

RENÉ DIETRICH, *Revising and Remembering (after) the End: American Post-Apocalyptic Poetry since 1945 from Ginsberg to Forché* (Trier: WVT, 2012), 254 pp.

Literary studies of the apocalyptic imagination since 1945 are usually studies of narrative, for the representation of apocalyptic endings has most commonly taken the form of the novel or popular film. Such studies overlap in part with more sociological studies of apocalyptic social movements and the texts they study and create. However, even these apocalyptic phenomena, whether religious or secular, are made coherent through prophetic or hypothetical narratives: certain events will come to pass, brought about by particular human or divine agents, and will have certain consequences for the faithful and unfaithful. The traditions of lyric poetry are not generally seen as intersecting with the main currents of modern apocalypticism. Indeed, the second half of the twentieth century has seen a distinct, increasing separation between scholarship on prose fiction and film and that on poetry—a separation or specialization that did not previously exist, at least not to this degree. The classic mid-century text on apocalyptic thought and modernism, Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* (1966), considered poems by Eliot and Yeats, plays and novels of Beckett and Burroughs, as well as poems, novels, and essays by D.H. Lawrence. In addition, studies of English romanticism (most recently, the work of Steven Goldsmith) have long considered the apocalyptic elements in Blake and Shelley. But, for the most part, scholarship on literary apocalypticism since Kermode—the work, for instance, of Warren Wagar, Peter Schwenger, Lee Quinby, Richard Dellamora, James Berger, Philip Wegner, and Teresa Heffernan—has focused on novels, movies, and (as has been the case for much literary scholarship from this period) philosophy. American postwar poetry seems to have its own trajectory. Like many other representations in this period, late twentieth-century poetry has been notable for its fragmentations, disjunctions, and various senses of endings, especially the posited end of subjectivity and the lyric voice. These lyric disasters, however, have not been critically regarded as apocalyptic in the way that, for instance, *Gravity's Rainbow* or *Riddle Walker* demand consideration of their

apocalyptic perspectives. There remains a tendency in the scholarship on postwar American poetry to regard its conflicts and disruptions as contained in the history of poetry. The formal or thematic novelty of poet X of today is a response not to social realities or histories but to Stevens, Williams, or Whitman. As vilified as it often is, the spirit of Harold Bloom's oedipal poetry is stronger than we like to acknowledge.

It is in this context that we read Dietrich's intervention into postwar American poetry and apocalyptic thinking, *Revising and Remembering (after) the End*. Postwar poetry, for Dietrich, is poetry written in the wake of historical cataclysm—of that series of 'posts' that seem to define the period: post-World War II, postcolonial, post-Hiroshima, post-Holocaust, postmodern. Accordingly, for Dietrich, the poetic responses he examines are 'post-apocalyptic'. That is, they are in the paradoxical position implied by his book's title. The poems revise and remember the, or some, ending and necessarily (and impossibly) do so from a moment after that ending. Some world has ended, but a voice or language from that world—though damaged or mutated—struggles to be heard. Given the post-apocalyptic premise of the termination of its terminologies, how can the voice be heard or understood? By whom would it be heard? We acknowledge, of course, the premise as a fiction. We are here, after all, reading the poems, probably in a position of comfort, not of agony. But the poems of (after) the end purport to reveal something—to stand in an apocalyptic, i. e., revelatory, relation to the disasters they point toward.

Dietrich's sense of post-apocalypse draws largely on the work of Berger and Heffernan. This is interesting and valuable, because the approaches and conclusions of these two scholars are quite different. Dietrich's book benefits from these contrasts but is also torn by them. For Berger, post-apocalyptic representation refers to an event. Berger employs a psychoanalytic terminology in which the apocalyptic event is seen in terms of trauma and the post-apocalypse is a landscape of symptoms. 'Apocalypse' is a trope through which we both apprehend and obscure a traumatic history; it is a mode both of memory and amnesia, or, as Dominick LaCapra in other contexts often puts it, of acting out and working through. Post-apocalyptic representation is a kind of Artaudian "signal-

ing through the flames”¹ of an *auto da fe*, a form of therapeutic hyperbole (which may, however, not be therapeutic but merely symptomatic). For Heffernan, on the other hand, post-apocalypse signifies a going-beyond and a rejection of the need for apocalyptic thinking altogether. Why, Heffernan’s post-apocalyptic writers (such as Rushdie, DeLillo, and Morrison) ask, cling to the focus on endings at all? Why not proceed post-Kermode? Abandon *telos* and *omega* and all the reprehensible, genocidal baggage they have entailed through the millennia. Adopt a narrative method not of foreshadowing a known ending but, as Gary Saul Morson and Michael Andre Bernstein have so usefully theorized, of sideshadowing a set of possibilities that might lead to different outcomes. And yet, Berger might respond, certain traumatic and significant events did occur. They were not inevitable, yet they happened, and we live amid their multiple consequences. We may want to be ‘post’ in the second sense but still are ‘post’ in the first.

Between these not-always compatible poles, Dietrich spins out his careful and astute analyses of poets from two postwar moments: Allen Ginsberg, W.S. Merwin, and Mark Strand writing in the generation close to the end of World War II (from the late 1950s through the late 1960s) and Susan Howe, Joy Harjo, and Carolyn Forché writing from the 1980s into the early twenty-first century. These selections show a wide range of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic sensibilities. It is illuminating to view through Dietrich’s eyes Ginsberg’s exuberant descents and ascents via Whitman and Blake through the darkest and most revelatory locations of personal and historical experience and to set these moments alongside the subdued lines and images of Merwin and Strand—verses that, as Dietrich observes, seem to have been uttered by voices of the dead. In all these works, to take a phrase from Strand, “the dreadful has already happened.”² But what is it? What has happened? For each poet something different, of course. In Ginsberg’s great poems, “Howl” and “Kaddish,” which are Dietrich’s concern, the action is still happening, the world is very

much ongoing in spite of the loss and damage the poet has witnessed.

From Ginsberg’s expansiveness to the condensations of Merwin and Strand is a big jump, and this grouping—the ability to regard these disparate poets under one rubric—is a measure of the audacity and risk of Dietrich’s project. Merwin and Strand speak with voices coming out of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Stevens’s “Snowman,” though without Eliot’s humor. They are, Dietrich notes, voices of the dead, of those caught permanently in catastrophe. And this is, it seems, for the most part, an amnesiac, utterly traumatized condition—with a few exceptions, without reference to history or social conditions. Dietrich cites Merwin’s critique of Whitman for an unreflective celebration of the American imperial project and for ignoring the extinct and the dispossessed. But surely this is a misreading on Merwin’s part. “Through me many long dumb voices / Voices of the interminable generations of slaves, / Voices of prostitutes and deformed persons”—Whitman’s oeuvre is full of such utterances.³ It seems that for an American poet to miss the complexity of Whitman’s view of America is to cut off part of his mind and tongue. I wonder whether Dietrich overstates Strand’s and Merwin’s work as post-apocalyptic. Might their work merely be expressing the poets’ depressive moods? Dietrich writes of the resignation and apathy that seem to characterize Strand’s work. What strikes me as uninteresting about Strand and Merwin—and yet, at the same time, interesting in a symptomatic sense—are their postures of despair. Lines as pretentious as “I was young and the dead were in other / Ages / As the grass had its own language // Now I forget where the difference falls” evidently had appeal for some readers at the time they were written.⁴ What is, or was, the cultural resonance of that tone of despair? Why does it seem no longer convincing? Even aside from the mythologies of her life, the poetic anguish of Sylvia Plath still sounds right. The flatness, or deadness, of voice in Ashbery’s *Three Poems* is still compelling and that book—which is more obviously post-apocalyptic than any work of Merwin or Strand—still commands

¹ Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958): 13.

² Mark Strand, *Darker* (New York: Atheneum, 1970): 42.

³ Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself” section 24, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Francis Murphy (New York: Penguin, 1996): 86.

⁴ W.S. Merwin, *The Second Four Books* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon, 1993): 83.

our attention. Ginsberg is the proper place to start, but Dietrich could have selected more interesting poets to put beside him.

The poets of the second half of the book—Howe, Harjo, and Forche—present ways of escaping the traumatized minimalism of Strand and Merwin. Howe's poetic rewriting of colonial American narratives might be described as a poetic version of the post-nuclear novel *Riddley Walker* in which language itself passes through a crucible of "time, sorrow, and injustice" (in William Faulkner's words) and emerges as an instrument of understanding equally obscure and revelatory.⁵ As Howe's protagonist enters the wilderness, wilderness in turn enters language, and language, as Dietrich writes, becomes a "force against the totalitarian unity of apocalyptic thought" (181). We might read Howe as a way of linking the two post-apocalyptic theses of Berger and Heffernan: the working through of irredeemable historical trauma and a gesture toward new premises of historical imagination.

In Harjo's work, as Dietrich presents it, we see an even more open opposition to apocalyptic thought, which, for Harjo, a Native American poet, is the dominant feature of the European expansion that nearly destroyed American Indian life. Harjo's work focuses on retrieving Native American culture and voices. It is a poetry, as Dietrich puts it, of "renewal and continuity" (188) and of "resistance" (201). Her work shares these features with Howe's poetry, but while Howe's language enforces the distance between ourselves and the past and resists attempting to re-create the past, Harjo's project is to defeat the apocalyptic forces that overwhelmed her culture and to create it again in a living language available for use in the present.

Finally, Carolyn Forche's *Blue Hour* returns us in some ways to the minimal, traumatized poems of Merwin and Strand. As Dietrich writes, her work, and especially the masterpiece of *Blue Hour*, the forty-page alphabetical poem "On Earth," "perpetuates [...] the moment after the loss [...] of disrupted temporality and traumatic memory" (208). However, this is a document of particular memories, ruins, losses, survivals, and crimes. It is a poem of insistence. It invokes the spirit and politics of witnessing that infused her previous (and, to my mind, far less successful be-

⁵ William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (New York: Vintage, 1990): 288.

cause more self-righteous) book, *The Angel of History*, but is a sort of Whitmanesque litany via a Kabbalist sensibility of reassembling the broken pieces of the historical world. It is Benjaminian in its implied neo-Kabbalist negative messianism but not in the sense of that so-often invoked passage on the "angel of history" in which the angel views "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet."⁶ That angel negates the value of the ruins; it is utterly without hope. In its negative sublime, it can represent nothing. The exhaustive listings of "On Earth" cherish their objects; they remember, represent, and transmit them. The only false note of the poem is its last letter, its last line: "zero."⁷ It is obvious, of course—but the logic of the poem makes it untrue. There should be no 'z.'

There is no absolute rupture in cultural production. Kermode made this point long ago and Dietrich allows us to understand it again in a new way. The poems Dietrich studies are poems of seepage, remainder, traumatization, mourning, outrage, and opposition. They illustrate a range of responses to catastrophe and can all be read as 'post-apocalyptic' as long as we understand a wide range of meaning for those terms. If we think either 'post' or 'apocalypse' can be narrowly defined, the unity of the argument breaks down.

Even with the reservations expressed, I consider this a compelling and important book. Dietrich demonstrates that the history of American poetry since 1945 does not consist simply of a set of responses of poems to other poems and that apparently disparate bodies of work share and participate in the apocalyptic sensibilities of the culture as a whole, in spite of formal differences. Dietrich raises more questions than he is able, finally, to answer. But these are the questions we will be continuing to ask for many years to come.

Yale

James Berger

⁶ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968): 257.

⁷ Carolyn Forche, *Blue Hour* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005): 68.