

Doomsday

Седми печат

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The Seventh Seal

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**APOCALYPTIC NARRATIVES
IN ANGLO-AMERICAN THEATRE
FROM BERKOFF'S *GREEK* TO
RIDLEY'S *ECLIPSE***

**АПОКАЛИПТИЧНИ НАРАТИВИ У
АНГЛО-АМЕРИЧКОМ ПОЗОРИШТУ
ОД БЕРКОФОВЕ ДРАМЕ *ГРЧКИ* ДО
РИДЛИЈЕВЕ *ЕКЛИПСЕ***

The paper considers several texts (Berkoff's *Greek*, Bond's trilogy, *The War Plays*, Rosenthal's *L.O.W. in Gaia*, Kushner's *Angels in America*, Butterworth's *The Night Heron*, Ridley's *Mercury Fur* and *Eclipse*, Washburn's *Mr. Burns*, and Churchill's *Escaped Alone*), written for Anglo-American theatre between 1980 and 2020 to analyse how the rhetoric of decadence and renovation changes with the turn of the millennium.

Key words: drama, theatre, narrative, apocalypse, end, crisis, renewal, apocalyptic imagination, apocalyptic discourse

Рад се бави анализом позоришних текстова написаних између 1980. и 2020. године, како би се испитали облици апокалиптичне реторике (декаденција и долазак радикално нове будућности) у англо-америчком позоришту на прелазу два миленијума.

Кључне речи: драма, позориште, апокалипса, крај, криза, обнова, апокалиптична имагинација, апокалиптични дискурс

Life. In its humdrum sense is worth avoiding.
 It's the factory for father, and the kitchen for
 mother. It's arguments at the dinner table.
 Missing children on the news. And through
 it all, a sense that things are slowly falling
 apart. Is it better to choose another record, to
 flip the lid on the pills and wait for something
 to happen? Is it better to turn out the lights,
 climb under the covers, until sleep invites you
 to a world you've always wanted? Is it better
 than the one that's in front of us?

England is Mine (2017)

Introduction

In Northrop Frye's tightly woven contemplation of fictional modes, literary symbolism, mythical imagery, seasonal stories, and generic distinctions in literature, the apocalyptic (divine) world reigns supreme: it is one of two metaphorical organisations of myth, conceived from an infinite, total creative act – the apocalypse. In contrast to its counterpart, the undesirable demonic world, which abounds with images of desert, rock, wasteland, malignant fire, labyrinths, and confusion, the apocalyptic world is a product of the imaginative limit of desire that is expressed in forms such as the garden, the sheepfold or flock, and the city. All metaphorically identified with Christ, these apocalyptic images are created by human desire, which is all-encompassing in its tendency to transcend the forms on the surface of the earth. The apocalyptic world of imagery is eternally unchanging and never adapted to plausibility. Like its counterpart, the demonic world, it is a 'source' for other intermediate structures of imagery, found in romantic, high mimetic, and low mimetic modes that displace myth in a human direction, as much as it is itself derived from the 'grammar of apocalyptic imagery' in our tradition – the Apocalypse of John (Frye 1990: 141). Closely related to the conception of the apocalypse as a creative act is yet another form of apocalypse, identified as the last phase of the dialectical progression of the Bible's content¹, which

1 'The content of the Bible is traditionally described as "revelation", and there seems to be a sequence or dialectical progression in this revelation, as the Christian Bible proceeds from the beginning to the end of its story. I see a sequence of seven main phases: creation,

enables Frye to connect the literary world with its reader. Since each phase represents a wider perspective of the previous one, ending with the apocalypse, Frye (1982: 136) equates the vision of the apocalypse with the total meaning of the Bible. This panoramic view provides ‘the destruction of the order of nature’, which symbolises ‘the destruction of the way of seeing that order that keeps man confined to the world of time and history as we know them’ (136). Frye indicates that the Bible with its open end, expressed in the call to the ‘observer’ to bear witness and focus not only on the process of renewal but also on the images that provide eternal life, truth, and healing, gives rise to a second apocalypse. This second apocalypse, occurring in the mind of the ‘observer’, is a new beginning when, in a single leap of imagination, habitual dualities such as ‘creator-creature, divine-human’ (137) cease to exist.

Pursuing the same point as Frye, that the Bible is a narrative that dialectically progresses from the beginning to the end, from creation to apocalypse, Frank Kermode posits that this definitive myth is a precedent of sense-making. Heavenly dénouement, with its full stop, brings the ‘radical instance’ of fictions about the world (Kermode 2000: 6) to closure; the end is, therefore, considered an integrating principle that gives wholeness to the structure and allows us to understand all that came before. Specifically, the end confers an aura of meaning to the middle, which would otherwise remain scattered and chaotic. The sense of an ending from the title of Kermode’s book represents an apocalyptic mode of thinking that relies on the power of resolution, which answers the basic human need for order and comfort (44). Through other stories that adopt this mode of thinking, individuals acquire and apply this model to understand their position in the midst.

Equally important for the how and why we imagine the end, and complementary to the apocalypse as the patterned end, is another perspective Kermode adopts by considering the apocalypse as a source of patterns that, once derived from naïve apocalypticism (naïve reactions to the End), have shown their tendency to be projected onto the present. Kermode (2000: 11, 93) identifies terror, decadence, renovation, and clerkly scepticism² as elements of the apocalyptic paradigm, and we are, he adds, consistently interested in decadence and renovation (99). The interdependence between these two

revolution or exodus (Israel in Egypt), law, wisdom, prophecy, gospel, and apocalypse.’ (Frye 1982: 106)

2 ‘A recognition that arithmetical predictions of the End are bound to be disconfirmed.’ (Kermode 2000: 10)

contrasted arenas has often been mentioned in times of crisis to remind us that a threat can potentially generate a change. We may unconsciously sense this potential or expectation regarding any (imagined) outcome – what Paul Ricoeur calls ‘the pole of attraction of the whole process’ (2016: 239) – as an end. Since the End ‘can only do by figures predictive of that part of it which has not been historically revealed’ (7), it lost its immanence, and we are left with the sense of living in a perpetual crisis. The present is thus perceived as a ‘time-between’ – between one’s moment and one’s death (25), a uniquely terrible moment, a transitional stage, and even a turning point. We no longer speak of the End (a common End), but the ends – death, crisis, and epoch (35). Whether the crisis is actual or perceived, it is one of the ways of connecting literary forms and human endeavours towards sense-making (93–94). Fictions that ‘move through time to an end’, and they always do³, allow us to dwell in the apocalypse, which is related to our need to invest in coherent patterns. Although disconfirmed, the apocalypse is never discredited (8); it is long-lived but subject to constant change. Nevertheless, it can easily be turned into a myth, a stereotypical pattern, and subdued by stereotypical reception unless there is a necessity for a ‘continuous preoccupation with the changing fiction’ (4). It is the knowledge of the fictive (124) that keeps the changing history of the apocalypse alive.

Jacques Derrida’s work, however, demonstrates resistance to apocalyptic structures, understood in terms of beginning-as-origin to end trajectory (Heffernan 2008: 12-13). This resistance forms part of his critical engagement with the structures of literary and philosophical arguments that rely on the ‘metaphysics of presence’, as shown by his deconstructive reading of Kant’s pamphlet, ‘On a Newly Arisen Superior Tone in Philosophy’. By speaking ‘of/ in an apocalyptic tone’, Derrida suggests what he later confirms as his aim: ‘to mime in citation but also to transform into a genre, and then parody, deport, deform the well-known title’ (1984: 5). When thus articulated, the aim not only establishes a relationship with Kant’s indictment of all those who pervert the voice of reason with ‘poetico-metaphorical overabundance’ (12) and thus threaten the end of philosophy; it also reflects the approach, commonly associated with Derrida, in terms of what it was usually criticised for. Derrida turns the characterisation of this approach into a constructive event of dislocating and (re)writing philosophical discourse, as clarified here:

³ ‘The novel will end; a full close may be avoided, but there will be a close: a fake full stop, an “exhaustion of aspects”’ (Kermode 2000: 145).

I shall take out some paradigmatic traits in Kant's indictment ... for I am perhaps, in repeating what he does, going to come round to doing the contrary – or preferably something else.' (Derrida 1984: 8)

As Samuel Weber rightly observes, Derrida's writing generally never ceases to 'demonstrate and explore ... its own theatrical quality' (2004: 14), consistently acquiring a 'complicated relationship to its "pretext" that involves neither reproducing it nor creating it. His writing manifests an operation that 'exposes the interval "between" texts and thus allows something else to "enter" the stage or scene' (15). By mixing various voices and genres, Derrida produces an apocalyptic response to Kant's pamphlet that discloses the 'structure of every scene of writing' (Derrida 1984: 27). Simply taking Kant's norm of philosophical discourse and inspecting it from within enables Derrida to expose what Kant's writing conceals. In the process, Derrida is specifically interested in the contract that Kant offers his opponents, which demands exclusion, namely that of the body (of Isis) in favour of the law, the sensible voice. This solution as part of Kant's demystification of the superior tone is merely a disguised desire for light, the light of the logos; it seeks to restore familiar tonality – the order of meaning – and the unity of destination (83-84).

Apocalyptic discourse, in Derrida's terms, is an invention that, as we learn from 'Psyche: Invention of the Other', 'always presupposes some illegality' and 'inserts a disorder into the peaceful ordering of things' (2007: 1). The structure of John's Apocalypse with its tonal disorder and its plurality of voices that undermine the determinable sender and receiver is, as Derrida proposes, a 'transcendental condition of all discourse' (1984: 27). As such, it presents both an alternative to the tone of authority that reduces plurality beyond recognition and a tool for dismantling the legacy of Kant's apocalyptic tone and its 'ruses, traps, trickeries, seductions' (27). Above all, apocalyptic writing causes us to respond to the trace that comes from some other or to the call of the other that has no decidable origin nor assured destination (Derrida 2007: 47). The end, or truth and intelligibility, is never fully and immediately present to us as Kant's tone suggests.

Teresa Heffernan describes the 20th-century writings that reflect, and even amplify, the sense that the power of the 'meaningful' end has been undermined by the holocausts⁴ as post-apocalyptic. The term denotes a shift towards a sense of living after the apocalypse – after the faith in revelation and

4 Heffernan (2008: 8) refers to the events from the middle of the 20th century, the Nazi death camps, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, fascism, and the Soviet gulag, while Fuchs (1999: 7) adds

renovation, after the 'faith in a radically new world' (7). The post-apocalyptic world of the text is riddled with catastrophes that are not considered as catalysts; the authors of such narratives, Heffernan emphasises, abandon all hope for a resolution and offer no vision of the regenerated – or any alternative – world. Thus, when she adds, 'the end is instead senseless' (5), this means without a sense of the end that used to secure order and purpose. As with other 'post' positions, post-apocalyptic narratives suggest a complex relationship with apocalyptic fictions in the traditional sense: they are dependent on a sense of an ending to claim and maintain a position that is not situated in the end.

However, the conclusion of Heffernan's study, which states that the turn of the century saw a major comeback of apocalyptic scenarios with a sense of order and catastrophic cleansing (150), speaks to the power of the apocalypse to recreate and transform itself. This power may be built in the 'model': the writer of Revelation returns to Genesis and gradually dismantles it only to rebuild it. Although this renewal could represent the exhaustion of aspects, the text modifies a linear concept of reading by leaving a trace to its 'pretexts'. Edward Said's work, *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, permits us to also consider the end-time narrative as a beginning or an activity that 'implies return and repetition' (Said 1975: xiii). Whether understood as an action, 'a frame of mind, a kind of work, an attitude, a consciousness' (xi), beginning is a process that produces difference by relying on and rethinking, refining, magnifying, or even overturning and destroying the familiar. This interplay between the customary and the new leads Said to describe literature as an 'eccentric order of repetition' (12), where 'eccentric' indicates a whole field of possible differences and idiosyncrasies that form the novelty, while 'repetition' suggests an ongoing conversation with a series of previous repetitions, with archives and remainders. Still, it is an order, but one that *avoids* a duality, already subverted by Roland Barthes, between the original and the derivative. The narrative concerning the end that has an ending is not an expression of spontaneous originality that imposes a limit (finality, closure, ultimate meaning) but rather, to borrow Barthes' words, a gesture of inscription by which a 'variety of writings ... blend and clash' (1977: 146).

other 'unimaginable devastations' such as the Great War, the 'rape' of Nanking, Cambodia, East Timor, Rwanda, and Yugoslavia.

Apocalyptic Narratives in Anglo-American Theatre from Berkoff's *Greek* (1980) to Ridley's *Eclipse* (2020)

From the mid-90s perspective, when Christopher Innes evaluates the drama of political crisis, it appears that British and North American playwrights have turned away from a 'rhetoric of apocalypse and utopia' (1996: 17). Identified as a call for a radical change in the existing social system, this rhetoric, typical for the political theatre across the 20th century, is either rejected or so insubstantial that Innes claims that the plays of the first half of the decade are non-political (24). The shift can be partly attributed, in his opinion, to the collapse of the communist system that shattered the socialist ideals by exposing the failure of its grand project of utopia.

Howard Barker's theoretical writings on the theatre from the end of the 1980s emphasise that the task of theatre is not to disseminate truth – or to secure unanimity – but to provide versions (1989: 44) and through these to 'return the individual to himself' (20) and the 'moral argument to the audience itself' (52). Kaleidoscopic and fractured forms are more suitable for a fractured age, and plays that adopt such forms are 'hard to hold' and 'without a message', but not 'without meaning' (36). His 'theatre of catastrophe', which refuses to fix the meaning, proves influential for the coming generations of writers and theatre makers who opt for more ambiguous and fluid narratives and dialogical modes. This tendency to produce a more engaged sense of living through theatre by trying to break the connection between the ultimate message and the meaning is rarely perceived as a socially engaged theatrical mode. It may appear, at least superficially, as some critics claim, that playwrights evade dealing with specific issues and providing careful analyses.

A storm of new British and American in-*yer-face* voices, which marked the last decade of the 20th-century theatre, react to a fractured world by emphasising its chaos. These playwrights reach for the apocalyptic 'landscapes' of contemporary life – its unimaginable, unpleasant, and raw aspects – to question what it means to be normal, human, natural, and real (Sierz 2001: 5). According to Aleks Sierz, the theatre that fights ennui, detachment, and disregard for the world we live in possesses a political agenda: 'it asks profound questions about social mores and moral norms' (9).

In Dan Rebellato's view (2017), the 21st-century plays continue the preoccupation with violence, typical of in-*yer-face* sensibility, and appear to evolve into its heightened version, not by making graphic representations of violence more explicit, but by reducing them in favour of a 'hypertrophy

of violent imaginative representation'. Rebellato refers to this escalation of violence on the imaginary level, coupled with a 'non-realist mode', as an apocalyptic mode recently adopted in theatre. Although it may be difficult to grasp an overarching critique beneath this burst of violence elevated to an impossible, incomprehensible, chaotic, fragmented, and even disconnected world, Rebellato, taking Theodor Adorno as his guide, goes on to argue that this tone reflects the authors' tendency to grapple with the totalising absorption of realism under neoliberal capitalism. The apocalyptic tone, in his view, is a form of dismantling this apparent totality, a way through, and perhaps out from, a superimposed system, an antidote to 'one single system of value for everything'. Not only does Rebellato thus provide a counter-argument to presumed opinions that such theatre is nihilistic and apolitical; he takes a step further by claiming that this is a new form of revolutionary theatre.

For Aleks Sierz, a playwright's flight of imagination is also a higher *modus operandi*:

theatre usually reflects the economic, social and political life of the country, but sometimes it does much more: it creates different realities; it explores imaginative worlds; it ascends to heaven or stumbles into hell. (Sierz 2011: 195)

The different realities Sierz mentions here are one of many themes he explores in his book dedicated to the British theatre of the 2000s. These realities – inner spaces or 'strange undiscovered territories of our own troubled heads' (David Jay as cited in Sierz 2011: 195), dystopian visions, spooky coincidences, parallel worlds, medium messages, imagined communities – are not only different; they are rival realities that sometimes overlap and sometimes compete but consistently transcend the ordinary bounds of the mind. Metaphor that 'floats a rival reality' (James Wood, cited in Sierz 2011: 195) is a tool the playwrights employ to transform society. Playwrights often use the metaphor of a plague, a generic label, as Girard explains, 'for a variety of ills that affect the community as a whole and threaten or seem to threaten the very existence of social life' (1974: 834), such as violence, xenophobia, war, genocide, biological war, natural, environmental, economic, and political disasters, nuclear waste, and nuclear catastrophes.

Steven Berkoff's play, *Greek* (1980), is a cockney appropriation – variation, improvisation, reworking, and re-evaluation – of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*.

Greek keeps the motifs of its pretexts – the plague, incest, and prophecy – but it is motivated by a different agenda – political, cultural, and economic circumstances in Britain during the 1970s and 1980s. Written one year into Margaret Thatcher’s premiership, the play transposes the Sophoclean setting into ‘the unimaginable wastelands of Tufnell Park – a land more fantasized than real, being an amalgam of the deadening war zones that some areas of London had become’ (Berkoff 1989: 141). Berkoff’s Eddy leaves ‘this cesspit, ... a scum-hole dense with the drabs who prop up corner pubs’ (145) and his adoptive parents’ cruddy environment – the stink and poverty, his Dad’s ‘work-raped face’ (147), neo-Nazi and racist language, and his Mum’s spotty apron, epitomising her enslavement in the kitchen (150). The society Eddy is about to face alone is ridden with verbal and physical violence, football hooliganism, bloodshed, political strife, bribery, garbage, and rats. The Britain of the time, as Berkoff sees it, is a decaying island possessed by an emotional plague, the ‘roar of the beast ... of frustration and anger’ (141). The scene of the ‘British plague’ (157) is not merely recounted but chorally and physically choreographed: Eddy and his family members adopt fragments of other voices and environments; they mime artefacts, exaggerate movements, and add sounds and words to the mime. The continuum of the narrative is broken, reconnected, and complemented by extraneous noise to such an extent that it becomes almost impossible to define Eddy’s vantage.

The noise structures reflect a society poisoned with hatred, drowned in aggression (156), trapped in inertia, ‘sloth and stale achievement’ (165), against all of which Eddy is determined to fight by reaffirming his faith in love, intoxication, and sexual satiety. Finally, Eddy, still convinced that his 10-year love, although incestuous, for a woman will counteract all the hatred and violence around them, rejects the ‘Greek style’ and reveals his intention of enjoying the safety and pleasure of his mother’s body. Eddy is a self-made man and, due to his ‘non-fatalistic disposition’ (142), Berkoff would rather have him create his own end: ‘What a foul thing I have done, ... tear them out Eddy, rip them out Bollocks to all that’ (183). As opposed to the end of *Oedipus Rex*, which leaves us to imagine the community restored to health once Oedipus, self-blinded, banishes himself from it, *Greek* is resolved by neither death or punishment nor cure. Berkoff’s play flouts the tragic rhythm of action of its pretext and, instead of the end that imparts a perception of supreme value both for the hero and community, proposes a different one that opens the play to provocative questions concerning the relationship between decadence and renewal.

Berkoff's *Greek* and Edward Bond's trilogy, *The War Plays* (1985), both have the ideological framework of critical realism that was dominant up to the 1990s (Tomlin 2013: xxi). Both plays share a utopian motive in the following sense: 'the worse the system can be shown as, the more urgent the need for change, as well as the more radical it would have to be' (Innes 1996: 19). Part one of Bond's trilogy is an account of a monster denied the possibility of being welcomed into this world: the spasm of his mother's womb, caused by the whistle of rockets that destroyed the world, crushed the child and threw him into the furnace of her burning house (2006: 12). Bond uses a potential nuclear attack, as Innes observes, to 'gain credence for his attack on capitalism' (1996: 22). Despite its introduction, which captures the world being devoured by fire, the scenes *Monster* recounts concerning its un-lived life unfold in recognisable realistic settings. The violence and inhumanity of capitalism represent a common thread that links different episodes from *Monster's* 'life': they voice Bond's continuing preoccupation with poisonous pedagogic strategies, power struggles, alienation, aggression, repressive regimes of institutions of morality and order, political and economic control, discipline, and exploitative social organisations. 'No one can willingly give up the name of human', says the *Monster* at the beginning of the final scene. Any movement towards the regeneration of society depends on the 'need to define rightly what it is to be human' (Bond 2006: 39).

The meaning of being human is severely tested in a post-nuclear holocaust setting of the second part and then wrapped up in the third part, which integrates the pre- and post-apocalyptic circumstances. Among the dusty and irradiated landscape, a group of survivors, living off tinned food, hope to not only rebuild humanity but create more desirable social conditions: this hell is the only possible foundation for paradise (46). Although aware that each new individual increases their chances of procreation, they associate the loner they stumble upon with an unknown disease and turn against him. All their fears of extinction, exacerbated by cycles of deprivation and violence, are now projected onto a single Other: 'the entire responsibility for crisis', as Girard notes, 'is collectively transferred upon the scapegoat' (Girard 1974: 843). The closely-knit group of survivors devise a strategy to confront the threat and subsequently entitle themselves to carry out the crime committed by the bombers to eliminate the disruptive factor.

The end of the play delineates a new community emerging at the edges of the wilderness, littered by the dead and dying. Although the 'skyline

changes every day' (158) due to the efforts of the few, the didacticism of the end suggests that the future depends on a continual interplay of domination, destruction, and renewal: 'The more power a society has, the more it changes – and the more people change / That brings things to a crisis / New power – new people ... / So you change the owners – or society blows itself up' (158).

The threat of nuclear annihilation, ecological crisis, obscene experimentation, military waste, and radioactive materials are crucial issues that inform the work of an American performance artist, Rachel Rosenthal. Her chronicle and meditation on a three-week vacation in the Mojave Desert are woven into a performance, *L.O.W in Gaia* (1986), through a complex strategic language, a combination of texts, voices, photography, chants, repetitions, dances, abstracted motions, and settings. The relationship between a lifetime and the time of the earth Rosenthal imagines is conveyed through the mixture of several voices, sound effects, and projected images. Apart from articulating her sentiments and thoughtful considerations concerning the global environment, she provides a bleak vision of the future of humanity by personifying Gaia and playing the role of our descendant, an irradiated monster. Aged 60 at the time, Rosenthal identifies herself with a crone, an aspect of the Triple Goddess, which 'summons a millenarian vision of catastrophe' (Fuchs 1999: 33): 'sooner or later, all of you, my Earth children, come to me' (Rosenthal 1987: 83); 'the end of the world comes when I unlock his chains.... Tremble, for you push me hard' (90). Rosenthal is a *Loner on Wheels* (L.O.W.), an archivist of bones, garbage, and images of devastation, and a *Lover on Wheels* (L.O.W.), an activist filled with love for the exploited and tortured body of the earth, one who registers the Goddess's depths, the movement of her bowels (84) – her long-denied power. Rosenthal's performance 'creates a feminist apocalyptic landscape' (Fuchs 1999: 33) and thus rewrites the eschatological narrative from a woman-centred perspective.

'The wrath of God', as AIDS was referred to by Conservative columnist Pat Buchanan in May 1983, is a composite that allows Tony Kushner to examine and provide a cross-section of America on the threshold of a new millennium. Subtitled 'A Gay Fantasia on National Themes', *Angels in America* (Parts One and Two, 'Millennium Approaches' and 'Perestroika', were written and revised between 1988 and 1993) interlaces the past, present, and future, history, fiction, and daily reality of 'people who are lonely, people left alone, sit talking nonsense to the air, imagining ... beautiful systems dying, old fixed orders spiraling apart' (Kushner 2007: 22). After a series of painful

psychological, hallucinatory, and physical displacements whereby characters of different sexual, political, and religious orientations and social backgrounds intersect, break apart, and transform. Prior, Louis, Belize, and Hannah reassemble before the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park to uphold their faith in humankind, humanity, and 'more life' (280, 288). Each of them, during their journeys, confronts genuine plague, a form of conservative rhetoric and, by exposing its hypocrisies, bypasses the 'stamp of salvation and damnation which disperses all the complexity' (44) of life. Since these characters represent outcast gays, blacks, Jews, and Mormons, some scholars perceive the merging of all these complexities of life in the final scene as Kushner's aspiration towards a utopian closure (Omer-Sherman 2007: 24). However, the play's end that announces the beginning of the Great Work (280) suggests that the closure is never a single transformative event. Kushner not only postpones the grand renovation and healing to a point in the future that is not associated with 'the year two thousand' but 'the capital M Millennium' (2007: 279), when the fountain of Bethesda will flow again, but also makes it clear that conflict and struggle are an integral part of the recovery process.

When the British playwright Jez Butterworth reaches for 'a recurrent theatrical motif in English drama' (Innes 1996: 19) in a new-millennium play, it is not to evoke an idyllic setting. The garden in *The Night Heron* (2002) is not a place of pastoral innocence and luxury but a trap, a noose that tightens around Wattmore and Griffin as the play progresses. Readers and spectators gain only brief access to the garden, situated at Cambridge University, through fragmentary narratives provided mainly by Griffin. Wattmore and Griffin cared for the garden – once, they even made all the flower beds bloom at once (Butterworth 2013: 140) – before they were sacked owing to Wattmore's strange behaviour, which caused a scandal and entered the local newspapers. They were forced to settle in the Cambridgeshire marsh, where their 100-year-old cabin was, during a few freezing days in the New Year, constantly invaded by townspeople and newcomers, all in search of something: birds, outlaws, sinister games, reasons, and logic. However, it is 'not all doom and gloom' (134) for the two former gardeners: low, slow, reserved, and awkward Wattmore finds refuge in recording lines from the Bible for a newly established cult, The Holy Sons of the White Prince, while crafty, ambitious, and violence-prone Griffin aims to write a poem about the garden for a poetry competition, organised by Cambridge University, to win a prize worth £2,000. The play is organised around the soundscape, an audio space of Wattmore's

recorded renderings and Griffin's ideas about the garden poem, set against the landscape, a photocopied iconostasis depicting the Lord and the Saints at the final judgment, which dominates the cabin. Wattmore's and Griffin's insular narratives represent their fantasy of returning to the garden (of Eden). Their reintegration into the community is thwarted by townsfolk who warn Wattmore's and Griffin's friends to stay away from them (150) and by the unexpected appearance of Bolla Fogg. Characterised as a demon-like woman by Wattmore, Bolla, a jailbird and their potential lodger, imposes herself on this male-isolated environment and disturbs it. Supposedly a poetry expert, since she can recite Andrew Marvell's poem, 'The Garden', by heart, she is immediately recognised by Griffin as almost a 'divine' intervention that will lead him in fulfilling his aim: 'She knows poetry. *Thunder and lightning. The lights flash and fail. Complete darkness*' (143). As it is, both of them were partially right: she kidnaps an angel-like Cambridge student to write the poem for Griffin, an act that connects the dispersed and nebulous forces of the text. The closing scene gathers all the characters from the play around the cabin in the Fens: a few members of the community searching for Bolla, two birdwatchers chasing the previously located night heron, and Wattmore, Griffin, and Bolla seeking to escape from their respective offences. Wattmore takes the blame for the mysterious crimes – 'I'm a dirty grabber, me. I'm the Jack O'Lanterns. ... I'm the Will O'Wisp.' (177) – and sacrifices himself, much as Christ did for sinners. In the final moments, the cabin's inner landscape meets an apt soundscape to make a powerful audiovisual statement on the entire interplay of exclusion, intrusion, and inclusion. The play that begins with the recorded story of the Garden of Eden appears to make a full circle, since it ends with the taped voice telling the story of the blood of the Lamb defeating the Accuser (178) from Revelation, as Wattmore takes the rope into the back room and hangs himself. However, the change from darkness, which opens the play to light emerging across the marsh at the end, does not denote a manifestation of truth, knowledge, or insight. Like the night heron the two birdwatchers came to see, this manifestation is merely an inkling of a promise: 'We have not seen him, no. But one day, perhaps. Maybe one day we shall see him' (179). The Cambridgeshire fens are not the antithesis of the garden at the centre of the University but an area of contention between myths of ignorance and enlightenment, decadence and improvement.

The action of Phillip Ridley's *Mercury Fur* (2005) plays out between chaos caused by an unspecified disaster that happened in the recent past and

the imminent bombings that aim to restore order. A 19-year-old Elliot and his younger and butterfly-addled brother Darren are clearing the decks for a party, arranged by Spinx, a ruthless 23-year-old gang leader. A derelict flat in a dilapidated building in conflict-scarred London is to be transformed into a torture chamber where special guests can relive their traumas and fulfil their wildest fantasies by inflicting cruelty on Party Piece, a 10-year-old boy. The play is not only a commentary on prevalent child abuse, as Sierz explains (2011: 114), but also on the cyclical nature of violence and its practical 'necessities': violence is used as a form of protection from the world's wrathfulness – it is a parent's gesture of love, now a prehistoric one in Darren's words, which aimed to save a child from harm (Ridley 2012: 46); bombs are used to target innocent civilians, quell riots, and restore order (116); causing severe physical and mental pain is a relief to a traumatised soldier (101); nuclear weapons are available to keep the attackers at bay (76–77). Hallucinogenic butterflies are the main tool for blurring the boundaries between imaginative violence and violent reality. First brought on by a storm – a 'freak of nature' as the telly reported (62) – or by the buzzing planes – as Elliot witnessed – butterfly cocoons at first made those eating them feel immortal, 'like there's no tomorrow' (64). While they previously made people immune to the virus of cruelty, butterflies now mount a parallel reality where individuals hallucinate scenes of assassinations and massacres or even act out every suicidal thought an individual ever had. Ridley makes a powerful statement about the world, which sees no exit in telling and retelling the stories – 'now it's all part of the f*** myth of what f*** ... happened' (62). All the characters are constantly trying to remember something; it is easier for those younger than him, says Elliot, because 'they remember less of ... how it was' (68). *Mercury Fur* represents a fragile and damaged world, like that of the blind Duchess, in which it is difficult to distinguish reality from dream, catastrophe from renovation, and actuality from interpretation. The play ends on a note of suspense: as the sound of bombing becomes increasingly louder, so does Darren's plea for Elliot, as he aims a gun at Darren's head, to show love. The readers and spectators are left to reflect on what an act of love could mean in a world crippled by violence – is it a final call for emotional connection, support, and purging or an appeal for mercy killing before everything collapses?

The telling and retelling of stories as a mode that both constructs and reflects culture and, more importantly, provides forms of exit, release, and

even escape, is central to *Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play* (2012) by American playwright Anne Washburn. The author chose *The Simpsons* episode ‘Cape Feare’, a parody of the Scorsese remake of the original *Cape Fear* from 1962, as a basis for storytelling and was particularly interested in pushing that story forward past the apocalypse to see what may happen.⁵ In the first act, set after a nuclear-plant disaster in the near future, a group of men and women find refuge in piecing together the moments of ‘Cape Feare’ around the campfire. This collective recollection game foregrounds the precarious quality of memory, simultaneously preventing a sinister reality from having its full effect on the survivors. The second act, which occurs seven years after the first act, demonstrates how that same recollection game has evolved into a new survival mode: the lines from various episodes of *The Simpsons* have become a highly desired commodity. The same group of survivors, now forming a theatre company, depend on other people’s memory to perform excerpts from different episodes and earn their living. While the second act relies on their urge to create by exploiting the outsiders’ repositories of memory, the third act, set 75 years later, presents an elaborate assimilation of historical, archival, collective, and personal experiences they have shared. From an intimate setting of togetherness around the outdoor fire, the group moves to the stage, where they perform their operetta-like version of ‘Cape Feare’ before the audience. This version blends different conceptual orders and creative stages: the nuclear-plant failure is transformed into ‘an incident at the Springfield Nucyalur Power Tower’ (Washburn, 2017); the actors portray the members of the Simpson family who, as sole survivors, must confront the owner of the nuclear power plant, Mr Burns – a new villain replacing Sideshow Bob from ‘Cape Feare’, who represents Max Cady from both versions of *Cape Fear*; as they perform, the actors replicate, distort, and exaggerate their personal experiences, previous theatrical gestures, *The Simpsons*’ characters, theme songs, and settings and thus refashion the ‘original’ series into a completely unfamiliar rendition; finally, they make communicative steps towards the playgoers and use gestures to lead them in applause. The whole cycle of metatheatrical inscriptions ends with a slow electric dawn. As the backdrop curtain parts to reveal that all the artificial lights on the stage – strings of Christmas tree lights, candle sconces, table lamps, and old theatre lights – are powered by the character of Mr Burns running on the treadmill, the stage is plunged into darkness as he collapses

5 Interview with Anne Washburn on *Mr Burns*, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dR01Ez6kFZw>, accessed 25 April 2020.

from exhaustion. The entire story, like its pretexts, 'pivots on an extremely old fear: being powerless' (Washburn, Nataraj 2015). The failure of the power plant generates an alternative motive force that gradually outgrows its initial impetus to supply a wider community. Moreover, since the storytelling forces the story and its pretexts to move through times and circumstances, it raises them to a mythic level, demonstrating how myths are created.

Caryl Churchill's play, *Escaped Alone* (2016), may be described as a diorama illuminated both from without and within the time, place, and circumstances of the narrative. Walking down the street, Mrs Jarrett glimpses, through a fence door, three older women drinking tea in a sunlit garden. Her appearance intrudes into this charming piece of English scenery: she is 'that' woman who has been spying on Sally, Lena, and Vi. Invited by Sally, Mrs Jarrett joins in their gossip, a flow of seemingly unconnected lines, trying to keep pace, but simultaneously stepping from this lively and chaotic structure to soliloquise. Her lengthy, uninterrupted speeches that end seven of the play's eight scenes are the narratives of 'the escaped alone', which are apparently unnoticed or consciously ignored by the three women. Thus, she is the 'Mrs' from whom the other women try to distance themselves; she is inside the perimeter of the garden – the scene of the voices – and simultaneously outside that scene. Mrs Jarrett is an outcast, a peripheral participant and narrator – a modern-day Ishmael. The epigraph to the play, 'I only am escaped alone to tell thee', borrowed from both, as Churchill carefully notes, the 'Book of Job' and *Moby Dick*, refers to the message itself, an incommunicability that calls for its 'pretexts'. As Frye says, 'Moby Dick cannot remain in Melville's novel: he is absorbed into our imaginative experience of leviathans ... from the Old Testament onward' (1990: 100). Mrs Jarrett's soliloquies adopt the proportions of the leviathan by frantically accumulating detailed testimonies of destruction caused by rocks, fire, flood, hunger, a whirlwind of domestic violence, monetised leisure and entertainment, xenophobia and bigotry, health inequities, and social and economic disparities. These are all eventually summarised by the phrase 'terrible rage', which Mrs Jarrett continues to repeat before thanking the women for the tea and going home. The message is carried through the fissures of language and conversation by a rhythm of commotion that invites apocalyptic imagination in the sense of a viscerally involved state of reception.

Philip Ridley's *Eclipse* (2020) is a direct response to a new crisis and all that accompanies it: isolation, quarantine, inner space, fear, panic, rumours, conspiracy theories, social breakdown, and societal collapse. It is one of

fourteen monologues collected under the title *The Beast Will Rise* and released online during the COVID-19 lockdown. An unnamed sophisticated gentleman poses before the camera to retell his experiences of the last few months, which have been ‘a veritable rollercoaster’ (Ridley, 2020). His story captures the world transformed under the impact of a strange virus that affects only the young: people go blind and eventually die; the elderly are blamed for the virus; bodies are burned in the streets; the Church introduces blessings that people can pay for to remove a hex caused by the presence of the elderly; the young wear fluorescent boiler suits; teaching as a profession no longer exists. Eclipse is the virus – the world going dull, ‘like someone had drawn a curtain across the sun’ (Ridley 2020), due to prejudice, hatred, superstition, deprivation, greed, and even disillusionment. Furthermore, the youngsters, as in Ridley’s other plays, are not presented as redeemers of the world. Here exemplified by Toxie, they demonstrate readiness to adapt themselves to the hypocritical demands of society as well as shrewdness in devising toxic methods to bring deliverance from an imposed sense of sin and misery. As the only one who can procure exotic supplies, Toxie brings several recognisably different tangerines, each intended for a specific person staying at Mr Cyrus’ hexed lodgings. One of the tangerines proves fatal to a huge tattooed man, who is the only other lodger next to the narrator. Once he is dead, Mr Cyrus and the narrator are forced to follow Toxie’s suggestion to skin the man, sell his tattoos, and earn more than enough to pay the Church to remove the hex. The narrator of the story, either unable to see through Toxie’s intentions due to his naivety or desperate to retain faith in idealised fantasies of childhood innocence, concludes his experience with a quote: ‘If something is proved to be beneficial once, then it should be encouraged to be beneficial again.’ Like Michelangelo’s frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, his partner Jolyon used to say, life is full of ‘bright, joyous stuff’ and ‘dark, disturbing stuff’. Perhaps it is only necessary to maintain a buoyant atmosphere, as Toxie promises.

Conclusion

Storytelling is ‘primarily concerned with entrances and exits’ (Ridley, 2020), says the narrator of *Eclipse* – a former teacher of the history of art and creative writing. Nowhere does skilful management of entrances and exits appear so crucial as in dramatic and theatrical conceptions. In the opinion of Oliver Taplin (2003: 21), entrances and exits ‘mark key junctures in a play’.

Apart from indicating 'the beginnings and ends of acts, the engagement and disengagement of characters, the changes in the combination of participants which change the whole tone and direction of the drama' (21), they can, especially in non-linear aesthetic forms, be perceived in terms of birth and death, both literal and metaphorical, of characters, ideas, arguments, visions, sounds, silences, and seen and unseen worlds. Moreover, entrances and exits are never single actions complete in themselves: while an entry 'provides the first impact' (21) of many aspects that come into play and will be further contested, an exit, even when taken as a final departure, exhaustion of aspects, or ostensible closure, 'conjure[s] up the future, the consequences' (21) or, as the epigraph of Washburn's play briefly states, 'each story ends on a dark and raging river' (Washburn, 2017).

When applied to the apocalyptic narratives of the analysed plays, 'dark' and 'raging' does not necessarily mean destructive, violent, or pessimistic. In terms of the scope and intensity of destruction, these plays can resemble post-apocalyptic narratives in Heffernan's sense: the texts convey pronouncements of doom, cataloguing social, political, economic, and cultural malaises, and natural and ecological hazards, but rarely provide clear images of healing. The playwrights adapt doom-laden content to familiar experience and identify catastrophes as social rather than cosmological events. If they provide a glimpse of renewal and renovation, it is to address the paradoxes on which those ideas are based. Rather than offering light and placidity, a meaningful totality from scattered events, the end provides a synaesthetic perception of incongruities. 'Emplotment', which denotes an operation (rather than a static structure) that synthesises heterogeneous elements into meaningful totalities (Ricoeur 2003: 21), is *completed* only in the 'living receiver of the narrated story' (21). In other words, the narrative as a concordant discordance is only proposed to the receiver as a *thought experiment* (23) that will take its full effect through a dynamic and transformative (as the emphasis on the word 'living' suggests) process in the reader or spectator. This process appears to coincide with the apocalyptic imagination that David Ketterer depicts as a 'philosophical preoccupation with that moment of juxtaposition and consequent transformation' (1974: 13). When the worlds of the play and the receiver intersect, the readers or spectators strive to understand the world that opens before them, which enables an 'old world of mind' to discover a 'believable new world of mind' (13).

Eschatological despair, as the plays written during the 2000s demonstrate, is not automatically associated with the end of a millennium or century. It is rather provoked by varying existential pressures, such as changes in systems of knowledge, social and political structures, and technological and artistic matters. Usually, the apocalyptic narratives appear to reproduce how contemporary societies think – they reflect an epistemological uncertainty about reaching a conclusion. When filtered through the mode of theatre, which in Patrice Pavis' words, 'endlessly varies the situations of narration, the points of view on the world, the purpose of the story and the way it is listened to' (Pavis 2016: 125), these narratives embody a transcendental condition of language, writing, and all experience: they welcome discontinuity, diversity, contradiction, and alterity. Additionally, by introducing apocalyptic landscapes that distort external reality, the playwrights break an implicit contract, the conventions of naturalism, and undermine the true order of events and time. The eschatological narratives provide an alternative to the historical or theological conventions of time (Genet 2003: 104); written for and performed in theatres, they introduce a dramatic time to the familiar time, thus overturning the social conventions, not for the sake of chaos, but 'for a breathtaking liberation' (104).

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