

So Long, Mom: The Politics of Nuclear Holocaust Fiction

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So long, Mommie
I'm off to kill a Commie
So send me a salami
And try to smile somehow.
I'll be back when the war is over
An hour and a half from now!

[Tom Lehrer, 1964]

We live in a Nuclear Age and no one would argue that the presence of nuclear weapons has not had an effect on us. Our anxiety stemming from these weapons has expressed itself rather overtly in stories about a projected or potential holocaust that have, themselves, become part of a political discourse which has touched on everything from American foreign policy to the nature of the American national psyche to our domestic nuclear power industry. The stories have expressed, in their own way, the most deeply troubling aspects of the political debates and for that reason should be considered worthy of study by anyone interested in nuclear issues. Most, if not all, of these stories are science fiction, but science fiction of a particular sort. Before anything can really be said of Nuclear Holocaust fiction, whether presented in print or in film or video, it would be well to define exactly what this thing is.

At first glance it would seem only sensible to think of nuclear war stories in the context of other war literature. Nuclear war is,

after all, war, and its literature commonly makes use of the images of conventional war to make concrete a war that has not, as yet, happened. Should it happen, this will be the War to End All Wars, or at least make them little wars fought, as Einstein put it, with sticks and stones, thus turning the idealism of the first great war of this century to mockery. Such is the observation made in the ABC production *The Day After* (1983) as the camera pans down a pristine white marble statue, a monument to the noble dead of World War I. At the base of the statue we see the dead of this war—not soldiers but civilians lying in the rubble of what was once Kansas City.

This image, bizarre because the monument is so very white and clean, untouched while all around is filth and wreckage, is worth dwelling on. We, who are used to the often anti-war literature that came out of the World War I, forget that what was written during that war was quite different. Idealistic, jingoistic, dwelling on the nobility of sacrifice for a noble cause, this literature downplayed the horrors of war as it cast its players in the role of a martyred Christ. Joyce Kilmer's "The Peacemaker," ironic only in retrospect, is typical:

Who fights for Freedom, goes with joyous tread
To meet the fires of Hell against him hurled,
And has for Captain Him whose thorn-wreathed head
Smiles from the Cross upon a conquered world.

For most Americans, World War I was a distant spectacle, a Manichean struggle between the forces of good and evil. Once the forces of evil were defeated, the assumption was that the soldiers would come home to a world both untouched and transformed because they had willingly poured forth their blood to keep it that way. In essence, World War II, though described in the popular literature in far less elevated terms—the prevailing attitude was that it was a dirty job but someone had to do it—was pictured in strikingly similar ways. It too was a Manichean struggle between good and evil to preserve an idealized home front. And, like their World War I counterparts, these soldiers, though cockier and more cynical, would also return to a world unchanged with the good preserved, the evil purged. Europeans, caught in the middle of it all, might have had a different attitude. For Americans, the wars were both distant and dis-

tanced, and thus American works focus primarily on the experience of soldiers in a military setting.¹

But the dead lying at the base of that statue in *The Day After* are not soldiers, and therein lies the difference. War literature is, generally, about what happens to soldiers. But in nuclear war literature—with the exception of Peter George's (Bryant) *Red Alert* (1958)² or Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler's *Fail-Safe* (1962)—soldiers, and the military in general, are irrelevant. War literature and nuclear war literature come out of two very different traditions with radically different assumptions: war literature comes out of the Epic, nuclear war literature is Apocalyptic. Although some crossovers do occur, most of these stories stay well within the bounds of the conventions of their respective types. The conventions, of course, have changed rather drastically over the last two or three centuries—the traditional epic in the grand style being operationally extinct and the word “apocalypse” having all but reversed its original meaning—but enough remains so that we can recognize the classifications or at least their origins. The epic recounts “grandly and vastly the adventures of a deity or culture hero whose actions have been crucial in the development of a society, a culture, or a religion” (Lemon 31–32), and “traditional epics,” as noted by M. H. Abrams, make use of material “developed in the oral traditions of [a] nation during a period of expansion and warfare” (49). Although modern epics, as stated by Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism*, tend to be ironic rather than heroic, they do recount large and important events—wars, after all, are not trivial things—and do center on the actions of some sort of culture hero or anti-hero (321–24). While modern protagonists may not be up to the standards set by Aeneas or Odysseus, being ordinary people caught in history rather than making history, their acts nevertheless make some difference. And once they've performed the requisite number of heroic deeds (often, as in *The Big Red One* [1980], the heroic deed is simply staying alive), they,

¹For an extended discussion of the conventions of war literature of the twentieth century, see Aichinger, Fussell, and Walsh. For an example of officially sanctioned views of World War II, see the U.S. War Department's propaganda series, *Why We Fight*. For the view from the ‘trenches,’ see Mauldin and Mowat. For an extended discussion of responses to World War I, see Stromberg.

²Also titled *Two Hours to Doom*. It was made into the film *Dr. Strangelove* in 1963.

like Odysseus, go home. And they can go home because there is a home to go to. Home may have changed; they may have changed—Hemingway's "Soldier's Home" (1925) is a case in point as is O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1973)—but, in essence, home is still there and, at least on the surface, relatively untouched, thus foregrounding what Frye calls the "cyclical form of the Classical epic" (318).

By contrast, in nuclear war stories, there is no home to go to because home is Ground Zero—"How's Sedalia?" "There ain't no Sedalia. Ain't no Greenridge. No Windsor. No nothin" (*The Day After*). Home, that is, civilization as we know it, is obliterated; and although some of these stories—Philip Wylie's *Tomorrow!* for example—see annihilation as an opportunity to build a new and more pleasant world, most picture life the Day After Day One in either dystopian terms—Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (*Bladerunner*), Orwell's *1984*, Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, Hoban's *Riddley Walker*, Zelazny's *Damnation Alley*—or simply not there as those who survive the initial attack slowly die of radiation poisoning Roshwald's *Level 7*, Schute's *On the Beach*, Amen's "The Last Testament" (made into the film, *Testament*).

The general impulse has been to regard these stories as something new—after all, we've never before had the power to wipe ourselves out so completely—but nuclear holocaust stories go back almost a hundred years, the first being Robert Cromie's *The Crack of Doom* about madmen plotting to destroy the universe with atomic energy published in 1895 soon after the discovery of radioactivity. In 1914 H. G. Wells published *The World Set Free*, one of the first novels depicting an atomic war and thus the model upon which much subsequent nuclear war fiction is based. But the stories, as stories, aren't new and weren't even in 1895 or 1914. They go back at least as far as the Flood, probably even further, but the story of Noah and his Ark is the oldest apocalyptic fiction most of us are familiar with. It sets the pattern: humankind has committed some grievous error and will pay as the Lord God Almighty unleashes His wrath. That nuclear war literature has replaced God with a thermonuclear device is a bagatelle, at least as far as the structure is concerned. Death, as it did in the Bible, comes out of the sky. Though we may feel that our eschatological anxiety is more real than that felt by people 2,000 or 3,000 or 5,000 years ago, as Frank Ker-mode put it,

It would be childish to argue, in a discussion of how people behave under eschatological threat, that nuclear bombs are more real and make one experience more authentic crisis-feeling than armies in the sky. There is nothing at all distinguishing about eschatological anxiety; it was, one gathers, a feature of Mesopotamian culture, and it is now a characteristic, often somewhat reach-me-down in appearance, of [ours]. [95]

Where this anxiety came from or how we came to feel it is something of which we cannot be sure. But those who speak of such things—from Kermode to Mircea Eliade to Joseph Campbell—credit it to changing ideas about the nature of time. In pre-Christian and pastoral societies, time is cyclical. In post-Christian and technological societies, time is linear. It begins at a specific point, proceeds in a straight line, and then stops. It is this notion, that time stops rather than renewing itself, that causes the anxiety which has expressed itself in a body of literature, primarily religious in its orientation, that has come to be called apocalyptic.

Originally the stories were not about the literal end of time but only the end of a unit of time, an epoch. Some disaster would wipe out the world; but a chosen few, Noah and his family or some equivalent, would survive to start things over. Gradually, however, the emphasis shifted and the “end” became an “end / stop,” but the quality of that “stop” was a bit different from what we would assume. Prior to the time of Christ, the “end” was merely a point in an ever-renewing cycle of time. The “end / stop,” a concept which differentiates Christianity from traditional pastoral pagan religions, marks the end of this material world and the beginning of something entirely different. As Frye has noted, the literature of apocalypse originally implied Revelation and the coming of something devoutly to be desired; the Kingdom of God on Earth, a new world which we would call utopian as historical time—*chronos*, or one thing after another—would be replaced by mythic time, sacred time, *kairos* (141–46). In these stories, time itself is regenerated by being created anew; the anxiety stemming from the idea that time can stop altogether is alleviated by replacing *chronos* with *kairos*. Around the time of Christ, apocalypse became both literal and immanent in that the last Apocalypse marks the beginning of a perfect era which will last forever. Real time ends, the material world ends in a series of horrific disasters recounted

for us in Revelation, St. John himself working within an Hebraic tradition already well established.

But there was a catch. Although Christ promised that the Second Coming would be within the lifetime of His followers, nothing happened. As Kermode notes, "The early Christians were the first to experience the disconfirmation of literal predictions." They responded by manipulating the "data in order to achieve the desired consonance":

If you insist that Nero is Antichrist, or Frederick II the Emperor of the Last Days, you need not be too depressed if your choice should die too early, since at this level of historical abstraction you can always believe he will return at a convenient season; and you will find Sybylline texts to support you. [9]

Thus, if the world does not end today, one can always fiddle with the arithmetic and have it end tomorrow or a hundred years from now or a thousand. This is because when it will happen is less important than the fact that it will happen, something to keep in mind as we think about our own atomic clock.

But lest we get too smug about our eschatological terrors, dismissing them as a variation on the kind of superstitious fantod best left to Middle Eastern Bronze Age barbarians or tenth century Europe, we must remember that although our fears are no more real than theirs, we, unlike they, have the technology to actually do it. We can, all by ourselves, bring about the end of the world and stop time forever, becoming, in effect, the direct agents of our own destruction. However, in a discussion of the stories *qua* stories, this empirical fact is irrelevant except on one point. Apocalyptic stories are religious; nuclear holocaust stories are not. The latter comprise a separate subcategory, the secular apocalypse. The primary difference between the two forms is that in a religious apocalypse there will be both Revelation and a Second Coming. In a secular apocalypse, there will not.

In a secular context, Revelation is inappropriate, a Second Coming mere superstition. People may come to understand something important, may even manage to salvage from the wreckage enough to build again, but that's not quite the same as seeing the face of God or finding one's self in a mythic New Jerusalem. And because most, if not all, of these stories qualify as science fiction, the emphasis changes. Science fiction is about,

as the name implies, science. The focus here is secular, not religious, and although the basic structure—sin (or error), deluge, aftermath— of both secular and religious apocalypses may be roughly the same, the nature of the error which brings it all about is different. In science fiction, the agent is not so much sin as it is mistake. We blow ourselves up not because we have developed technology—although Hoban's *Riddley Walker* implies that may well be the case—but because we have misused the technology we have developed. If there is any sin here, it is that of hubris, a Faustian reach for knowledge without bothering to consider the consequences or, as it was put in an old Tom Lehrer song:

I send them up
Who cares where they come down
That's not my department
Says Werner von Braun.

The emphasis in these stories is thus ethical—human beings acting in a dysfunctional manner in relation to each other, their environment, and their own technology—rather than moral—a dysfunctional relationship between humanity and God. That nuclear holocaust fiction comprises a subcategory of science fiction dictates such an emphasis even in *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, which does explore religious questions in a serious and troubling way. But exploring exactly what these stories are about from the angle of the larger genre of science fiction raises problems, primarily because it is not easy to say what science fiction is. As Abrams states, “the criteria for classification [of genre] have been highly variable” (68). Apocalypses, or, as W. Warren Wagar calls them, “terminal visions,” qualify as a genre in terms of structure, much as comedy or tragedy is so defined. It is the defined and specific structure generating a recognizable type of story which is the criteria for classifying these stories, such generating structures noted by Vladimir Propp in his work with fairy tales. But science fiction is different because the genre, the term “science fiction” aptly labelled as “unsatisfactory but firmly established” by Kingsley Amis (76), is not so much structural or literary as it is a category for the convenience of booksellers and buyers. The term “science fiction” covers a wide variety of different kinds of stories and thus, as a genre, creates the kind

of problem Richard Slotkin discusses in "Prologue to a Study of Myth and Genre in American Movies." If genre is defined as "the continuity of form," then terminal visions are, indeed, a genre, but science fiction is not; it is perhaps better seen in terms of myth, "the continuity of meaning." The common denominator in these stories is not structure (or form) but a fascination with gadgetry or, as Brooks Landon has put it, a focus on the impact of technology on society.³ But while his definition does serve to differentiate science fiction from related forms such as science horror (*The Blob*), science fantasy (*Star Wars*), or space opera (*Star Trek*), it has a scattering effect on nuclear holocausts because it disintegrates what should be a collective group. It would perhaps be best to use a different term, "speculative fiction," a term sometimes used, more or less cynically, to designate any work of science fiction (or fantasy or opera) of literary merit.

Critical snobbery aside, what these tales do is play in worlds which do not exist. "Do we dare create a world?" Thomas Pynchon asks in *The Crying of Lot 49*; and for several centuries, starting with Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), writers have done that in a way that distinguishes what they write from simple representations of imaginary places. Essentially, speculative stories (or science fiction) are a form of Utopia: utopian if the world created is manifestly superior to the real world or dystopian if it is exaggeratedly bad. As Abrams notes, they present "the marvels of discovery and achievement that may result from scientific development" or "its disastrous or apocalyptic conclusion" (177-78). Indeed, the first works of science fiction—*The Reign of George VI* (1763) and Sebastien Mercier's *L'An 2440* (1771)—did just that. Both were utopian speculations emphasizing the wonders that technological advances would bring to the world, their authors predicting the future from a base of scientific certainty. But by the end of the century, such faith in the saving grace of reason and technology was called into question, most overtly in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1816), subtitled "The New

³Brooks Landon, Professor of English, University of Iowa, defined science fiction thus in conversation in 1986.

Prometheus." Obviously, as we were warned in the original myth, inquiry may be problematic.

But the warning is ambiguous because, although Prometheus' discovery of fire cost him dearly, it benefitted humankind. This ambiguity marks the Romantic Era, an era characterized, as David Ketterer notes, by "apocalypses of imagination":

It was during the Romantic period in English literary history, in the 1790s, that a positive apocalyptic charge came to the fore. The American and French revolutions were interpreted as the pre-millennial prophesied in the Apocalypse. R. W. B. Lewis writes: "For the English imagination of the decade, in short, the word 'apocalypse' meant not a vision of horror but of dazzling splendor, not of catastrophe but of the epochal and triumphant social transformation that catastrophe led to." In the subsequent period of disillusionment, many writers . . . were bent on portraying what M.H. Abrams has termed "apocalypses of imagination" that celebrate a compensatory new world. [10]

The Romantic world view was, in many ways, a reaction against the world view of the Enlightenment of the previous century. According to Wagar in *Terminal Visions* (1982), the Enlightenment was eminently rational, had a deep faith in the "inherent goodness of the natural order," and felt that nature was "a logico-mathematical system which man . . . can know. . . . By knowing it, he can also learn how to rationalize the human order, bringing it into harmony with the machinery of Nature" (134). The Romantics, on the other hand, were far more mystical, valuing feelings and intuition above reason and pure empiricism. Although the Romantics were as optimistic in their own way about humankind's chances for bettering itself, as were the people of the Age of Reason, their attitude naturally led them to doubt the ability of science. But their pessimistic tendencies stemming from the excesses of the French Revolution were outweighed by a general optimism. The speculative fiction of the nineteenth century reflected, by and large, a widespread faith in progress. That faith was intensified by the emergence in the 1840s of positivism, a reaction against Romantic mysticism in favor of science and reason. As Wagar states:

For students of speculative fiction, positivism has a unique importance, because it is also the world view of the "hard core" of the field, the

world view of science fiction with stress on the word "science." . . . [It is the] authentic fiction of science, which is to say, true to positivism. It originated in the fertile intellect and imagination of Jules Verne, flowered in the even greater genius of H.G. Wells, and continues on to the present day. [135]

Cutting across this optimism was another world view, emerging in Europe in the last decades of the nineteenth century and in England and America a bit later. Wagar calls this view "Irrationalism"; we would probably identify it with modernism and post-modernism. Basically, "irrationalism" holds that "man and the world . . . are not fundamentally governed by reason":

The world is not the coherent, reasonable, knowable, humanly meaningful order disclosed either by cold science or warm poetry, and man is neither machine nor angel. Beyond these negations, irrationalists agree on very little. . . . But the irrationalist leap is just that: a leap, even a leap in the dark. . . . the problem with irrationalist man is that he no longer, in his bones, believes in the intrinsic correspondence of the external world and the world of ratiocination or consciousness. The gap between the two, requiring so many death defying leaps, is uncomfortably wide and fearsomely deep. [136-37]

At this point that we begin getting a significant number, even from H.G. Wells, of apocalyptic terminal visions.

Of course we have to qualify "significant." Science fiction has, in general, been regarded as a subliterary genre, its best works often categorized as something else. And science fiction *per se*, has been a highly ghettoized form with, as Paul Brians notes, "a very restricted audience" and, we may assume, an even more restricted audience, given the extended dominance of Positivism, for stories about the end of the world. It is not that booksellers' stalls were suddenly flooded with terminal visions; it is that over the course of the nineteenth century, more appeared, so that by the end of the century, there were enough to count.

Generally, as can be seen in Cromie's *The Crack of Doom* (1895) or that more commonly read tale of gothic horror, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), these stories were about something evil that threatens the world but is stopped, Perils-of-Pauline fashion, in the nick of time. Unfortunately, most of these stories have been long out of print and generally unavailable, but both Paul

Brians, in *Nuclear Holocausts: Atomic War in Fiction, 1895–1984* (1987), and David Dowling, in *Fictions of Nuclear Disaster* (1987), provide extensive lists of titles and plot summaries and from these something may be gleaned.

The first thing that can be gleaned is that something was going on in the collective European/Anglo-American mind at the end of the century such that certain scientific discoveries would be barely off the presses before someone was busy figuring out we could obliterate ourselves with them. The cause of this phenomenon is uncertain. Wagar credits it to cultural, political, and economic changes too rapid to be easily assimilated. It is these kinds of changes that cause atomic war in Wells's *The World Set Free*. Essentially, technological advances outpace humankind's ability to deal with them, and the world blows up. Wells's story, however, is fairly optimistic. Atomic catastrophe does not wipe out civilization, though it does damage it considerably. It forces humankind to institute such reforms as a one-world government and a planned economy to do away with the petty nationalism and chaotic free enterprise system that caused the war. Once the debris has been cleared, everyone settles down to enjoy a utopian society where people, freed of the constraints and hardships of an industrial society, can pursue truth, beauty, and self-expression. Most such stories, however, are sensationalist and escapist trash, interesting not for their intrinsic qualities but for their status as symptomatic of something which could not be easily identified.

By the end of 1914, however, that free-floating intangible had acquired tangible substance in the form of World War I. For those of us who know that war only in retrospect, it is difficult to imagine how people could have greeted its advent with jubilation. But a general restlessness, particularly among intellectuals, artists, and the young, had taken hold. Although Wagar's interpretation focuses on the anxiety caused by too rapid change, it is also possible that the restlessness was simply a product of boredom stemming from a materialism grown too comfortable, as posited by Roland Stromberg in *Redemption by War*:

People who are separated from the common herd by an unusual sensitivity and (a certain sort of) intelligence . . . cannot long endure to

stay inside a society which appears to them unspeakably crude, boring, stupid and silly. . . . The feeling that modern life is ignoble oppressed European (and American) "Sensitives," from the mid-nineteenth century on, in mounting intensity. It grows apace as we pass from Stendahl and Balzac . . . to Flaubert and Baudelaire, pioneers of the absolutely disgusted. . . . If the "unhappy consciousness" was a familiar Romantic phenomenon, it meant nothing like that total abhorrence of "a hideous society" which drove Huyman's *Des Esseintes* . . . to cut all his ties with it . . . or Mallarme to write incomprehensible poetry the better to infuriate the "vile bourgeoisie." [16-17]

Whether motivated by boredom or anxiety, support for the war was, at least at first, so widespread that even English Quakers greeted it with enthusiasm (Stromberg 3). No matter the horror the war became, at its onset it seemed the dawn of a new and wonderful age, the final Apocalypse which would sweep away all that was disgusting and dull or unsettling and frightening about Western civilization.

Often, this strange enthusiasm is attributed to simple naivete—Europe had been at peace for a hundred years; the United States for fifty—but such an interpretation fails to take into account the considerable unrest of the century. Periodic bloody revolutions, chronic colonial wars, burgeoning nationalism and the shifting of borders in Europe, labor violence, ethnic clashes, and a restless move west punctuated by range and Indian wars in the United States provide the counterpoint to a surface tranquility. But people had been given their violence in, for the most part, relatively small doses. Distant wars were easy to romanticize, especially when the dominant ideology and the dominant economic system disintegrated both tradition and continuity and left people singularly uninterested, particularly in the United States.⁴ Capitalism and liberalism, observes Garry Wills in *Confessions of a Conservative*, are inherently destabilizing:

Capitalism is of its nature expansive, risk taking, wanting new markets and materials and products. It has wrought more change in the modern world—often senseless change—than any revolutionary force. It

⁴See R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam* (1955) and Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1966).

overturns and runs on. It has of itself no sense of tradition. It tears down old to keep building new in a perpetual gamble on tomorrow. [212]

Perhaps capitalism itself provided the ground for a seemingly mad desire for apocalypse, for capitalism is itself in its own way apocalyptic.

The horrors of that war produced at its conclusion two distinct and overlapping reactions: a deflection of prewar idealism into such mass political movements as socialism and fascism, both religious in their intensity, and a general revulsion against the whole bloody affair. Both postwar Europe and postwar America were characterized by a pervading sense that nothing was quite the same or ever would be again; a growing and uneasy feeling that the world was, in essence, absurd. In speculative and science fiction, this feeling found expression in a large number of stories vying to outdo each other in their depiction of fantastic weapons and devastating wars. Most of these, given the descriptions of them by both Dowling and Briens, seem not to have been very good but a few are worth noting including some by major writers such as Upton Sinclair—*The Millenium* (1924)—or Karel Capek—*The Absolute at Large* (1922).

The majority of these stories (published before and just after World War I) could be categorized as either “rescued in the nick of time” or cautionary “muscular disarmament.” An even greater number of “atomic” stories, as if caught in some positivist time warp, touted the potential miracles of atomic energy. Two novels, however, point to a new development that would, by the late 1940s, become the dominant mode: Sinclair’s *The Millenium* (1924) and Capek’s *The Absolute at Large* (1922). In these novels we are neither rescued nor given a way out through defense via preparation (a foreshadowing of our current policy of Mutually Assured Destruction) or disarmament. We are simply destroyed. And in sharp contrast to Wells’s *The World Set Free*, what is left of civilization after the disaster—eleven people in Sinclair’s novel, thirteen in Capek’s—is distinctly, and satirically, dystopian.

Interest in nuclear war stories surged during the late 1930s and probably would have continued during the 1940s if wartime

censorship had not intervened.⁵ After the dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan in August of 1945 and the easing of war time censorship, appeared most of the titles regarded as classics of nuclear holocaust literature: John Hersey's *Hiroshima* (1946), Aldous Huxley's *Ape and Essence* (1948), George Orwell's *1984* (1949), Philip Wylie's *Tomorrow!* (1954), Neville Shute's *On the Beach* (1957), Pat Frank's *Alas, Babylon!* (1959), and Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959). While nuclear holocaust stories never accounted for more than a small share of even the science fiction market, they were, at this point, moving into both the middlebrow mainstream and the high culture canonical. This trend would continue in the 1960s with Alfred Coppel's *Dark December* (1960), Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler's *Fail-Safe* (1962's best seller), Edgar Pangborn's *Davy* (1964), Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), Angela Carter's *Heroes and Villains* (1969), Doris Lessing's *The Four Gated City* (1969) and in the seventies and eighties with Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1976), Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (1980), Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), and Tim O'Brien's *The Nuclear Age* (1987). As the titles suggest, the form has been growing more varied, more experimental, and less stereotyped in plot structure. Some of these books even do without a nuclear war, holding it in abeyance as an inevitable future event—*Gravity's Rainbow*; *The Public Burning*—and preferring to examine the underlying psychic causes of nuclear war, or—*The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Nuclear Age*—focusing on the possible effects of Cold War tensions and nuclear threat. But the vast majority of nuclear stories, basically escapist pulp of varying quality, stuck with the older forms: sensationalist depictions of nuclear devastation dominating in the 1950s and 1960s; right wing survivalist fiction dominating in the 1970s.

Whether pulp or literary, the vast majority of this fiction is pessimistic. Indeed it would be difficult, in the aftermath of World War II, to imagine how it could be otherwise. Fiction af-

⁵Some things were published; Robert Heinlein's "Solution Unsatisfactory" (1941) and Robert More Williams' "The Incredible Slingshot Bombs" (1942), for example, appeared in *Amazing Stories*.

ter World War II—Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* (1961), Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), or even the more conventional *From Here to Eternity* (1951) by James Jones—made a radical shift from depicting war in heroic terms to showing it as absurd and grimly ugly, its participants victimized by the stupidity of their own army even more than by war itself. By contrast, even in the most vehemently anti-war novels coming out of World War I, one can detect an undercurrent of nostalgia for a lost innocence and a botched heroism that intensifies the bitterness of these works. In the postwar novels of World War II, there is not even that. While part of this can be accounted for by the sheer fact of the unintelligible Korean Conflict (the 1959 film, "Pork Chop Hill," is illuminating in this regard), much of it can be attributed to the World War II and the dawn of the nuclear age.

Nuclear anxiety entered our consciousness full force. From silly movies about giant ants to Mailer's "The White Negro" and the poetry of Allen Ginsburg, the Bomb hulked like an impending migraine.⁶ Most of the fiction directly about the Bomb, playing off and expressing this tension, was designed to scare people and, as such, entered the public dialogue. This dialogue divided between those who advocated avoiding Armageddon by getting rid of the bombs and those who believed that building even more would be, given the presumed ambitions of the other side, the sensible thing. The fiction, generally, divided the same ways, with some stories, covertly or overtly, pushing for a "first strike" to do in the Russians before they did in us. But even the most optimistic of these stories, Wylie's *Tomorrow!* which argues for salvation through preparation, is so horrific that capitulation seems, in spite of its author's intentions, a good idea.

Herein lies the dilemma. While nuclear holocaust stories can describe the problem, they don't tell us anything we don't already know. All of us, left, right, and center, are well aware that if you drop something that blows up, it will make an awful mess. As Gwynne Dyer observes, media attention on the familiar horrors of nuclear war has, in fact, only served to "induce numb

⁶For further discussion of the effect of the Atomic Age on canonical literature, see Parkinson and Sears and Lord.

indifference in the mass of the population" (200). The end result is to paralyze us with the thought that we are all going to die and that there is nothing we can do—*On the Beach*—or to reinforce the feeling that even nuclear obliteration won't stop us, once we've figured out how, from doing it again—*A Canticle for Leibowitz*, *Riddley Walker*. Some writers analyze the problem in terms so mythic—*Gravity's Rainbow*, *The Public Burning*—as to be useless. Others, notably those who write survivalist fiction, are motivated by a spite so apparent that one wonders if perhaps D.H. Lawrence were not correct in his opinion that those obsessed with apocalypse desire it because it would give them the opportunity to kill off all the people they don't like even though it would take them along as well. And, although these stories have served as propaganda for all sides, they have proved remarkably inept at changing anyone's mind. Not surprisingly, the telecast of *The Day After*, in part a project of sorts of the Nuclear Freeze Movement, resulted not in the hoped for enlightenment but in the further retrenchment of each side in its own previous position.⁷

Then what, other than a prickly sort of entertainment, are these stories good for? Serious attempts to deal with the atomic bomb show a marked tendency, in the 1950s and 1960s, to read the problem in psycho-sexual terms. Paul Goodman, in explaining why we project repressed anger caused by the tension of frustrated desire, sees

The desire for final satisfaction, for orgasm . . . as the wish for total self-destruction. It is inevitable, then, that there should be a public dream of universal disaster, with vast explosions, fires, and electrical shocks; and people pool their efforts to bring this apocalypse to an actuality. [209]

And Allen Ginsberg:

America gone mad with materialism, a police-state America, a sexless and soulless America prepared to battle the world in defense of a false image of its authority. [26–27]

⁷Gallup polls done in 1983 and 1984 indicate that American public opinion regarding a verifiable nuclear freeze had not changed to any degree worth measuring. In 1983, 77% were for it and in 1984, the figure was 78%. Only 24%, however, favored a unilateral Freeze. The Reagan administration responded by increasing funding for both the military and SDI. After the 1984 election, the nuclear freeze movement simply dropped from sight.

Norman Mailer, in "The White Negro," posits the sexual rebel, the hipster, as the only properly human response to "the suppressed knowledge . . . that we might still be doomed to die as a cipher in some vast statistical operation . . . a death by *deus ex machina* in a gas chamber or a radioactive city" (338). Norman O. Brown, tracing the connections between capitalism and desexualization in his psychoanalytic history, *Life Against Death*, observed that "it also begins to be apparent that mankind, unconscious of its real desires and therefore unable to obtain satisfaction . . . is hostile to life and ready to destroy itself" (x).

The trouble with a psycho-sexual approach is that, in terms of effective political action, it stops it. The tendency towards violence is built into our chromosomes or our culture in an ever recurring regeneration through violence, a never-ending cycle arising from the frontier experience. We become prisoners of our own history. Or, worse, we become prisoners of something called the human condition:

The fateful question . . . seems . . . to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction. . . . Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent . . . they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man. They know this, and hence comes a large part of their current unrest, their unhappiness and their mood of anxiety. And now it is to be expected that the other of the two 'Heavenly Powers,' eternal Eros, will make an effort to assert himself in the struggle with his equally immortal adversary. But who can foresee with what success and with what result? [92]

Thus wrote Freud on the eve of the Fascist takeover in Europe. And thus stand we, sixty years later, trying to deal with approximately the same problem in approximately the same terms, the systemic instabilities—economic, political, and psychic—of the nineteenth century apparently still with us.

For those of us who write and teach literature and criticism, dealing with that problem is exacerbated by the way most of us have been educated. Critical methodologies have been overwhelmingly text-oriented and formalistic; even deconstructionism turns the whole world into a fragmented logocentric text. Literary texts exist without context—as structures generating other structures, as well-wrought urns to be admired for their

formal elegance and perfection, as high culture status symbols (Alan Bloom), or as symptomatic of an overdetermined state of affairs, a sickness without cure. Even methodologies which seek to privilege the reader over the text or to see the text and reader as interactive—phenomenology, hermeneutics, reader response, or various psychoanalytic approaches—simply widen the hermetic circle without breaking or displacing it. And most historicist approaches have been little more than literary history. We could, if we wish to teach nuclear holocaust texts, simply choose the best of them (and who would argue that *A Canticle for Liebowitz* is a fifth-rate book?) and teach them as we would teach any work of quality on the assumption that simply teaching these works will refine thought and feeling. But, as Richard Ohmann has pointed out:

The Arnoldians among us . . . err by placing faith in the critical force of history, art, literature, and philosophy, apart from the institutions within which they are mediated at a particular historical moment. Our own profession . . . has pretty successfully abstracted it from any but literary history, muted its social resonance and given it a primary reference point in the individual consciousness, striven to anchor it in supposedly timeless values and ideas of human nature, and lately surrounded it with specialist techniques of interpretation and quarrels about theory . . . quarrels that sometimes enlighten and sometimes do little more than advance careers and stake out territories. [9]

There is no automatic connection between exposure to an idea and a belief in that idea; no guarantee that belief will lead to action, effective or otherwise. If we wish to use nuclear texts to increase awareness of impending doom in order to avoid that doom, falling back on familiar methods will not do, because we must assume that our students have never heard of the Bomb, at best a naive assumption. We need, instead, to reexamine how and why we teach what we choose to teach. We need to believe, as Ohmann puts it, that "literature doesn't happen in an autonomous realm of culture, but responds and participates in the whole of history." Literature is, finally about *something*, something other than itself. We need to reexamine what canonized texts might really have been saying, historically, what factors cause them to express certain things in the ways that they do. Then, if we are serious about using nuclear texts as something

other than quirky symptoms of atomic anxiety or as agit-prop in the form of an atomic bogeyman, we need to ground these texts in something other than the context of our own fears.

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