthly paradise] (173), the pair only narrowly escape being drowned (Sara) or burnt (the Prince) by a crazed mob. As the fire spreads (the element most symbolic of apocalypse), the two friends leave the village while all the inhabitants, celebrating together in an increasingly violent and drunken frenzy, are consumed by the flames. While the Prince had earlier tried in vain to convince Sara, in a letter, that: "qualsiasi inferno è preferibile a questo paradiso fasullo" [any kind of hell would be preferable to this false paradise] (204), now, as they cross the mist, Sara needs no further persuasion, observing, sagely, that while this new environment may not be perfect, they have had enough of paradises.

¹⁸ See Revelation 5: 6. Reinforcing this symbolism, the Prince carves for Sara, as a Christmas gift, a simple wooden animal which, to his dismay, she immediately sees as a lamb (*Il sogno*: 159-61) and adopts as her talisman. See also Revelation 9: 1-11.

¹⁹ Sara, however, remembering the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (an early apocalyptic tale of fire and destruction; see Genesis 18, 19) makes the opposite link, claiming that the Prince is the "one good man" (*Il sogno*: 202).

Paola Capriolo's stance on organized society is one of deep pessimism. Her focus here is on a dystopia—or negative utopia, conceived as such by the Management—followed by the apocalyptic end of this 'civilization'; Management decides everything but is faceless, and feeds citizens only false or empty reassurances. Capriolo is explicit in terms of apocalyptic reference, openly citing or alluding to the books of Exodus, Daniel and especially Revelation. While the symbolism is exclusively biblical and the story embodies the characteristics of traditional biblical apocalypse (punishing evil and saving the 'righteous') the tale also borders on the postmodern apocalypse—"a version of the apocalypse that dwells obsessively on the end, without any expectation of a new beginning".²⁰ How, then, does her intent to highlight the deficiencies and absurdities of society in a modern parable centred on the 'end of the world' theme, compare with that of Tullio Avoledo?

Set, apparently, in the year 2000, *L'elenco telefonico di Atlantide* portrays a week or so in the 'life' of bank employee Giulio Rovedo, the firm's legal expert. The story unfolds in various city environments including Milan, seen, perhaps, as a modern-day Babylon; presented in different type-faces and fonts (reproducing memos, tables, emails and computer screens), it addresses work relations, male friendships, male/female relationships, family ties and work/domestic responsibilities, revealing above all else an overwhelming sense of alienation, which the facility of electronic communications only accentuates. We meet concentration camp survivors, Nazi-hunters, AIDS sufferers, computer hackers and Egyptologists, such individuals all symbolic of past and present apocalypses, where attention was focused on economic rather than human (or humane) values, and 'progress' largely involved demolition. Yet in this ultramodern world, questions of mysticism and mystery are far from absent, most notably, a search for the Ark of the Covenant ('revealed' in Revelation 11, 19); and thus implicit is the search for utopia, the attempt to conjure up a future 'ideal' society, or, even more aptly, resuscitate a past. The title, indeed—recalling Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627)—aptly hints at a conflation of the mythical with the modern.²¹

Giulio Rovedo leads a very fragmented existence, juggling time spent in Pista Prima²² in the "condominio Nobile" (the apartment block where

²⁰ Kumar in Bull: 207; see also Boyarin in Dellamore: 43-44.

²¹ Atlantis recurs, if incidentally, in all Avoledo's novels to date, arguably as a symbol of what is lacking, and thus sought, in today's world.

²² The Italian equivalent for the 'province' of Airstrip One in Orwell's *1984*. The town is so-called, the narrator is later at (ironic) pains to relate, because of the

he has his bachelor pad, and in whose basement the Ark of the Covenant is supposedly to be found), time at work, and time spent with his friends, or with his wife and son. Suddenly discovering one day that he is to be transferred to Milan, to the headquarters of the powerful mega-bank Bancalleanza which governs the small bank for which he works, Giulio protests, particularly at the casual manner of informing him: by fax. Yet the manager merely replies: “Ma dài, Rovedo. Si abitui. Ormai siamo entrati nel nuovo millennio. Rapidità, efficienza. Grandi strategie aziendali” [Come on, Rovedo. Get used to it. We’re in the new millennium now. Speed, efficiency. Grand company strategies]. Giulio leaves the room, crushed, but cannot resist storming back in, to parry: “Tanto per la precisione [...] il nuovo millennio comincerà solo il primo gennaio” [Actually [...], the new millennium will not begin until 1st January] (64, 66), an ironic criticism levelled at the many who celebrated the end of the wrong year. As Giulio’s friend Franco later asks him, looking out at the dark from the window of his flat:

Te lo immaginavi così, il Duemila? [...] Sai cosa mi sembra? Ci pensavo ieri. Mi sembra di essere finito in quell’episodio di *ai confini della realtà* che ci aveva terrorizzato da piccoli. (217)

[Did you think the year 2000 would be like this? [...] Do you know what I feel? I was thinking about it yesterday. I feel as if I’m in that episode of ‘The Twilight Zone’ which had terrified us when we were little.]

The double-edged irony only becomes apparent subsequently, one of the engaging characteristics that permeate and drive Avoledo’s fiction.

And so we follow Giulio as he moves frantically between cities and between buildings, his job and marriage under threat, his best friend dying of AIDS. And in the midst of all this he becomes caught up in a conspiracy, seemingly hatched by the powerful Bancalleanza, as he attempts to fight the homogenizing, controlling influences that result in unscrupulous dealings and the exploitative (mis-)use of technology, with humans constrained by impersonal ‘structures’, forced to endure transfers, redundancies (or inappropriate retraining in middle age) and the rise of young upstarts or ‘idiots’ as managers. As Giulio’s superior De Rege tells him: “Noi costruiamo strutture destinate a resistere nel tempo” or “Questi non sono tempi per l’originalità” [We build structures destined to last. These are not times for originality] (22), and Amon Gottman (a heavily

racetrack-style ring road constructed around it, rather than for any reference to Orwell (*L’elenco*: 153).

significant name), the young ‘boy-manager’ of the Milan bank, states: “Il *masterplan* non prevede margini di disomogeneità.” [The masterplan does not allow for any lack of homogeneity] (27, original emphasis).²³ Comparisons with the all-controlling “direzione” and the “Centro” of *Il sogno dell’agnello*, are pertinent. Here, is a vision of a new kind of totalitarianism, reminiscent of the Fascist state which, in the ’30s, was only partially successful in controlling the lives of individuals and keeping them subordinate to the state, as the Fascists could not exercise control inside people’s homes or minds—something which for the controllers of today is far less of a problem, as Orwell’s *1984* already prophesied in 1949, and Vassalli’s novel, most brutally, extends. All four Italian writers, indeed, bring out this aspect in their novels, and their revelations are far-reaching and acute.

Right from the opening pages of *L’elenco telefonico*, following the tradition stretching back through Leopardi, Manzoni, Machiavelli and Dante, we find myriad implicit or explicit criticisms of contemporary life, in the modern context of mass culture, and most especially of big business: subcontracting, takeovers and mergers, the increasing, impersonal speed of communications (and getting results), accompanied by decreasing personal space (e.g. tiny, sterile offices all kitted out with the same kind of plants, and reminiscent of Capriolo’s “Centro”). Later criticisms range from the annoying to the pernicious, from insensitive mobile phone use and thoughtless double parking, to the near incomprehensibility of contemporary language, mindless rules, emotional and financial blackmail, and the (dubious) function of universities—this last theme receiving extensive treatment in *Mare di Bering*.

We thus see, in *L’elenco telefonico*, the de-humanizing process at its most extreme—hence the greater importance given by individuals to myth, to ancient gods, to mysticism or superstition, in an attempt to find some deeper reality or sense. Giulio devotes increasing time to his suddenly-awakened interest in ancient Egypt (a civilization which collapsed), especially in Apophis, the god—or demon—of chaos, and interest soon be-

²³ These aspects are based on Avoledo’s personal experience, his own unwelcome transfer to Milan: “I’ve never felt so alone in all my life. I had to adapt to patterns of work and ways of thinking that were totally alien to me, and to a kind of officialdom that still causes me distress.” He also abhorred “the monotony, the endless meetings, the smallscale abuses of power in the company and the large-scale manoeuvres of macroeconomics...”. Personal communication from Avoledo, November 2006.

comes obsession.²⁴ This search for, or fixation on ‘another world’, another layer, or reality, to counter-balance the fragile or defective nature of actuality, comparable to that of almost all Capriolo’s tormented protagonists, shapes a novel in which, as one critic has stated, “parallel realities (whether real or presumed) conspiracies and dreams are all gradually brought together to form a fascinating and increasingly complex plot” (Baranelli). Nothing in *L’elenco telefonico*, indeed, including any kind of coincidence, is what it seems. Emanuele Libonati, the character Giulio first encounters on a train, and who turns out to be a concentration camp survivor, tells him (with Platonic overtones):

Niente è per caso. Tutto quello che sembra accada per caso è in realtà determinato da una volontà superiore [...].²⁵ Lei crede di vivere nel mondo della ragione, del principio causa-effetto. Anchi’io vorrei tanto crederci. Ma quella che vediamo è solo l’ombra del mondo. (258, original emphasis)

[*Nothing occurs by chance. Everything that seems to happen by chance is actually determined by a higher will [...]. You think you are living in a world of reason, governed by the cause and effect principle. I would so much like to believe this too. But what we see is only the shadow of the world*]

Giulio has a similar conversation with the computer hacker, Maurilio Calzavara, who admits that the reason he began to investigate Bancalleanza was because it flaunted the Ark of the Covenant as its symbol and he does not believe in coincidences: “C’è un *disegno*, invece. Un *progetto*” [There is, rather, a *design*, a *plan*] (283, original emphasis). According to the Old Testament, the Ark of the Covenant, a chest of acacia wood overlaid with gold, contained the two tablets of the ten commandments, which were considered sacred, having been dictated by God to Moses; when the covenant was broken, desolation followed. Yet what Avoledo may also be hinting at is that it is not what you know that is ‘important’, but what you can convince others that you ‘know’, the controlling force being, once again, akin to that of the totalitarian state.

The Ark—a surrogate Holy Grail (also referred to on several occasions)—occupies the main narrative attention of the latter half of the story.

²⁴ Giulio even receives an email shaped as a pyramid (400). Egyptian literature and near-Eastern mythology, as also Babylonian divination writings, have been considered important sources for Jewish apocalyptic thought (Reddish: 33).

²⁵ This notion also recurs in the discourse of two of Capriolo’s earlier protagonists: Baron Scarpia of *Vissi d’amore* (1992; *Floria Tosca*, 1997) and Erasmo Stiler of *Un uomo di carattere* (1996; *A Man of Character*, 2000).

From separate conversations with Libonati and Valdemarin (another tenant of the Nobile), Giulio learns that, mysteriously and coincidentally, the dimensions of the Temple built to house the Ark are identical to those of the Nobile's cellars, and thus the location of the "*sancta sanctorum*" would be the large sink there, from whose tap miraculous water flows.²⁶ Another tenant, the ironically-named Abbagnano, endeavours to exploit this source to the full, bottling and selling the water to the sick, who soon flock to the Nobile and turn it into a place of pilgrimage. While Avoledo may be alluding obliquely to the prophecies contained in the book of Ezekiel regarding God's plan to re-establish the Temple as the centre of worship (in Israel), he is clearly showing the ruthless manipulation of the emotions of those who are suffering. As far as the book's title is concerned, incidentally, while Atlantis is implicit in the yearning for a lost utopia, and there have been seemingly peripheral references to Atlantis along the way, the mysterious phone directory itself does not surface until the final pages, as the title of a book that Calzavara has stolen from Libonati, and which provides a curious twist to the tale.²⁷ Giulio, indeed, is bewildered by all the different sequences of events in the story, especially the Bancalleanza 'conspiracy theory', and prior to this had even apologized to Libonati for his confusion, wondering if he was losing his sanity:

Una settimana fa ero una persona normale. [...] Adesso sono stato scaricato da mia moglie, sto per perdere il lavoro e mi trovo a discutere se sotto casa mia c'è la tomba di un faraone, o Atlantide, o l'arca dell'Alleanza (346).

[A week ago I was a normal person. [...] Now I have been thrown out by my wife, I'm about to lose my job, and I find myself involved in a discussion as to whether the tomb of a Pharaoh, or Atlantis, or the Ark of the Covenant is located under my flat.]²⁸

And so the reader is led back and forth through the labyrinthine layers of the plot to the 'end' of the story where the various 'ends' are (apparently) all tied up as Giulio escapes the Bank's sinister clutches and returns home to wife and son. If, after all the machinations, the reader finds this too convenient or abrupt an ending, Avoledo's Coda, or new

²⁶ See *L'elenco*: 329-30. The Ark of the Old Testament was housed in the *Sancta Sanctorum* and placed in the Temple, or Tabernacle.

²⁷ For Bianchi (1999), a phone directory, with its impersonal numbers representing individuals, is a dystopian text *par excellence*.

²⁸ Giulio's 'summing up' of his situation is not unlike that of Walter, the protagonist of Capriolo's *Il nocchiero*.

‘revelation’, and quite astonishing post-revelation soon overturn this premature judgement. It is “a finale that opens the way to new interpretations and is the perfect ending to an intelligent and ironic tale” (Baranelli), at which point reflection reveals just how adroitly planned and executed the story has been; the order restored (an essential characteristic of eschatological theories) belongs to the ‘futurological’ rather than to the present, and to “il caso” [chance]—or the choices of ‘another’.²⁹ In retrospect, the apparently incidental comments and observations (on parallel or ‘other’ worlds, in particular), it is now clear, impose a wholly new layer of significance. But other than to hint that Giulio’s number is indeed contained in some kind of ‘directory’ would be to spoil the reader’s pleasure in uncovering for him- or herself the precise way in which Avoledo achieves his ‘end’.

Tullio Avoledo’s stance, then, on life in modern society, is highly cynical, and pessimistic in the sense that no day of deliverance is at hand. *L’elenco telefonico di Atlantide* is the portrayal of a dystopia in which chaos, corruption, confusion and ‘non-communication’, reign, all stemming from excessive controlling power—and yet the apocalypse may have already taken place. As in *Il sogno dell’agnello* the symbolism is largely biblical, with several references to Jonah and to Job, together with quotations from the apocryphal gospels of Nicodemus and Thomas. While *L’elenco telefonico* is not a transparent allegory in the way that Capriolo’s is, Avoledo adapts core elements of biblical or apocalyptic texts to his own form—as do both Pispisa and Vassalli.

Vassalli’s *3012* is permeated throughout with biblical, especially apocalyptic allusions, culminating in the final chapters with Antalo’s announcement of a kind of ‘second coming’, the imminent arrival of the “God of Armies”: “squilleranno le trombe” [the trumpets will sound] (202); it may not be without significance that this occurs in chapter 67, as if following the 66 Biblical books. Antalo’s preachings, more incisive and direct than those of Capriolo’s gentle Prince, subvert the biblical ‘truths’, and survive, as the ‘editor’ tells us, having been transcribed by witnesses and theologians after his death (in the year 3012): the world was created out of anger, man is born with the seeds of hatred in him, and war is the sole cleanser of the world—as for the 20th-century Futurists. Antalo, indeed, is murdered simply because he lived inoffensively, expressed no hatred, had done no wrong. Pispisa’s *Città perfetta* adopts a similarly ironic tone, with phrases such as “Le vie del profitto sono spesso tortuose,

²⁹ For an elaboration of the elements of chance, coincidence, ‘reality’ and fantasy in the story see Bianchi: 194-99.

accidentate e oscure” [The ways of profit are often tortuous, dark and fraught with dangers] (42) and recurrent references to apocalypse, Judgment Day and Jesus’ second coming: traffic in the outside world, for example, is described as “l’apocalisse di ogni mattina” [the apocalypse of every morning] (106). Each writer uses different aspects of apocalyptic or biblical symbolism/imagery for his or her particular denunciations. While Capriolo adopts a highly literary and direct style for her allegory, as suiting her more ideological premise, Avoledo’s contemporary setting, idiom and clichés, his quirky, sometimes grotesque humour and multi-faceted irony, suit a modern story that is anti-political/-economic. *L’elenco telefonico* is plot- and character-driven, incorporating dizzying changes of scene, interweaving accounts, and elements of suspense, while *Il sogno dell’agnello* unfolds in a single, unified setting with its more predictable, if horrific, outcome.

Why apocalypse (now)? In the year 2000 Kermode was led to republish his 1967 seminal study *The Sense of an Ending*, prompted precisely by the approach of the millennium to re-examine relevant topics and themes, believing that “these old paradigms continue in some way to affect the way we make sense of the world” (2000: 28). Particular dates (such as the end of a millennium) certainly seem to bring out apocalyptic sensibilities,³⁰ and human beings, despite refuting the significance of such boundaries rationally, can be infected on the one hand by a sense of decay and cultural decline, and on the other by a search for renewal.³¹ Kermode nevertheless stresses that “apocalypse can flourish [...] quite independently of millennia” (2000: 182).³² Historical events, indeed, exert a far stronger pull and apocalyptic literature is more aptly classed as “crisis literature” (Reddish: 24), presenting or illustrating a crisis (experienced or perceived) as well as giving an alternative picture of reality.

Contemporary fin-de-millennium authors certainly seem to be considering the world as being in a state of crisis, with apocalyptic motifs and messages highly visible although the specific ‘causative factors’ obviously vary. With the Italian writers discussed, socio-political and/or ideological factors, or aims, dominate their literary discourse, which is persuasive and

³⁰ This is primarily attributable to the Bible, as Kermode recognizes (2000: 187); see, for example, Psalm 90: 4 and 2 Peter 3: 8.

³¹ Gerber (50-79) affirms this as a basic premise in his study of the 1880s; see Kermode in Bull: 258.

³² Kermode cites the following as end-of-the-world dates/predictions: 948, 1000, 1033, 1236, 1260, 1367, 1420, 1588, 1666, 1948 (2000: 9, 10, 12, 15, 183); see also Kumar in Bull: 211.

rational rather than in any way religious or hysterical. Their dissatisfactions and fears relate especially, as we have seen, to the numbing effects on individuals of excessive managerial control—the world's spiralling out of (but also, ironically, into) control—which leads to an uncertain, insecure or unwanted future for the individual, and ultimately to the collapse of civilization itself. Capriolo and Avoledo, as Vassalli and Pispisa, rather than being 'original' in their conceptions, their fictitious portrayals of the world (present or future) as dystopia, are part of a long tradition of writers who are attracted by "the appeal of apocalyptic discourse" (O'Leary: 10), to explore themes of extremes, seeing the ability of such 'myths' to communicate across time, to reveal and confront the new 'forces of evil' in the world.

Critics have variously categorized literary apocalypses, dividing them into religious or secular, Christian or anti-Christian, high or popular, ancient or modern (or postmodern), demarcations that can be helpful in assessing patterns or models. Of particular relevance to the two texts at the centre of our discussion is the system defined by John R. May (and used by Zimbaro for her classification of apocalyptic literature) wherein the two broad categories are religious and secular. The first subdivides into traditional (Judeo-Christian, following Revelation) and primitive (less structured, and beginning with some kind of paradise); the second into three: anti-Christian, humorous, and the apocalypse of despair.³³ The religious grouping offers hope at the end, the secular the absence of hope.

With as its subtext the book of Revelation—which dictates structure and plot and shows a reading of current society through "the prism of Johannine structures and figures" (Bethea: 34)—and with its opening describing a kind of utopia, Capriolo's apologue falls between traditional and primitive religious. Yet the traditional formula is further subverted in *Il sogno dell'agnello* in the sense that rather than a dystopian world in which an Antichrist—or false messenger—heralds the apocalypse, the story presents a false utopia in which the 'unhappy' Prince functions as a 'true' seer or prophet. The submissive citizens are credulous victims, their paradise of false gentility shaken by the 'tests' they are simply unable to 'pass'. *L'elenco telefonico di Atlantide*, on the other hand, showing the apparent randomness of the universe as far as the individual is concerned, can be classed as secular, and falls between the categories of despair and humour (with Abbagnano as the false miracle worker). Giulio is constantly swayed by the beliefs or spurious authority of others—power- or

³³ May (229) cited by Zimbaro (see xii-xv, 11-20). The genre of science fiction is included in the category of despair.

revenge-hungry frauds or deceivers—and in the end seen to be both victim and prisoner, propelled by the ‘higher will’ of which his mentors have spoken.³⁴

Despite their obvious formalistic and stylistic differences, the two writers, through their allusions, hints and sequences are clearly united in terms of their perplexities, their distress, their standpoint on contemporary reality. Capriolo’s exposé, or extended ‘fable’, may be overly didactic, but the author’s position vis-à-vis the present is clear. She conveys, albeit implicitly, what many apocalypse writers encapsulate, and that is a deep-felt desire for some form of redemption or purity—in her case, a return to the world of learning, of books, of the individual unfettered imagination: while there is no post-apocalypse, it is clear which values or ‘imperfections’ would survive the ‘end’, and the final ‘vision’ in the novel is one of relief, of hope. Avoledo may be offering something more whimsical, or over elaborate, he may appear quite detached from his story, delighting in the paradoxes, the incongruities, the imposed order and structures, and yet his condemnation of society, his horror of contemporary ‘values’, is no less vehement. Each in his or her own way is writing an allegory of the collapse of society, which is man-wrought, even in Capriolo’s case where the signs and warnings are more closely and expressly biblical. And in their different dystopias all four writers, as their forebears from the ’60s on, are pointing the finger at technological and economic ‘progress’ as the culprit, and the sterile need, or demand for immediacy and the gratuitous in their many manifestations. Theirs is a fiercely critical, largely Orwellian, attitude towards contemporary society and where it is going—hence the need to represent its overturning, in a fantasy world.

Both Capriolo and Avoledo, furthermore, appear to identify closely with their protagonists: the male protagonist of Avoledo’s *L’elenco telefonico* is not only based on the author’s experiences of working in a bank but, as Baranelli has observed, his name, Giulio Rovedo, is charmingly assonant with Tullio Avoledo (see also Bianchi: 187). And Sara in *Il sogno dell’agnello*, is surely modelled on Capriolo as a child: non-conformist, full of imagination and always questioning things (as the author accepts; personal communication, February 2007). Both writers similarly highlight the importance of written texts, texts which look (forwards or backwards) to utopia—in itself, however, rarely desirable: the Bible, for Capriolo, as the “book of life” *par excellence* (Revelation

³⁴ The appearance (as the Antichrist) of the genocidal leader in Avoledo’s *Tre sono le cose misteriose* could also signal imminent apocalypse, and the coming final battle in which evil (the tyrant) will be defeated by good (the prosecutor). Yet the novel ends before the ‘battle’ begins.

especially, but also Daniel),³⁵ while in Avoledo's case *L'elenco telefonico di Atlantide* can be seen as the false 'book of life', the putative phone directory of Atlantis, of a lost world.

All the works discussed are portraying mankind, particularly its gentler side, in peril. Humans, for Avoledo, Pispisa and Vassalli, are pawns in the control of vested interests while Capriolo's citizens are merely simulacra, not involved in any form of 'life', uttering platitudes, not having (no longer able to have, rather than not daring to have) any ideas of their own—having been subjected to a type of oligarchical homogenizing brain-washing, akin to the drug-induced docility required in Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). In all the stories, individuals are kept in ignorance for their own 'good', and it is in these circumstances that allusions to apocalypse as a 'cure', or an 'end', are most powerful.

While some writers see the salvation (or utopia) that the apocalypse can usher in as a "rhetorical and mystic solution to the problem of evil" (O'Leary: 6), both Capriolo and Avoledo are presenting an exposé of evil with no solution explicitly proposed, as befits the postmodern apocalypse. Like *Gulliver's Travels*, *Brave New World* or *1984*, among many others, Capriolo's novel functions as a critique of society and of any solution in the guise of a mild or lukewarm utopia. *Il sogno dell'agnello*, indeed, implies the need to avoid utopias altogether, advocating a less perfect but more natural world, like that envisaged in the epigraph to *Brave New World* (from Berdyaev): "And perhaps a new century is beginning, a century where intellectuals and the educated classes will dream of ways of avoiding utopias, and of returning to a non-utopian society, less perfect and freer." Perfection, as offered by Capriolo's Management, is simply mindless conformity; it is a false utopia, just as is Vassalli's "age of peace", which intensifies and slowly sinks into dystopia and apocalypse. Avoledo's exposure follows the model wherein conspiracy and apocalypse appear in the same discourse (O'Leary: 6), and in his dystopian, or post-apocalyptic scenario, time is rushing past with no time or place for any suggestion of utopia. Vassalli and Pispisa, like Capriolo, both show that sections of humankind cannot shut themselves off from others with impunity, while Vassalli's thesis is also that too much of anything, even peace, has negative consequences causing a swing towards opposite values. Pispisa's story ends with the assault on the "città perfetta" and its repudiation in the press by a new 'clean', environmentally-friendly finance department—as well as the news that management of the project has

³⁵ See Revelation 20: 12 and Daniel 12: 1. As Bethea notes, "If there is to be a way out, if history is to be transfigured [...] it is through *the Book*" (44, original emphasis).

simply passed to Morgan's puerile godson. *3012* closes with the end of the "era antica" and yet with the prophecy (and hope) of a new beginning; however, as the 'editor' explains, 2000 years have gone by and the prophecies have not (yet) come to pass. All these apocalyptic texts have what Umberto Eco (63) calls "visionary power", in the paradoxical sense that "not all visions have to do with the future, or the hereafter." Vassalli's projection, indeed, is less 'futurological speculation' than its far-off date may comfortably suggest.

We began by stating that apocalyptic texts were traditionally intended to both console and challenge, yet it is clear that modern presentations do not have this dual capacity. Writers today offer little consolation, theirs is more a kind of 'resistance/protest literature' against a society in which physical wellbeing and myriad 'freedoms' and 'rights' have been gained, but at the expense of individual maturity, wisdom, and ideals such as honesty, loyalty and common morality.³⁶ Capriolo, Avoledo, and Vassalli, and to a lesser extent, Pispisa, are writers who revere the 'lessons of history' and scry the future, partly as a way of externalizing their personal fears, distaste and disenchantment,³⁷ and partly as a warning to society. Yet since today so many seem desensitized to any serious message literature (or anything else) may have to offer, perhaps (echoing Eliot: 92), the (literate) world will not react with a bang but a (hollow) whimper.

The use of apocalyptic motifs and images by contemporary novelists attests, then, to their power to witness, or challenge, and it seems safe to conclude that writers will continue to be inspired by "the ancient logic of apocalypticism" (O'Leary: 4), to imagine, conjecture, speculate on and portray end-of-the-world scenarios and catastrophes in different guises and in different periods for centuries to come, until... the end of the world. This is not simply because threats to security, individual or universal, perceived or actual, will endlessly recur, but because the apocalypse—the apocalyptic myth—is eternal. As we have indicated, man throughout the passage of history has exhibited a tendency (or even a need) to imagine 'The End' whatever the numerical significance of the year. Where the predicted apocalypse fails to materialise, adjustments may need to be made but the apocalypse survives—the 'thief in the night' may yet appear—tied

³⁶ Reddish observes (26): "Through their visions of another world and a higher reality, apocalyptists challenge and confront the present systems. [...] Through their writings, they encourage others to resist also." See also Bloch: xi-xii.

³⁷ It is as if they are saying: "The future has arrived, and is a disappointment" (Bianchi: 196).

continually to the present.³⁸ In other words, whether old or new, between expectation and reality lies the shadowy abyss that can trigger apocalypse. I close with a short exchange from Avoledo. During an unwanted call from the computer hacker, Calzavara, Giulio shows his anger, but the hacker begs him not to hang up. Giulio retorts: “Altrimenti cosa succede? Finisce il mondo?” [Otherwise, what will happen? Will the world end?] (155), which is what readers of apocalypse always have to discover.

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³⁸ Its allure and power lie precisely in its flexibility to explain current events; see O’Leary: 17, 175. As Kermode (2000: 8) notes: “Apocalypse can be disconfirmed without being discredited”; on this see also Bloom: 223-24, 227 and Baudrillard: 39. Kermode observes, furthermore, that “every man imagines his own apocalypse,” and thus “the end is immanent rather than imminent” (in Bull: 254, original emphasis); see also Derrida: 17 and Dillon—particularly good on Derrida’s contribution to the debate, in the context of Maggi Gee’s *The Flood* (2004).

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