



The End of the Matter: Re-emergence of Apocalyptic in the Contemporary Novel

CORDELL STRUG

Zion-Bethel Lutheran Parish, Lake Bronson-Karlstad, Minnesota

“Here is the end of the matter. As for me, Daniel, my thoughts greatly alarmed me, and my color changed; but I kept the matter in my mind.” (Dan 7:28)

The term “apocalypse” has retained its currency in the modern age but, as one would expect in our fragmented culture, the contexts which determine its use tend to separate meanings which were fused in the classical use of the term. Speaking broadly, the term is used in two very different circles, and the split is roughly along the lines of either predictions of the end, or violent imagery or events. The first is the property of the Christian right with their timetables and historical surveys. The second is about all that remains of the force of the term in the culture at large, where it seems to be only a polysyllabic synonym for “really bad.”

The classical use of the term fused these concepts and much else besides. As D. S. Russell among others has argued, the ancient apocalyptic writers (2nd century B.C.-1st century A.D.) continued the prophetic tradition in times which seemed to be times of ultimate crisis, when wrenching polarities emerged in society, and the ground beneath the feet of the faithful shook as never before.¹

These historical conditions emerged under the oppression of Antiochus IV, then ceased when the Jewish nation lost all political hope under the Romans. One might say that apocalyptic emerges when hope seems impossible and the very life of a culture is in mortal peril, and that it subsides when hope is simply gone and life must go on anyway. Thus, in its classical usage, apocalyptic is obsessed with the end, but that obsession is indistinguishable from its burning despair of and frantic hope for the possibilities of the present.

¹D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964) 91.

Russell has argued elsewhere that the time which called forth Jewish apocalyptic was a time very much like our own. Not only faith in the abstract, but also the very fabric of cultural life is threatened—both from a bewildering clash of cultures and a widespread loss of human rights.²

One can list all sorts of characteristics of the writing which arose from this situation: mythological imagery, cosmological and historical surveys, dualism of light and darkness, good and evil, demonic powers and Messianic figures.³ But whether any or all of these are present, a piece of writing is recognizable as apocalyptic through its *mood*,⁴ the frantic sensing of colliding

forces, the search beyond the present for avenues of understanding and escape, and the closing of ranks for the last stand and the wild hope for deliverance. These were the kinds of things that were fused into the classical apocalyptic visions.

It seems to me that there has been a re-emergence of this fusion in some serious contemporary works of art, a fusion which far transcends either simple prediction or savage violence and really rediscovers a nerve of response to social pressures which was at the heart of a book like *Daniel*. The last few years have produced the interesting phenomenon of three writers who made their reputations with novels of social realism—works with explicitly political themes searching for avenues of action in the present—all forsaking the realistic novel to write works of fantasy with apocalyptic overtones.

The three writers are Edward Abbey, whose major themes are his love of the American West and his disgust at those destroying it; Nadine Gordimer, the South African novelist; and Gore Vidal, the master of irony who has always been fascinated with the American political scene. Abbey's *Good News*, Gordimer's *July's People*, and Vidal's *Kalki* have all made the shift spoken of above (which in some sense reproduces the shift from prophecy to apocalyptic).⁵ In this essay I shall discuss Abbey's novel at some length as a spectacular rediscovery of apocalyptic. Next I shall look more briefly at *July's People* and *Kalki* for the more complex point of view they take on their apocalyptic material (one might call them "ironic apocalypses"). Finally, I shall conclude with some remarks on the relation of the Christian vision to such works.

I. ABBEY'S REDISCOVERY OF APOCALYPTIC

Of the three novels to be considered, Edward Abbey's *Good News* comes the closest to being a true piece of apocalyptic writing: in its formal characteristics, its thematic content, its call to stand fast in faith, and its hope in a final victory.

The story is set in the American West in the near future. The entire fabric of modern industrial society has come apart, undone by its wars and its abuses of the goods of the earth. The cities are ruins, and only two possibilities for order

²D. S. Russell, *Apocalyptic: Ancient and Modern* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968) 5, 17.

³D. S. Russell, *Method*, 105.

⁴*Ibid.*, 104.

⁵All references to these novels will be given in the text. The editions used are: Edward Abbey, *Good News* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1980); Nadine Gordimer, *July's People* (New York: Viking, 1981); Gore Vidal, *Kalki* (New York: Random House, 1978).

have emerged: farmers who are individually reclaiming land, and the remnants of old army units that have set up military dictatorships in the cities.

Abbey takes us into the conflict by following two men who at first seem to have no interest in it. Significantly, they are only on a basic human quest. Jack Burns, an old one-eyed cowboy, is searching for his son; he is accompanied by Sam Banyaca, an Indian who had been trained as a shaman and who retains his magical powers—though he sees them, as a result of the Harvard Ph.D. he holds, in a thoroughly demythologized way.

They are heading for what used to be Phoenix, Arizona. Phoenix is now ruled by a military force commanded by The Chief, an ex-SAC general, once a university professor, who

maintains order by terrorism and is readying his force for a drive eastward to attempt to rebuild American society in its former technological image. This is only a means to an end, however, as The Chief's goal is transcendence of the earth, a bizarre blend of mysticism and space travel.

His primary adversary in the city is an old faculty colleague, Noah Rodack, a Jewish anarchist who leads a band of students called the "Robin Hoods" in raids on the last remains of industrial society, especially its archives, burning all records so that the human dimension of society might be reclaimed.

The story is a series of skirmishes, chases, captures, and escapes; essentially the story of the slipperiness of the human personality faced by rigid oppression.

Good News can be appreciated as an environmentalist fable or as a futuristic adventure tale with polemical overtones, but the most interesting thing about it is its use, explicitly and implicitly, of forms and themes characteristic of apocalyptic writing.

First, the book at several points gives a compressed historical survey of the decline of industrial society into the state pictured in the book. Since the book does not purport to be written in the past, this serves less to authenticate the predictive side of the book than to argue for the plausibility of its depiction. The survey appears in a number of forms and from different points of view. The Chief sees the pitiable state of civilization as a consequence of moral collapse and the rise of anarchy. For Captain Fannin, the officer in charge of the prostitutes, the historical development to her present is a fall from a golden age of luxury. Yet the major survey forms the prologue of the book, and it identifies just those things which the military see as values of the past as the *causes* of the wreck of society:

In the effort to compensate for losses abroad, each industrial nation attempted to supply its needs by exploiting to the limit—and then beyond—its own resources of land and forest, water and metals and minerals. The fuel needs of the machine were considered paramount, but the effort to keep the machine operating led to destruction of basic resources needed for the production of food....The cities could not feed themselves; they were largely abandoned as urban millions spread into the countryside in search of food....The oldest civil war of all, that between the city and the country, was resumed. (3-4)

And those things which mark our industrial civilization—all its gadgets, toys, and amusements—appear in Abbey's book as ruins or as instruments of

destruction; they thus become signs of the end easily identifiable in the society around us:

the abandoned trucks along the highway, the derelict automobiles at rest on flattened tires, doors sagging open, mice, moles, birds nesting in the ruin of their interiors. Vines and weeds grow from the rotten upholstery of dead Fords, defunct Chevrolets, moribund Powerwagons, decayed Cadillacs and wasted Winnebagos. (29)

Lists of stores appear at several points, epic catalogues of a shallow culture, and give us signs

that we can literally read around us:

They are flashing past *Ace Tire Company, Valley National Bank, Sambo's, Hobo Joe's, Big Boy's, Circle K, Whattaburger, Pizza Hut, Holiday Inn* (never a holiday, never an inn), *U-Tote-Em, Quik Mart, Bashaw's, Safeway, Texaco, Gulf, Shamrock*—. (200)

These ruins are filled with animals, but Abbey's use of animals in the book goes beyond the merely descriptive and moves toward a classical apocalyptic use—they become signs of the end, marks of the dissolution of the human. From Abbey's point of view, of course, a good deal of human society deserves to be dissolved. So the animal imagery appears in different ways.

As in the quotation above, animals are shown reclaiming the earth. As such, they are allies of those who love and care for the earth, who live simply and who are more interested in life than conquest. They signify the reappearance of the natural order, almost its inevitable victory over the machine. They are one assurance of victory.

Since the animals are on the side of the truly human, the truly savage is identified with distinctively human achievements—cities, gallows, torture—and with actions that presuppose a certain level of culture—betrayal, cold hatred, cynical abuse. At one point, Dixie Dalton, a prostitute whom Sam loves, is being driven to the Tower by two spies:

What a pair of pigs, she thinks. Worse than pigs—reptiles. Gila monsters. Ugly, poisonous, creepy. But why compare them to an honest lizard? They're worse than anything unhuman. (112-113)

Yet the master image which dominates the entire book is the Tower, in which The Chief has his headquarters. Watching a gila monster, Sam remarks:

"The real monster is up ahead in those glass towers. Look at this junk along the road: these steel toys, these pet baby dinosaurs. Even they tried to get away from him." (30)

As Sam and Jack Burns move into the city, little details pile up in the reader's mind until a picture is formed of the great Tower, impressive in itself, standing on nothing but waste and rubble. All we have seen on the road to the Tower is wreckage: abandoned cars, empty buildings, muddy streets, corpses, and wandering animals.

The image thus bears a precise relationship to that of the second chapter of Daniel with its brilliant metals and feet of clay. With a fine stroke of imagination, Abbey ends his book with the armored column moving out of the city, in a sense tipping the Tower on its side, thus collapsing the vertical image to a horizontal

image, equally rootless and mechanized. The message is clear: this is built on nothing; it cannot stand.

One wonders if Abbey had Daniel in mind when he conjured up the elements of this

story. Of course the city in the desert is an image so ready to hand of pride and folly attempting to build on nothing that he would hardly have needed Daniel to produce it. And if it is an adaptation, it bears no mark of academic translation but is an authentic apprehension of an apocalyptic theme, rising out of Abbey's grim meditation on the plight of his land.

In the character of The Chief, the personification of evil—the great beast of his vision—Abbey tries to make explicit the destructive qualities he sees in modern civilization. The Chief is not unattractive. He is handsome, intelligent, learned and a warrior. He wears his military identity lightly and, with his articulate philosophy, is anything but a blind force.

But what makes him destructive and allows him to stand as the emblem of a destructive civilization is his contempt for nature: in himself, in others, and in the earth. He refuses the grace of natural communion, choosing the city over the land, using and abusing the loyalty of those around him, treating people as tools and forming his military force into a weapon that will first rebuild society but ultimately leave the planet itself (*ad astra*, as he says) in order to transcend the one thing he hates more than any other: the flesh. This hatred, this refusal of nature, is for Abbey the very heart of the conflict.

Ranged against The Chief are all sorts of figures through which Abbey tries to define the authentic dimensions of human life and to indicate avenues through which hope may reach into the future.

The miraculous is demythologized, as befits a secular apocalypse, but it is present nonetheless in Sam the shaman and his magic. He alone never falls into the hands of The Chief and he delivers his friends from the institutional death of the gallows and the brutal passions of Sergeant Brock. But he has a streak of cynicism that puts an ambiguous edge on the hopes Abbey presents. Trying to dissuade Burns from returning for his son, he says:

“Listen, boss, I learned one thing at Harvard. There's one thing wrong with always fighting for freedom, and justice, and decency. And so forth.”

Burns looks up at the blazing sky. “Only one thing? What's that?”

“You almost always lose.”

The old man laughs, reaches out, and squeezes Sam's near arm. “Well, hellfire, Sam, what does that have to do with it?” (222)

This conversation, its cynicism and its shrugging dismissal of the lack of obvious hope, sketches the direction of Abbey's vision. He has no grand force to pit against The Chief. That is just the point: the human characteristics he is loyal to are the small affections, the intimate communions, the dogged loyalties, that do not require the oppression of thousands and the rape of the earth. Sam himself, conversing with Glenn the pianist, an even greater cynic, confesses his decision to join the revolution of Rodack and to look for Burns:

Sam speaks at last. “I'm in love,” he explains, smiling. As if that explains anything. (239)

It might, for Abbey, explain everything.

Glenn, one of the minor figures that illumine the fringe of Abbey's ragged band of

humanity, is engaged in his own project of rediscovery, returning to authentic music from the rinky-dink tunes he has had to play:

They find Swingin' Glenn in the gloom of the bar, hunched before his piano, long fingers dancing up and down the keyboard in the actualization of an abstract theorem of tone and tempering worked out some two hundred and seventy years before, by a bewigged German organist trying to hold down a good job. (237)

The official state, on the other hand—to go with its air-conditioners, motels and machines—expresses itself through the cheap tackiness of popular tunes cycled endlessly on loudspeakers in the torture rooms, the elevators, and the gallows square.

This is one element that rescues Abbey's vision from primitivism, since the human quest involves a sifting through the wreckage of centuries for the more profound creations of humanity. Rodack's band of students, the most organized wing of the opposition, organize their celebrations and sorrows around carefully preserved musical recordings.

Jack Burns, who is with the band at this time, responds to the music with the flashing insight of the apocalyptic writer who intuits that the promises of old were not *broken* but only postponed, still there, awaiting fulfillment

...old Jack Burns feels the world of his youth come flooding back upon him, and with it the lost youth of a legend he once loved, the broken resolves and lost promises of the revolution that—did not fail, but—never was completed. Was not completed! (71)

The promise, for Abbey, is there, beneath the rubble, ready to be wakened. Rodack is its most articulate champion; and in his vision it must come from below, not be handed down from above, as The Chief's promise is. Like the faith of The Chief, Rodack's faith transcends death, but that is not because he wishes to transcend the flesh but because he cares about things beyond himself. He is more like Daniel's friends who go into the furnace with faith but will not capitulate, even if their faith in deliverance is not rewarded. But like Daniel's friends, he is joined on the gallows by a deliverer with great powers, and he is saved.

The message of standing fast is thus joined to the proclamation of the end, and Abbey has made every effort to define the ground on which the stand must be taken: nature, tradition, community, and love. If there is a sure and certain hope, it is that the voracious system of technology will fall of its own weight, and that nature will reassert itself. Yet like the true apocalyptic seer, Abbey leaves a dimension for human effort and calls for the stand of the faithful—whether or not their deliverance will come.

In perhaps the most fantastic touch of this earthy fantasy, the body of Burns disappears after his death, and Captain Barnes, the man Burns claimed as his son, in a victory of the personal over the social, conceals the disappearance from The Chief. With all else that he is in touch with, Abbey here reasserts the

ancient hope that the authentic hero, the dogged lover who will not leave the ones he cares about,

cannot die and might, must, someday return.

As the book ends, the battle is still in doubt, but the city is falling and the army is wandering away, severed from its base. It is an appropriate ending for this gritty vision. And the vision sounds the true apocalyptic note: the outrage, the judgement, the call to action, and the cry of hope. Good news, even this.

II. THE IRONIC APOCALYPSES OF GORDIMER AND VIDAL

Abbey writes as a true believer and can thus reappropriate brilliantly the traditions of apocalyptic and recast them for his own purposes. The other two books are more complex and, while they share the movement to an apocalyptic form of writing in a secular context, they may be said to complicate central elements of that form and by complicating them produce works which are even more disturbing. These elements are, for Nadine Gordimer, the faithful remnant, and for Gore Vidal, the Messiah and his final judgement and reign. The societies they deal with are different, Gordimer writing of *apartheid* in South Africa, Vidal of confusion in America. Both are set in a near future, after relatively successful revolutions. Both try to imagine the meaning of a social cataclysm in great detail. And both probe the meaning of “success” in an apocalyptic context.

July's People by Gordimer is a simple, chilling story in which people who were part of a society, part of the more liberal element in South African society, are made to realize how deep within them that society lay (not only its prejudices but its routines, its stores, offices, and relationships) and how much of themselves died when it collapsed. Bam and Maureen Smales are a young, white, moderately affluent South African couple, who had often thought of leaving their racially torn country:

They sickened at the appalling thought that they might find they had lived out their whole lives as they were, born white pariah dogs in a black continent. They joined political parties and “contact” groups in willingness to slough privilege it was supposed to be their white dog nature to guard with Mirages and tanks; they were not believed. (8)

The Smales are the ordinary, well-meaning element in society, but Gordimer sets her vision in the immediate future and shows the narrowing possibilities of their world vanishing entirely. The revolution comes. They have not abandoned the country, cannot think of fighting for it, but will probably be killed by the blacks simply because they are white. July, their black houseboy, hides them away in his jungle village.

The new world, in short, has come, and the Smales are simply unable to live in it. Both July and the Smales are trapped by social structures whose absence allows them not freer communication but no communication at all. The Smales' possessions are pryed away from them, or stolen—the last, most crushing loss being Bam's gun. Their children begin to forget their old home. They themselves grow apart and cease to love or respect one another.

Gordimer is not dealing with the fury of freedom fighters. She is dealing with people who understood themselves to be moral, who wished for justice.

But when justice came not in due time but in a cataclysm, they were swept away. Gordimer is telling us what the apocalypse will cost. In the eerie final scene, Maureen sees a helicopter over the village and seems to hear it land in the bush; she runs toward it, running toward the only thing that makes any sense to her: the past.

The book, save for its vision of upheaval in the immediate future, is close to a realistic novel. Yet it has some of even the formal characteristics of apocalyptic. For one thing, racial war—in which the skins of the antagonists make uniforms unnecessary—seems inherently dualistic. The topsy-turviness of July housing the Smales carries an easy symbolic weight of vindication (though it is Gordimer's purpose to show how uneasy and complicated this is—even for July). And there can be no clearer, and perhaps no sadder, image of the necessity of absolute choice than that final image of the dirty, despairing young woman running toward what is presumably a military helicopter, leaving her family, choosing any machine, any white order, over the miserable hut in the black village.

Early in the book, Gordimer sweeps us from the troubled present into the catastrophic future by means of an historical survey which, as always in apocalyptic, hooks us by familiar detail and hurls us ahead:

When it all happened, there were the transformations of myth or religious parable. The bank accountant had been the legendary warning hornbill of African folk-tales, its flitting cries ignored at peril. The yellow bakkie that was bought for fun turned out to be the vehicle: that which bore them away from the gunned shopping malls and the blazing, unsold houses of a depressed market, from the burst mains washing round bodies in their Saturday-morning garb of safari suits, and the heat-guided missiles that struck Boeings carrying those trying to take off from Jan Smuts Airport. (9)

Interestingly enough, it is only the *end* of their society that reveals its true nature. Jogging once, Maureen reflects that

The habit of the pace came from spare-time attention given to many things, back there: your health, your sense of injustice done, your realization of living a life that was already over—these were the dutiful half-hour recognitions that did not affect normal daily abuse. When the Smales couple ran around the suburban blocks under the jacarandas they didn't know what they were running from. (146-147)

Earlier she recalled a photo taken of her when she was a little girl out for what she had considered a pleasant outing with her black maid. Years later she had seen it in a *Life* publication about South African policies:

White *herrenvolk* attitudes and life-styles; the marvellous photograph of the white schoolgirl and the black woman with the girl's schoolcase on her head.

Why had Lydia carried the case?

Did the photographer know what he saw, when they crossed the road like that, together? Did the book, placing the pair in its context, give the reason she and Lydia, in their affection and ignorance, didn't know? (33)

When this society falls, we again see wilderness reclaiming this earth, with

the presence of animals signalling the arrival of a new order (at least for the Smales). It is an order that some people are at home in, but not them:

The same endless dragging of wood, chopping of wood, for the same fires; the same backsides bent at washing, squatting picking over maize; the same babies staggering towards mastery of their legs among the old slowly losing it. An acceptance that produced restless fear in anyone unused to living so close to the life cycle, accustomed to the powerful distractions of the intermediary or transcendent—the “new life” of each personal achievement, of political change. (106-107)

The irony is that it is radical political change that has brought them to this.

The last blow for Bam is the theft of his rifle, and Gordimer, through Maureen's eyes, makes the telling connection between his loss, his helplessness, and his greater loss of a whole life, however much he condemned it:

...he was back there: if he couldn't pick up the phone and call the police whom he and she had despised for their brutality and thuggery in the life lived back there, he did not know what else to do. (145)

Their culture, their language, and their very selves dissolve. They simply cannot find their place in this new world. One cannot just decide to “continue on” after so complete a catastrophe. Gordimer is facing the possibility that the coming of the end, the apocalyptic future, may bring a challenge that cannot be met, at the very deepest levels of our beings.

Gore Vidal takes, if possible, an even dimmer view of the possibilities of apocalyptic change. *Kalki* is a stunning use of the full trappings of apocalyptic writing: pseudonymous authorship, Eastern religious mythology, appeals to an arcane tradition, a messianic figure, death falling from the skies, and the dawn of a new age. Yet every page can also be read as a black, realistic comedy of obsession and destruction. This ambiguity serves Vidal's purpose: he wishes to think out the ambiguities inherent in a religious force incarnate in a particular person—divine powers and human flaws. His novel is, in a sense, a critique of the *idea* of a messiah. This can be taken simply as anti-religious satire. But there is a deep truth being explored here which religious traditions ought to ponder: the danger of conceiving salvation in too radically disjunctive a fashion, severing the divine too completely from the human.

Kalki purports to be the manuscript of a woman pilot named Teddy Ottinger (of Jewish descent, filtered through Christian Science). She tells us she is writing it in the White House and muses “Is this a success story?” (1). We are left to wonder through most of the book how and

why she is there and, though we find that out, we are still wondering about “success.”

Ottinger had become famous for writing a book called *Beyond Motherhood* after having her tubes cauterized. She is then asked to interview a man who claims to be Kalki, a god of Indian mythology, an incarnation of Vishnu. The appearance of Kalki is to signal the end of the Age of Iron and bring the destruction of all humanity and the birth of a new age from the band of disciples whom Kalki will gather around himself. Kalki’s cult was spreading, and young followers could be seen everywhere handing out white paper lotus flowers and encouraging people to purify themselves before the end.

America is presented, rather accurately, I suppose, as a confused, cluttered society, filled with technological marvels, spiritual fads, and confusion—on the one hand obsessed with silliness and trivia, on the other ready to embrace a fatalistic vision of death. All significant options between those seem to have disappeared. Kalki combines both poles of this confusion by proclaiming the coming end and giving away cash prizes with his lotus lotteries (for which the flowers are not sold but freely given). He catches perfectly the mood of the age—pessimism and greed.

Teddy herself displays an utter severance from reality and just drifts into Kalki’s movement as one of his four chosen disciples. In a brilliant passage, Vidal shows her avoiding her mother-in-law who may have cancer; Teddy writes:

I got away before Lenore came back to the living room. I have never really been into death. Or water sports. Or bondage. I am not Pisces but Libra. (18)

A society that ranks death with water sports as a kind of interest and justifies that ranking astrologically is in deep trouble. And this one is.

Kalki is in fact Jim Kelly, an ex-U.S. Army sergeant who was involved in chemical warfare in Vietnam and was also heavily involved in drug traffic. The reader, with most of the characters, is all too ready to believe that religion for Kelly is *simply* a front for making a fortune through drug running. However, what makes Kelly/Kalki tick is not greed but a quite different motivation, a weird and dangerous connection of essentially religious themes: recreation, destruction, power, and immortality.

And in this realistic comedy, the grim fantasy comes true. Everyone in the world perishes, save Kalki and his four disciples. If one doubted the drug dealer’s ability to bring in a new age, he at least ended the old one.

It is a brilliant finale, and the mechanism of death which Vidal reveals (and by which he maintains the realist side of his equation) is just as clever: the lotus flowers carried an incredibly toxic chemical warfare germ developed by Kelly when he was with the army. (He and the disciples had been inoculated.) He had actually recruited Teddy for her flying skills in order to deliver the germ from the air. And for her sterility.

For there is one final twist: Kelly does mean to begin a new creation, since only he and one other woman are capable of producing children:

The enormity of what Kalki had done was more than matched by what he now

intended to do. I completed the catechism. "He intends to be the father of the new human race." (228)

But ambiguity persists. Humanity is elusive to the end, recalcitrant in the face of any project that arrives in the flesh. Giles, the doctor, knew that though Kalki and his wife could produce children, they could not produce them *together*. He also avoided the vasectomy he was supposed to have had. *He* means to father the new race. Kelly, just as vulnerable to human passion, kills him. Now there will be no new race.

It was indeed a success story. But it was also a story about the difficulty and danger of stretching the concept of success into an apocalyptic context.

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The novel is a brilliant performance. And Vidal's finest conception is Kelly/Kalki, the god come in the flesh or the flesh that imagined itself god, bearing both tremendous powers and tremendous flaws.

As Gordimer does, Vidal is trying to think out the mundane details of the apocalypse; to show the grim complications hidden behind simple expectations of the end and the new age, and the all too plausible dangers of any new order arriving in the flesh. The book is an outcry against any *wholesale* rejection of a human perspective in the name of religious truth:

Good and evil cease to have meaning if there is no human scale in which to weigh such entirely human qualities. (230)

III. THE CHRISTIAN VISION AND RE-EMERGENT APOCALYPTIC

Of course, what is missing in all of these works is a faith in a divine power, active in history, whose hands hold control of all events. There is no *providence* here.

Yet what is important to the apocalyptic writer is a vision of providence at work in a time of ultimate crisis. We cannot very well blame these writers for lacking a vision of providence if our religious communities lack a sense of the other element: crisis and loss.

We have, in the Christian community, a certain *official* apocalyptic vision. And whether we gleefully chart the rise of Red China on a millennial timetable with the Christian right, or routinely answer "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" in the eucharistic prayer of a moderate orthodoxy, or simply crack a knowing smile at the mention of the second coming in the creed, we have lost touch with the hopes and terrors of the immediate present and future. Things for us are either so over and done with or so much out of our control that we tend to avoid serious treatment of history.

While Christians surely must hold to their vision of a power that transcends the world, the work of these artists is important because it yields a vision of the possibilities and tendencies in that world. The appearance of apocalyptic forms in serious fiction is itself something to be pondered, speaking as it does of emerging polarities and ineffectiveness of ordinary structures. Beyond this, the writers I have dealt with lead us down two separate avenues.

What Abbey sees is for him really good news since it involves the death of industrial society. Such a vision is valuable for the way it sees forces at work and the way it tries to pick out points of value amid the rubble.

Gordimer and Vidal, on the other hand, reveal the terror awaiting us. Above all else, they reveal the costliness of the end, something that remains uncounted in the vision of many Christians. And Vidal especially reveals the danger of a theological vision which severs itself too completely from human character and values. Seeking to recreate, it only destroys.

Good news and bad news: the ambiguity here is not simply a consequence of the lack of a divine perspective or the lack, in the case of the latter two, of the perspective of the freedom fighter. It is an ambiguity at the heart of apocalyptic

itself: the Day of the Lord is either welcome or dreadful or, things being bad, enough, both.

These writers are more aware of the polarities of society and more wary of the costliness of the end than most of the Christian community. Their use of an old religious genre can thus be immensely instructive. But perhaps the most instructive and disturbing thing about these works is the mere fact that they are being written now.