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## Prophecy in Modern Apocalyptic Literature: A Sacred Tradition

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According to Jonathon Penny, there are three modes by which we may identify apocalyptic literature: these modes are prophecy, revelation, and eschatology. Of these three, prophecy is the most important element to consider because it is the element most readily identified with that which is sacred. By examining prophecy and its various functions in Aldous Huxley's *Time Must Have a Stop*, William Golding's *Darkness Visible*, and Don DeLillo's *White Noise* we are better able to comprehend how prophetic presences within the latter novels affect reader perception and therefore affect the way in which we perceive and therefore receive modern apocalyptic literature.

The function and presence of prophecy in these three literary works is important because it provides a foundation for the idea that all modern apocalyptic literature is essentially sacred. Although I believe that apocalyptic literature may be sacred, and that it may be sacred with secular overtones, or secular with sacred undertones, I do not believe that an entirely secular mode is feasible or possible within this particular trope. Literature provides a history of mankind, and throughout that history religion has been an inimitable presence, particularly in the western literary tradition. Even if an author were to declare, "I am writing specifically in terms of secular apocalypse" (which is unlikely) the religious traditions would still be brought to bear upon the reader simply because of association. People cannot unlearn centuries of ideology, especially when that ideology pertains to apocalyptic literature. The word apocalypse in itself evokes intense imagery for many people. Prophecy especially lends itself to instant association with the sacred because its presence heralds a change to

come, an ending or a beginning, and any other manner of possibilities which cannot help but bring forth the sacred aspect because of the imagery that is traditionally associated with it. This lends credence to the idea that modern apocalyptic literature is critically affected by prophetic figures and imagery, and that the latter also affects whether the nature of the apocalypse will be construed as sacred or secular.

Of the three novels in question, the one that can be most readily identified as unequivocally sacred is Golding's *Darkness Visible*. The easiest way to determine the sacred tendencies of the text is to examine the incidence of prophecy, and prophetic imagery that pervades it. The character Matty is not only a prophet-like figure, he is at the center of much of the prophetic imagery that occurs throughout the novel. Even his name is suggestive of biblical reference (the book of Matthew). Immediately at the beginning of the book, we become aware that there is something different or strange about Matty. Just before we are introduced to the naked, half-burned child who seems to have appeared out of nowhere, there is a rather prophetic description of the area from which he first emerges:

“At the end of the street or where now,  
humanly speaking, the street was no longer  
part of the habitable world – at that point  
where the world had become an open stove  
– at a point where odd bits of brightness  
condensed to form a lamp-post still standing,  
a pillar box, some eccentrically shaped  
rubble – right there, where the flinty street  
was turned into light, something  
moved.” (Golding, p 12).

The place that Matty is first seen by his rescuers is here described as “no longer part of the habitable world” suggesting that Matty's origins are somewhat supernatural. Golding goes to great lengths to stress this, by providing a sharp contrast between plain, everyday items such as a pillar box and the *something* moving in the light. This reference to light is also significant in that it elicits immediate associations with Christ, and therefore with God, as Christ is often referred to as “The Light.” A child born of fire and presented in such a setting with all the manifestations of religious symbolism surrounding it is obviously not your average child. By the use of simple literary devices, the author successfully conveys the importance of the child to the story in a prophetic manner through imagery and association.

Also of interest are the prophet-like aspects of Matty himself. Almost the entire first portion of the novel involves Matty questioning his existence, and later his purpose. Who am I? What am I for? What am I meant for? These are questions that are constantly repeated in a sort of mantra throughout the first part of the book. Clearly Matty knows on some level that there is a reason for

his existence. He knows that there is something he is supposed to do, he is simply unsure of what it is. This knowledge is not enough in itself to imply prophecy. What complements it is the appearance of the angels that Matty describes in his journal. He is unsure that he is not mad, which is usually a good sign that one isn't. But from this point on, he is provided with the knowledge of his purpose and what he is meant for. There are two main things that tend to make him appear prophet-like: 1) he has been contacted by God (through the angels) and 2) he is not provided with complete knowledge, only the bare essential points (which is a typical situation for prophets in the Bible: Noah was only initially told to build a boat, he wasn't told why). Matty's situation is the crux of the novel. If he were not armed with such foreknowledge, then Sophy's plan would have succeeded, and as the angels suggest that the boy who was saved by Matty was important for later events, we are left with the sense that the disaster or crisis has been averted.

Clearly there is a larger picture to be seen here, but we are only given a glimpse of one small portion of it. This sense that there is something more, that there is a higher power directing the workings in progress, and the infinity that that inarguably implies is the result of prophecy, and prophetic imagery. Without Matty's prophet-like tendencies, and all the relevant imagery that accompanies his existence throughout the novel, it is doubtful that it would be as easy to understand the greater implications of the text.

Huxley's *Time Must Have a Stop* is slightly different in its approach, although the results are essentially the same. In Huxley's case, he uses prophecy to highlight the divine, but in a much more secular manner. This foresight alerts us to the coming changes and revelations that are inescapably forthcoming. At the same time, we are still left with a fair amount of doubt as to the eventual repercussions, but this is essentially irrelevant. What is important here is not so much the outcome of the prophecies, but the effect that they have on the sacred nature of the book. While this text may appear at first more secular than sacred, the religious nuances are still palpable. Prophecy is the mode which allows this to occur.

In *Darkness Visible* it is apparent from the beginning that Matty is the main prophetic focus. In *Time Must Have a Stop* there isn't really one single person who could be designated the prophet. The role seems to alternate between various characters. At one point the Queen Mother says that "No fat man has ever lived even to seventy. Much less to any reasonable age." (Huxley, p 129). This is obviously a prediction of Eustace's death. This moment in particular is notable because Eustace's death is one of the critical events that helps to determine the book's sacred aspects.

Eustace's death is an important event because it allows him to return in an unearthly form at a séance and experience prophetic visions. The spirit of Eustace described them as "clear memories of what had not yet happened." (Huxley, p 153). Although Sebastian is never allowed to hear the

prophecies that Eustace envisions (thanks to the bumbling medium) he is aware of the truthfulness of the session. Some of the things that the medium says, although garbled, remind him of things that he and Eustace had previously discussed. This allows Sebastian to realize that there is obviously some form of life after death, and highlights one of the revelatory points of the novel. But the critical implication here is that the prophecies that Eustace is remembering are being supplied by a higher power, thus rendering the novel sacred as well as apocalyptic.

Once again, the presence of the prophetic mode is influencing the reader in the direction of the sacred, rather than the secular.

Also of interest is the fact that when the séance is over, Uncle Eustace's spirit describes "... that pure, shining silence of the light. Brighter, ever more urgently, ever more austere and menacingly beautiful. Perceiving the danger..." (Huxley, p 153). In the previous passages, Eustace had experienced prophetic visions just after he saw the light. This clearly links prophecy with religion, as light, as previously mentioned, tends towards the Christological. Interestingly enough, Eustace seems to be afraid of the light (perceiving danger as it approaches), but whether he chooses to accept it or not is irrelevant. The point of interest here is that there *is* a divine presence (in the form of the pure shining light) and this evidence further proves the validity of the approximation that even texts with seemingly secular facets, are still fundamentally sacred.

One cannot speak of prophecy in *Time Must Have a Stop* without mentioning the intriguing character Bruno. He is not, unlike Matty, a main character, but he is a critical one. His preponderance stems from the significant encounter he has with Eustace. He and Eustace are speaking of death, and Eustace is denying that there is anything spiritual or psychological when a divine form (or "Gaseous Vertebrate" as it were) seems to manifest itself:

"Then the darkness closed down once more, like the lid of a sarcophagus. Closed down irrevocably, it seemed to Bruno, closed down forever. Impulsively he laid his hand on the other's arm. "Eustace," he said, "I implore you..." Eustace started. Something strange was happening. It was as though the slats of a Venetian blind had suddenly been turned so as to admit the sunlight and the expanse of the summer sky. Unobstructed, an enormous and blissful brightness streamed into him." (Huxley, p 91).

Once again we are provided with acute and dramatic imagery that suggests divine intervention and forthcoming prophecy. Here too, the presence of light and its quality (unhindered, perfect, and blissful, as the narrator describes it)

emphasizes the underlying sacredness that permeates this work. Following this momentous occurrence, after Eustace has accused Bruno of trying to hypnotize him we hear that:

“He had made his final desperate effort to raise the lid; but from within the sarcophagus it had been pulled down again. And of course, he reflected, resurrection is optional.” (Huxley, p 92).

This is obviously a prophecy, not necessarily of Eustace's death (although we are in no doubt as to the verity of that occurrence, sarcophaguses leaving very little room for misapprehension) but of Eustace's damnation, and refusal to accept the divine. Bruno notes that “resurrection is optional”, qualifying that Eustace has a choice, but the fact that the sarcophagus lid has been pulled down again indicates that he already knows that Eustace will not choose to be saved.

When these prophecies and images are coalesced, it becomes apparent that although there are many denials of the sacred throughout the book, seeming at first to render it somewhat secular, the sacred cannot be ignored completely, especially when the mode of prophecy has been thoroughly scrutinized within the context of the novel. Huxley has thus provided an excellent example of the sacred, with overtones of secularity that was previously mentioned.

Up to this point the sacred nature of the texts has been fairly obvious, or if not obvious, then easily unveiled upon close perusal. *White Noise* is a little bit more difficult to pinpoint at first, but the end result is the same. The reason for this is that this novel is constructed in a completely different manner than we have previously seen in the other two novels. Unlike *Darkness Visible* and *Time Must Have a Stop*, there is no firm grounding in the sacred. Rather, it is obscured in a sort of allegorical manner that initially translates as secular, but can soon be discerned as sacred by focusing on the mode of prophecy, and its effect on reader perception as a whole.

The trappings of religion are all present in *White Noise*, but they are couched in the language of modern culture. The place of worship is no longer a church, but a supermarket. Murray reinforces this theory when he says “This place recharges us spiritually, it prepares us, it's a gateway or pathway. Look how bright.” (DeLillo, p 37). He further completes the comparison when he goes on to describe the similarities between the supermarket or “church” and the place where Tibetan priests go to practice their faith and eventually die. Murray's ruminations lend weight to the suggestion that DeLillo's novel is secular, but with clearly sacred undertones.

However, the best means of comprehending the sacred undertones of the

novel are to study the forms that prophecy and prophetic imagery take in this novel. Prophecy is the clearest indicator of sacred apocalypse, and it is present in a subdued, yet discernable form. Murray often plays the role of the prophet-like figure. This is never more apparent than when he says:

“Every advance in knowledge and technique is matched by a new kind of death, a new strain. Death adapts, like a viral agent. Is it a law of nature? Or some private superstition of mine? I sense that the dead are closer to us than ever. I sense that we inhabit the same air as the dead. Remember Lao Tse. ‘There is no difference between the quick and the dead. They are one channel of vitality.’ He said this six hundred years before Christ. It is true once again, perhaps more true than ever.” (DeLillo, p 150).

Although this is again a case where there is a questioning of which higher power is directing things (someone other than Christ?) the fact that this can be determined at all suggests that sacred associations have been made and lead to the subsequent conclusion that this text cannot possibly be completely and independently secular. How is Murray able to sense that the dead are closer than ever, if not by some sort of divine manipulation? By closely examining such prophetic instances as these, the idea of a secular work with sacred undertones becomes less impossibility and more realism.

Wilder too, can be seen as a somewhat prophetic presence. From the beginning we are told that the toddler seems to be tuned in to something that is not perceptible to others. His seven-hour crying fit, which seems to have had no apparent provocation can hardly be considered commonplace. Although there is no real suggestion of what he might have been crying for (perhaps a foreshadowing of the toxic event to come and its repercussions) there is a prophetic imagery that is established when the narrator notes that when Wilder had finished his seven hour cry-a-thon:

“It was as though he'd just returned from a period of wandering in some remote and holy place, in sand barrens or snowy ranges – a place where things are said, sights are seen, distances reached which we in our ordinary toil can only regard with the mingled reverence and wonder we hold in reserve for feats of the most sublime and difficult dimensions.” (DeLillo, p 79).

Clearly this is acknowledgement that Wilder has been a part of a greater

whole, and that the entire concept of this is admittedly beyond those who are close to it. It is a concept of “sublime and difficult dimensions” and as such is not openly broached by any character in the novel. In this indirect, albeit effective manner the secular has been marginally replaced with the sacred once again through the mode of prophecy.

The idea of an entirely secular work of modern apocalyptic literature is clearly not an achievable goal. By focusing on the mode of prophecy within the greater apocalyptic, literary context, we are able to realize that while a given work may be entirely sacred, sacred with secular overtones, or secular with sacred undertones, it is simply not possible that apocalyptic literature may be entirely secular. There are too many associations and perceptions that can be drawn upon from a lengthy religious tradition that are too prevalent to ignore, as we have seen with these novels. Each text is very different from the other, but the link between all of them is prophecy and it is definite that the presence of this mode has greater implications than simply foreshadowing events. Prophecy is almost always accompanied by automatic assumptions, usually because of the religious parallels that can be detected. What is important is that if an assumption or association can be made, it is usually for a reason. In these cases there were clearly sacred tenets to be discovered, if one only took the time to consider carefully the circumstances. Whether you look for it or not, it is impossible to ignore the perpetual sacred presence, and it would be detrimental to the overall experience of modern apocalyptic literature if the sacred aspect were to be ignored or deemed coincidental.

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