

REFLECTIONS

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THE WORLD TO END LAST MONTH

A close look at the headline just above reveals a puzzling confusion of tenses. The phrase “world to end” carries a distinctly predictive quality, whereas “last month” shows a certain degree of retrospectiveness. It is reasonable to ask what is going on here.

Some of the confusion stems from the fact that I write these columns far ahead of the cover dates of the issues in which they appear. It takes time to set a magazine in type, print, and bind it, and send it out. So, although this piece is intended for the issue to be dated June 2015, I’m actually writing it in September 2014.

The “last month” part of the title refers to a recent prediction that the world is going to end in April 2015. If you’re reading this in May 2015, you can feel confident that the world didn’t end as predicted last month. (If things went otherwise, it’s likely that you won’t be seeing this at all.) Since I’m writing now about what is for me still a future event that will lie in the past by the time you read this, you can readily understand that a certain awkwardness of tense will inevitably be involved.

The prediction of imminent doom under whose shadow I presently live is not, of course, the first I’ve had to worry about. The earliest one I can remember dates from 1944, when a preacher in (I think) Missouri announced that the world would end in (I think) September of that year. I was then about to enter the fourth grade, and still counted my age in single-digit numbers. I had already gathered quite a bit of knowledge—I knew the names of most presidents, most of the states of the Union (there were forty-eight then), even the recent kings and queens of England shown on the postage stamps that I collected. But knowledge is not the same thing as wisdom, and, there on the verge of the fourth grade, I had no way of being sure that the world *wouldn’t* end in the upcoming September. After all, I had seen the story about it in the newspaper and I was still young enough to believe that things I read in the newspaper were true, by and large. The world didn’t end in September 1944. It hasn’t ended on any of the other dates predicted since then. As of this morning I can’t be sure that it won’t end in April 2015, though my guess is that it won’t. Though it *will* end sooner or later, as things in this universe are destined to do, my bet is that the end will come later rather than sooner (so renew your subscription right now).

Worrying about the end of the world surely goes back to the first time human beings observed a total eclipse of the sun, and probably earlier. By 365 A.D., one Hilary of Poitiers had asserted that that would be the world’s final year; Martin of Tours issued a similar proclamation a few years later; the Spanish monk Beatus of Libana subsequently calculated that Doomsday would arrive on April 6,793; the year 1000 was widely believed to be bringing the finale for us; and so on and so on. Benjamin Creme took out an ad in the Los Angeles *Times* to tell us that Jesus would return in June 1982 and wrap things up for us; in 1985 the preacher Lester Sumrall published a book called *I Predict 1985*; a 1987 prediction had it that Halley’s Comet would crash into the Earth on April 29 of that year; various religious leaders postulated the Rapture and the End on September 11, 1986, October 3 of that year, September 28, 1992, and October 28, 1992. Here in the San Francisco Bay Area, the minister Harold Camping pegged the Apocalypse for September 6, 1994, later revising the date to October 21, 2011, after which he retired from his ministry and apologetically admitted that predicting the day of the Rapture was impossible and any attempt to be precise about it was sinful. Nevertheless, the year 2011 was bespeckled with

other apocalyptic prophecies regarding 2012, based on calculations allegedly drawn from the ancient Mayan calendar.

I'm here to tell you that that didn't happen, nor was the world swallowed by a black hole in 2010 as a result of the activation of the Large Hadron Collider experiment. The fact is that we are still here, and—despite the latest date for our finale of April 2015, my bet is that we'll still be okay by the time the June 2015 issue of this magazine appears, or I would not be expending my few precious remaining hours writing this.

Foreseeing the end of the world has been the business of SF writers ever since there was such a thing as science fiction, and back before it. What sort of end-of-the-world stories our primordial preliterate ancestors told we will never know, but the oldest such tale that has come down to us, the five-thousand-year-old Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh, describes a deluge that drowns the whole Earth, save only a certain Ziusudra, who manages to save his family and set things going again. The theme recurs in many later versions: the Babylonian one gives the intrepid survivor the name of Utnapishtim, the Hebrews called him Noah, to the ancient Greeks he was Deucalion, and in the Vedic texts of India he is Manu. Details differ, but the essence is always the same: the gods, displeased with the world, destroy it but then bring mankind forth for a second try.

The Norse myths give us a terrible frost, the Fimbulwinter, in which all things die except a man and a woman who survive by hiding in a tree; they follow the usual redemptionist course and repeople the world, but then comes an even greater cataclysm, Ragnarok, the doom of the gods themselves, in which the stars fall, the earth sinks into the sea, and fire consumes everything—only to be followed by yet another rebirth and an era of peace and plenty. And the Christian tradition provides the spectacular final book of the Bible, the Revelation of St. John, in which the wrath of God is visited upon the Earth in a host of ways (fire, plague, hail, drought, earthquakes, flood, etc.), leading to the final judgment and the redemption of the righteous. The Aztecs, too, had myths of the destruction of the world by fire—several times over, in fact—and so, of course, did the Mayas.

The nineteenth century gave us many apocalyptic visions: such books as Jean-Baptiste de Grainville's *The Last Man, or Omegarus and Syderia* (1806) and Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), written under the shadow of a worldwide epidemic of cholera. Edgar Allan Poe sent a comet into the Earth in "The Conversation of Eros and Charmion" (1839). French astronomer Camille Flammarion's novel of 1893, *La Fin du Monde* (*Omega* in its English translation) brought the world to the edge of doom—but only to the edge—as a giant comet crosses our path. H.G. Wells told a similar story of near-destruction in "The Star" (1897). In *The Time Machine* (1895), Wells had already taken his time traveler to the end of life on Earth and beyond. ("All the sounds of man, the bleating of sheep, the cries of birds, the hum of insects, the stir that makes the background of our lives—all that was over.")

Flammarion's compatriot Jules Verne very likely drew on the latter sections of *Omega* for his novella, "The Eternal Adam" (1905). Verne espouses a cyclical view of the world: Earth is destroyed by a calamitous earthquake and flood, but the continent of Atlantis wondrously emerges from the depths to provide a new home for the human race; and we are given a glimpse, finally, of a venerable scholar of the far future looking back through the archives of humanity, "bloodied by the innumerable hardships suffered by those who had gone before him," and coming, "slowly, reluctantly, to an intimate conviction of the eternal return of all things."

The eternal return! It is the theme of so much of this apocalyptic literature. That phrase of Verne's links his story to the core of Flammarion's own belief that our own little epoch is "an imperceptible wave on the immense ocean of the ages" and that mankind's destiny is to be born again and again into universe after universe, each to pass on in its turn and be replaced.

Rebirth after catastrophe is to be found, also, in M.P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* (1901), in which we are overwhelmed by a mass of poisonous gas, leaving only one man—Adam is his name, of course—as the ostensible survivor, until he finds his Eve and life begins anew. No such renewal is offered in Frank Lillie Pollock's terminally apocalyptic short story "Finis" (1906), though, which postulates a gigantic central star in the galaxy whose light has been heading toward us for an immense span of time and now finally arrives, so that "there, in crimson and orange, flamed the last dawn that human eyes would ever see."

Few readers turn to apocalyptic tales these days for reassurance that once the sins of mankind have been properly punished, a glorious new age will open; but, even so, the little *frisson* that a good end-of-the-world story supplies is irresistible to writers, and the bibliography of apocalyptic fantasy is immense. Garrett P. Serviss' *The Second Deluge* (1912) drowns us within a watery nebula. G. Peyton Wertebaker's "The Coming of the Ice" (1926) brings the glaciers back with a thoroughness that makes the Norse Fimbulwinter seem like a light snowstorm. Philip Wylie and Edwin Balmer's *When Worlds Collide* (1933) tells us of an awkward astrophysical event with very unpleasant consequences for our planet. Edmond Hamilton's "In the World's Dusk" (1936) affords a moody vision of the end of days, millions of years hence, when one lone man survives and "a white salt desert now covered the whole of Earth. A cruel glaring plain that stretched eye-achingly to the horizons . . ." Robert A. Heinlein's story "The Year of the Jackpot" (1952) puts the end much closer—1962, in fact—when bad things begin to happen all around the world, floods and typhoons and earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, culminating in a lethal solar catastrophe. J.T. McIntosh's *One in Three Hundred* (1954) also has the sun going nova, at novel length. And, of course, the arrival of atomic weapons in 1945 set loose a proliferation of nuclear-holocaust stories.

I suppose there's a strange comfort in such thoughts: "If I must die, how good that all of you must die also!" But the chief value of apocalyptic visions, I think, lies elsewhere than in that sort of we-will-all-go-together-when-we-go spitefulness. As we examine the great apocalyptic myths we see that not only death but resurrection is usually involved in the story—a bit of eschatological comfort, of philosophical reassurance that existence, though finite and relatively brief for each individual, is not totally pointless. Yes, we have done evil things and the gods are angry and the world is going to perish, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, but then will come a reprieve, a second creation, a rebirth of life, a better world than the one that has just been purged.

The possible variations on the theme are endless. As Robert Frost wrote nearly a century ago,

Some say the world will end in fire,

Some say in ice.

From what I've tasted of desire

I hold with those who favor fire.

But if it had to perish twice,

I think I know enough of hate

To know that for destruction ice

Is also great

And would suffice.

Fire or ice, one or the other—who knows? The final word on finality is yet to be written. But what is certain is that we will go on speculating about it, right until the end.

See you next month . . . I hope.

