Apocalypse and the Postmodern Novel
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One of the most obvious ways in which apocalyptic discourse surfaces in the modern novel is the actual literary construction of postmodernist ‘worlds’: as Brian McHale in his book *Postmodernist Fiction* notes, ‘most postmodernist futures, in other words, are grim dystopias … The motif of a world after some holocaust or some apocalyptic breakdown occurs’ (1991, 67). In Russell Hoban’s novel *Riddley Walker* (2002) what we would recognise as ‘our world’ has been erased, only to be replaced by a blank parody disseminated through the medium of apocalypse: it is ostensibly our world; the place names, though mutated, parallel those of the specific corner of ‘Inland’ it is centred upon: ‘Fork Stoan is Folkestone, Do It Over is Dover’ (*Riddley Walker*, 226). McHale discusses the fictional fascination of ‘parallel worlds’ (1991, 61), and indeed Hoban’s novel could be cited as an example of the *topos* McHale refers to as a ‘parallel-or-alternate-world-story based on historical speculation’ (61).

The postmodern novel seems to be fascinated with what is unpresentable, paradoxically defining itself in terms of ‘liminal phenomena that defy both categorization and, finally, expression’ (Bennett and Royle 2004, 255). Postmodernism itself, inhabiting the future perfect, ‘what will have been’ (Bennett and Royle 2004, 256), perhaps recognises a kindred spirit in the apocalypse; as postmodernism reads as a discussion of worlds beyond the present moment, beyond the now, apocalypse is a discourse that is beyond our world, beyond our collective annihilation. Lyotard describes one of the features of the postmodern as ‘working without rules to form the rules of what will have been done’ (Bennett and Royle 2004, 256). Lyotard’s ‘what will have been done’ is comparable with McHale’s *novum*: Brian McHale cites that any fiction contains at least one *novum*, an ‘event that did not occur’ (1991, 59). However, in the genre of science fiction (which *Riddley Walker* could feasibly fall into), this *novum* is not at the levels of narrative but in the fabric of the represented world. This means that apocalypse is not just a surface discourse, a ‘narrative discontinuity’ (McHale 1991, 59), but rather an active part of the construction of the ‘world’ of the novel, the catalyst of a ‘network of innovations’ (McHale 1991, 59). Apocalypse, as progenitor of the possibility of an alternate world, establishes this parallel and consequently ‘invites the reader to compare the real state of affairs in our world with the hypothetical state of affairs projected for the parallel world’ (McHale 1991, 61), thus creating an ‘unheimlich’ space to extrapolate our culture and politics to their apocalyptic limits. Therefore perhaps the simplest reading of why apocalypse is never far from the surface of the recent novel is that apocalypse is never too
estranged from modern discussion of culture and politics. Apocalypse can also simultaneously provide the medium for political and cultural discussion; Hoban’s novel represents a landscape and a future that in the era of Cold War and nuclear warheads may not have seemed too implausible. Another postmodern novel, Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2001), engages with contemporary issues regarding environmental destruction and technological advancement that are perceived as threats to the security of the human species; anxieties that have replaced the Cold War threat of nuclear annihilation as the perceived cause of our imminent extinction. In the same way it is human nature to create ideology and grand narrative, it seems to be our nature to create narratives of apocalypse.

The notion of apocalypse is not just a surface discourse in *Riddley Walker*, but is integrated in the very fabric of the novel via the novel’s extraordinary use of language:

> That's why I finely come to writing all this down. Thinking on what the idear of us myt be. Thinking on that thing whats in us loan and loan and oansome.  

(*Riddley Walker*, 7)

Lyotard in his essay ‘The Postmodern Condition’ (1979) described the ‘society of the future’ as less concerned with ‘Newtonian anthropology’ than with the ‘pragmatics of language particles’ (quoted in Rivkin and Ryan 2004, 356). The atomisation and fusion of the English language in *Riddley Walker* is as potent a reminder of both the erased and inscribed worlds as the debris that surfaces and is re-commissioned by the inhabitants of Riddley’s corner of Inland. Apocalypse, like postmodernism itself, presents in Hoban’s novel a challenge to the logocentric idea of meaning, as Riddle’s English is a mutation of ‘standard English’. Post-apocalypse, the relationship between sign and signifier has been dispersed as Riddley’s reconstructions of words from other similar phonemes such as ‘enne wayr’ illustrates: misapplication and catachresis is rife. The way the language operates in *Riddley Walker* is in fact is a metaphor for the world itself in *Riddley Walker*, ‘our world’ as a sign ‘sous rature’, ‘physically cancelled, yet legible beneath the cancellation’ (McHale 1991, 100). As McHale cites this is part of the pantheon of ‘distinctly postmodernist strategies, namely the strategy of placing projected objects, in this case, an entire projected world, *sous rature*, under erasure’ (65).
Postmodern, ontological discourse problematises the concept of apocalypse itself, by destabilizing the concept of a stable world residing behind the discourse in the novel. As Brian McHale discusses in *Postmodern Fiction*:

> What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted and how do they differ? (1991, 10)

Extrapolating this logic, the assumption of an apocalypse is as antithetical to the postmodern rationale as the idea of a stable world; if the notion of the world itself is far from secure, assuming a grand teleological end to the world seems equally presumptuous. Like any of the grand narratives, the apocalypse is duly delegitamised and exposed as construction. In a sense, the idea of ‘multiple worlds’ (and here I am inclined to insert the addition multiple literary worlds) prohibits against apocalypse, as at the apocalypse of one world, another takes its place. By delegitimising the grand narratives the teleological ends they anticipate are also consequently delegitamised: the death of history, the death of man; and in the literary ‘world’ the death of the author. In another postmodern novel, *London Fields* by Martin Amis (1999) the author-character in the novel (who metafictionally writes and participates in the novel’s proceedings) dies a few pages before the novel’s conclusion; however, the novel moves beyond the death of the author, subsequently opening up another world beyond the author’s consciousness. As Brian McHale points out as posthumous (and perhaps we can credibly extrapolate this to post-grand narrative and post-world) discourses, ‘they are discourses more or less in a void’ (1991, 230). In postmodern fiction the ‘world of the text’ is problematised by the quality of literary self-reflexivity. Zadie Smith further complicates the theory of apocalypse by splitting it into cultural sub-divisions, pointing out that some societies, due to their geographical situation, have been forced to learn to co-exist with the possibility of total annihilation:

> You could divide the whole of humanity into two distinct camps, as far as she was concerned, simply by asking them to complete a simple questionnaire, the kind you find in *Woman’s Own* on a Tuesday:
> a) Are the skies you sleep under likely to open up for weeks on end?
> b) Is the ground you walk on likely to tremble and split?
c) Is there a chance (and please tick the box, no matter how small that chance is) that the ominous mountain casting a midday shadow over your home might one day erupt with no rhyme or reason? (White Teeth, 210)

Apocalypse has its universal teleological credentials eroded in White Teeth, as we see that mass destruction is in fact a reasonably localised matter: a volcanic eruption may have devastating consequences for several towns or villages, but it is unlikely to affect a country on the other side of the globe, or even an adjoining nation. Hoban undermines the notion of apocalypse in a slightly different manner, by removing its teleological credentials, as the apocalypse is no longer ‘an ending’ but the precipitator of a historical looping that simply transfers mankind back to his beginnings. Riddley Walker is set around 2000 years post-Apocalypse, where the inhabitants of Riddley’s world populate a neo-Iron Age society. In an ouroboros-like structure, the apocalypse is paradoxically both beginning and end, both history and future; the seeming perversity of beginning a narrative post-Armageddon engaging with the postmodern suspicion of ‘teleology and closure’ (Hutcheon 1993, 62). In Riddley Walker historical narrative is robbed of its grand teleological end; after doomsday, humanity just limps on. Apocalypse is perhaps present as a surface discourse in order, like any other grand narrative, to be delegitimised. However, in a similar way to the sense that Amis’ ‘author’ may be said to be in Barthelme’s words ‘dead, still with us, still with us, but dead’ (McHale 1991, 202), the threat of apocalypse is equally difficult to entirely dispel as like the dead author, it functions as integral part of the working of the text; in Riddley Walker, and to a certain extent White Teeth, it is apocalypse that shapes the form of the literary work and propels the narrative forward. Through this partial delegitimisation it embodies McHale’s ontological ‘vacillation or ‘flicker’ (1991, 202); apocalypse remains at the surface of the literary work as it is very difficult to escape teleological discussion, the discussion of and end. As Smith cites, the endgames ‘must be played’ (White Teeth 540).

Apocalypse in White Teeth is illustrated as a focus for teleological desire, epitomised in the God-fearing form of Hortense Bowden:

Hortense Bowden: (Tearfully): And them dat expeck such an end to dis world will be sorely disappointed, for He will come trailin’ terror and Lo de generation dat witness de events of 1914 shall now witness de turd part of de trees burn …

(White Teeth, 397)
Apocalypse, as for Goodparley and Orfing via the ‘Eusa Story’ (Riddley Walker 30) in Riddley Walker, has become a secondary grand narrative onto which desire can be projected: sociological, religious, political. Hortense’s apocalypse is an opportunity to indulge in her own religious superiority, to helpfully daub the neighbours’ doors with the ‘sign of the Beast’, and to don a clean pair of knickers in order to meet her saviour ‘fresh and odourless and ready for heaven’ (White Teeth, 397). Religion in all its different guises, Kingdom Hall and KEVIN, is a key theme in White Teeth, and the concept of a forthcoming ‘day of judgement’ is one of the reasons that discussion of the apocalypse is never far from the surface of Smith’s novel. Hortense, as the locus of authority on apocalyptic matters in the novel, would seem to present the least complex, most hegemonically mediated ideas of the apocalypse. However, Smith refuses to allow us to view her characters in such a reductive manner:

‘Lemme tell you something. I’m not like dem Witnesses jus’ scared of dyin’. Jus’ scared. Dem wan’ everybody to die excep’ dem. Dat’s not a reason to dedicate your life to Jesus Christ. I gat very different aims. I still hope to be one of de Anointed evan if I am a woman. I want it all my life. I want to be dere wid the Lord making de laws and de decisions’. (White Teeth, 409)

If the concept of ‘God’ in western philosophy and culture can be viewed as an assertion of white, patriarchal dominance, therefore apocalypse signifies the ultimate patriarchal exercising of power. However, Hortense sees the apocalypse as her own chance for empowerment, to have her voice heard as one of the Anointed, and as a black woman. The apocalypse for Hortense promises to be an act of radical decentring, again revealing its credentials as postmodernism’s sister discourse: Apocalypse is Hortense’s moment to challenge the phallocentric and ethnocentric culture of her societies. In this moment of absolute ending, everything and nothing matters. As Josh, the son of the middle-class Chalfens, muses in White Teeth:

He took another deep hit on the joint and it sent him back to being twelve, being twelve; a precocious kid, waking up each morning fully expecting a twelve hours until nuclear apocalypse scenario… Round that time he had thought a lot about extreme decisions, about the future and its deadlines. Even then it had struck him
that he was unlikely to spend those last twelve hours fucking Alice the fifteen-year-old babysitter next door, telling people he loved them, converting to orthodox Judaism, or doing all the things he wanted and never dared.

(White Teeth, 496)

The fantasy of apocalypse undoubtedly captivates as it can be read as an embodiment of our most anarchic desires, a moment when hegemonic codes of behaviour are suspended, ‘the point at which consequences disappear and any action is allowable’ (White Teeth, 497). Smith describes New Year’s Eve as a microcosm of this non-consequentiality, ‘impending apocalypse in miniature’ (White Teeth, 497), a moment to indulge our self-indulgent antisocial desires. However, Smith seems to revoke this notion as soon as she presents it, highlighting postmodernism’s position as a ‘politically ambivalent’ force ‘both complicitous with and contesting of the cultural dominants’ (Hutcheon 1993, 142). Smith demonstrates our need to realise actions as being accompanied by consequences, as actions are understood via their consequences: ‘choices need time, the fullness of time, time being the horizontal axis of morality – you make a decision, then you wait and see, wait and see’ (White Teeth 496). As a moment of hedonistic hegemonic suspension, apocalypse is a site within ourselves, an imaginary space where we can play out our ultimate fantasies. However, apocalypse is a site of instability, of uncertainty: as Josh worries, ‘what if the world doesn’t end and what if I fucked Alice Rodwell and she became pregnant’ (White Teeth, 497). The apocalypse is never far from the surface as it is ingrained in our psyche as the tension between what we would, and what we dare not do, the moment beyond the completion of our most terrible desire which is ‘something like the end of the world’ (White Teeth, 497). As Smith invokes, there is ‘always the fear of consequences’ (White Teeth, 497).

However, if we presume that catastrophe is ‘never far from the surface’ we simultaneously invoke the concept that there is a hidden discourse, iceberg-like, under the apocalyptic ‘surface of the novel. Brian McHale answers persuasively for this hidden discourse when he states:

The postmodernist preoccupation with death as the ultimate ontological boundary, which may be traced thorough the many postmodernist variants (revisionist, parodic) on the venerable topos of the ‘world to come’. (1991, 65)
Postmodernism, as foregrounding ontological concerns, is consequently ‘always about death’ (McHale 1991, 231). Perhaps the concept of apocalypse is never far from the surface of the recent novel as it is how we create an ‘analogue or metaphor of death’ (McHale 1991, 231). Foregrounding ontological boundaries is a means of foregrounding death, of making death, the unthinkable, available to the imagination, if only in a displaced way; engaging with the postmodernist concern with the unrepresentable. Earlier in this essay I cited the *apocalypse* as the unrepresentable; a statement I wish to partially revoke. Rather in the representation of the unrepresentable, the apocalypse operates as a signifier eclipsed by the signified: the signifier being death. Narratives of apocalypse allow us to imagine the conditions of our own deaths, producing a ‘simulacra of death’ (McHale 1991, 232). As if to foreground this desire to visualise our own death, in a Chinese-box narratology, death-narratives are embedded within the metaphorical death-worlds. For example, in *Riddley Walker* Riddley recounts the tale of ‘Aunty’ who is the bringer of death, where death is metaphorically equated with the sexual act: as Riddley notes, ‘when your time comes you have to do the juicy with her like it or not’ (*Riddley Walker*, 91). Therefore what is never far from the surface of the modern novel is the veil of apocalypse, what really pervades the discourse of the novel, is the anxieties surrounding our conception of death.

It seems, as two surprisingly related discourses, it is unsurprising that the apocalypse is never far from the surface of the postmodern. As I have mentioned in this essay, apocalypse is the ultimate teleological ‘end’; yet, if we examine the end of the novel, ostensibly the locus for surface discourse of apocalypse approximating from its position at the ‘end’ of the literary world, we see that non-ending is as compelling as ending: the created world which ‘flickers, opalesces at precisely the point where we conventionally expect either maximum clarity and definition or total opacity (an open ending’) (McHale 1991, 110). In *White Teeth* our teleological desire is indulged by the chapter headings towards the end of the novel: ‘Crisis Talks’ and ‘Eleventh Hour Tactics’, ‘The End of History Versus the Last Man’, up to the ‘Final Space’. However, Smith frustrates our epistemological desire by leaving us in a double bind as she creates an end which is simultaneously the complete, apocalyptic end of the world of the novel, but also an end which is not an end, which is simply ‘the beginning of an even longer story’ (*White Teeth*, 540). Smith satirically asks what focus group, what sector of ‘young professional women aged eighteen to thirty-two’ would like a ‘snapshot seven years hence of Irie, Joshua and Hortense sitting by a Caribbean sea’ (*White Teeth*, 541). This self-reflexive ending, this sense of non-ending, is ‘quite sufficient to destabilize the ontology of
the projected world’ (McHale 1991, 110). Apocalypse in White Teeth is described as ‘fantasy’, the ‘fantasy of no time’ (497), but perhaps this is deliberately misleading. Apocalypse perhaps exists as an example of Baudrillard’s ‘hyperreal’, to be ‘presented as imaginary in order to make us believe the rest is real’ (Brooker 1992, 154). In White Teeth the discourse of apocalypse haunts below the surface, in the realms of our fantasy, persuading us on a subliminal level that the world of the text is somehow ‘more real’, and therefore making the shock at the end when the ontological ending is simultaneously inscribed and erased all the more potent. The assertion that according to the simacralum we find no reality, no stable world, beyond the text is perhaps indicative of why Baudrillard’s argument can be criticised as ‘apocalyptic nihilism’ (Hutcheon 1993, 33) as we are left in ontological freefall. The apocalyptic world suddenly violates the law of the ‘excluded middle, creating ‘semiotic worlds suspended between existence and non-existence’ (McHale 1991, 33). The characters at the end of White Teeth are ‘dead and not dead, and their world both exists and does not exist’ (McHale 1991, 34); in a similar way Riddley’s world is suspended between the world it once was and total extinction. One way in which the characters and worlds are uncannily ‘undead’ is in the way the reader must ‘abandon the actual world and adopt (temporarily) the ontological perspective of the literary work’ (McHale 1991, 33). Apocalypse and the process of reading are not too far removed, as reading necessarily involves the erasure of one world (the ‘real’ world) in order that another world (the world of the text) may be projected. Perhaps the great pervasiveness of the apocalypse in literature lies within its potential; it creates a literary arena that crackles with possibilities. Apocalypse can be the discourse that inscribes a created world onto ours, can be the arena in which our desires are played to their endgames, a literary space to push the liminal and ontological boundaries of our own world.

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References


