Chapter IV

Heralding the Apocalypse

The end of every millennium brings with it apocalyptic expectations of the end of the world. Apocalyptic groups prophesy awesome destruction and await the annihilation of mankind and the world. But till recently these harbingers of doom had failed to consider a destruction of the natural world brought about by the rape of the environment. With the dawn of the new millennium, the degradation of the environment has captured the imagination of mankind like never before. Man has come to realize the precarious nature of his existence, that he is living on the edge, and that future life on the earth will depend on the well being of the planet. Environmental writers like Rachel Carson and Paul Ehrlich, prophets of the new age, foresee annihilation brought about by human arrogance and greed. As religious beliefs grow more tenuous, traditional views of the apocalypse become more relevant in an environmental context. As Lawrence Buell writes in *The Environmental Imagination*, "Apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal [. . .] the rhetoric of apocalypticism implies that the fate of the world hinges on the arousal of the imagination to a sense of crisis" (285).

As a literary form, apocalypse grew out of the Judeo-Christian vision of the end of the world. The term ‘apocalyptic’ is used to refer to literature that focuses on cataclysm and disaster in the world and uses the catastrophic imagery of the Book of Revelation to describe those events. As a result, the popular misconception is that of apocalypse meaning disaster or the end of the world. But apocalypse is not disaster but revelation. The last book of the Bible that is also called the Apocalypse is in fact
"The Revelation to John." The word 'apocalypse' is derived from the Greek word *apokaluptein*, meaning to 'uncover,' 'reveal,' 'disclose.' Apocalypse is eschatological in nature (the root is *eskhatos*, meaning furthest or uttermost); it is concerned with final things, with the catastrophic end of the present age and with the new age. From a Judeo-Christian religious point of view, apocalypse is the Last Judgement, when sinners are punished and the just rewarded. But read as a cultural text, apocalypticism is the culmination of human recklessness, and apocalyptic literature is a last call to the human race to cease the destruction. Apocalyptic literature relies upon the basic elements and structure of the Book of Revelation—the apocalyptic imagery of cataclysm and new earthly paradise, the linear progression of time and the historicity which it implies, and the narrative methodology of the Book of Revelation (Tangney par. 7).

Confronted with Robinson Jeffers's obsession with violence, critics have described him as misanthropic and pessimistic. But living as he did in the period that witnessed the two world wars, Jeffers was quick to recognize the apocalyptic implications inherent in Western society. Like the Biblical apocalypticist, Jeffers too imagines a final cataclysm and a new earth, but these features do not have religious overtones but rather are imagined as cultural upheaval and renewal. In "Self Criticism in February" Jeffers alludes to the oft-repeated charge that he is too interested in violence. The tranquil blue beauty of the sea does not merit his attention. His ocean is sombre yellow. "With wrack from the battered valley, it is speckled with violent foam-heads... And tiger-striped with long lovely storm-shadows" (2: 561). He points to the violence of the times and defends himself that "it is not / Perversity but need / that perceives the storm-beauty." In "The Bloody Sire," he speaks of the necessity of violence in the evolution of the world and its history. "Stark violence is still the sire of
all the world’s values.” Even the bloodshed and violence of the world wars are necessary:

What but the wolf’s tooth whittled so fine
The fleet limbs of the antelope?
What but fear winged the birds, and hunger
Jewelled with such eyes the great goshawk’s head?

Who would remember Helen’s face
Lacking the terrible halo of spears?
Who formed Christ but Herod and Caesar.
The cruel and bloody victories of Caesar? (3: 25)

In “Tamar,” Jeffers uses a number of apocalyptic images as he narrates the story of the imminent destruction of the house of Cauldwell. The screaming of the wind and the sound of the ocean pounding granite become outward manifestations of the turbulence in the minds of the characters. Tamar’s dreams have apocalyptic dimensions: “A wild white horse, / Came out of the wave and trampled her with his hooves, / The horror that she had dreaded through her dreaming / With mystical foreknowledge”(1: 22). In yet another dream, she sees

an axman chopping down a tree and field-mice scampering
Out of the roots—when suddenly like a shift of wind the dream
Changed and grew awful, she watched dark horsemen coming out of the south, squadrons of hurrying horsemen
Between the hills and the dark sea, helmeted like the soldiers of the war in France.
Carrying torches. (1: 54)
Even the other characters are troubled by terrible dreams and visions and apocalyptic expectations. Ramon Ramirez, herdsman of the Cauldwell herds sees a similar vision of horsemen carrying torches. Old Cauldwell waits for the day of judgement:

'I have prayed to the hills to come and cover me,
We are on the drop-off cliff of the world and dare not meet Him, I with two days to live, even I
Shall watch the ocean boiling and the sea curl up like paper in a fire and the dry bed

Crack to the bottom.' (1: 84)

The reluctant dawn too is described in terms that suggest disaster. the forces of doom being released to flow down the valley like lava: "Old Cauldwell from his window saw the cloudy light seep up the sky from the overhanging Hilltops, the dawn was dammed behind the hills but overflowed at last and ran down on the sea." "The withered house of an old man and a withered woman and an idiot woman," seems to await a cleansing destruction. The trees down the coast are "tall and terrible horsemen on patrol, alternate giants / Guarding the granite and sand frontiers of the last ocean."

The violence of the landscape is vividly portrayed in the poem:

The calm and large

Pacific surge heavy with summer rolling southeast from a far origin
Battered to foam among the stumps of granite below.
Lamar watched it swing up the little fjords and fountain
Not angrily in the blow holes; a gray vapor
Breathed up among the buttressed writhings of the cypress trunks
And branches swollen with blood-red lichen. (1: 34)
The geographic features of the coastal region where Jeffers lived encouraged his apocalyptic intensity. Edward A. Nickerson writes:

The fire, wind, earthquake, and deluge of apocalyptic writing are real threats in the bare mountains south of Carmel. The coast is dry from late spring until at least October, and fires that consume many acres are a persistent threat. The frequent strong winds that blow in off the sea increase the fire danger. The San Andreas earthquake fault runs just along the coast and tremors are common [. . .]. The same winds that bring fire in September can bring torrential rains in December, threatening dwellings in the canyon-bottoms with earthslides. (WAL 12: 113)

The apocalyptic manifestations of fire, wind, water, and earth—forest fires, holocausts, storms, deluges, and earthquakes—menace the lives of his characters. The poet persistently speculates on man's future albeit gloomily, and emphasizes nature's catastrophic qualities. Fire plays an important role in Jeffers's poems just as in the Biblical apocalypses. Fire threatens to destroy the setting as in "Cawdor," or actually destroys it as in "Tamar." The Double Axe" and "Hungerfield." In these poems, fire is the agent, which cleanses through destruction the land that has been polluted by man; it is an agent of retribution and, at the same time, of mercy, putting an end to the torment of the main characters. Part II of "The Double Axe" introduces the old Inhumanist, the caretaker of the fire-razed Gore land, with a reminder that nature has covered the scars of that devastating fire. The poem again ends with a nuclear holocaust that destroys the world, but not completely, for the old inhumanist survives and awakens to a red dawn, confident in the hope that the human race too would survive. Like fire, wind and rain are also cleansing as well as destructive forces.
Earthquake usually functions as a suggestion of menace, rather than as an actual destroying force.

The narrative methodology of the Book of Revelation is as crucial to apocalypticism as the element of disaster. Lois Parkinson Zamora points out in *Writing the Apocalypse* (Hereafter referred to as *WTA*), that in the Judeo-Christian apocalypses, the end of the world is described from the point of view of a narrator who is radically opposed to existing spiritual and political practices. His narrative reflects not only his opposition to existing practices but also his political powerlessness to change them. His is a subversive vision: he is outside the cultural and political mainstream, awaiting God's intervention in human history, when the corrupt world of the present will be supplanted by a new and transcendent realm (2). Jeffers too assumes such a narrative stance. His view from the Hawk Tower has come to symbolize his characteristic inhumanist stance of the detached observer brooding over the fate of the world—an attitude remarkably like that of the apocalyptic writers of the Bible. The Tower stands physically at "world's end:" from the tower the poet-prophet evaluates mankind from the detached standpoint of the apocalyptic narrator. In "Margrave," as in many other poems, the poet's point of view is that from the tower—"on the small marble-paved platform / On the turret on the head of the tower/ Watching the night deepen" (2: 171). At times his is a cosmic view that can see the earth as a particle of dust and the sun as a sand grain. His detached inhumanist stance enables him to see the earth and man in their proper place in the cosmos. He criticizes the human hubris that insists that the "earth was the world and man was its measure." The apocalyptic-poet witnesses the worsening condition of civilization. He looks to the future and sees the present fecundity leading to decadence. In "Air-Raid Rehearsals," his tone is that of the Biblical prophets:
Unhappy time why have you built up your house
So high that it cannot stand? I see that it has to fall:
When I look closer I can see nothing clearly, my eyes are blinded with rain.
I see far fires and dim degradation
Under the war-planes and neither Christ nor Lenin will save you.
I see the March rain walk on the mountain, sombre and lovely on the green mountains. (2: 516)

He sees the "grand and fatal movements toward death," but is helpless to stave away the disaster: "I would burn my right hand in a slow fire / To change the future [...] I should do foolishly." but he can only watch "The dance of the / Dream-led masses down the dark mountain." (2: 515)

The narrator, though he stands outside the mainstream, is also part of the action. He sees the future but cannot avoid the present. He too is implicated in the corruption:

I am also not innocent
Of contagion, but have spread my spirit on the deep world.
I have gotten sons and sent the fire wider,
I have planted trees, they also feel while they live,
I have humanized the ancient sea-sculptured cliff
And the ocean's wreckage of rock
Into a house and a tower,
Hastening the sure decay of granite with my hammer,
Its hard dust will make soft flesh;
And have widened in my idleness
He concludes that man's contagion is also a part of the intricate scheme of things: "It is likely the enormous beauty of the world requires for completion our ghostly increment. It has to dream, and dream badly, a moment of its night" (2: 167).

From a point ostensibly beyond the end of time, the apocalypticist surveys the whole of human history, focusing on its cataclysmic end (WTA 2). The narrator of apocalypse must be one who can occupy a unique position—a position that is both historical and ahistorical, a position at once inside and outside of time, a position from which he can simultaneously recall the past, report on the present, and warn of the future, and at the same time, report on the future as if it were the past (Tangney par. 15). For the apocalypticist, the future is past: his is a statement of God's plan for the completion of history, alternately in the prophetic future, then as accomplished fact (WTA 2). "The Broken Balance" opens with a reference to the people of Tuscany hearing a pealing of trumpets high up in the air, which the soothsayers interpret as a sign of the end of the age. Jeffers too hears a shrill and mournful trumpet-blast. He contrasts the natural order with the human order, and finds the human order wanting. He can see that man and his civilization standing on the peak of time have begun to perish. Standing in the present, he remembers the "farther future," as if it were the past. He remembers the "last man dying. Without succession under the confident eyes of the stars." From his vantage point outside time, he has come to realize that even the "bald ape's by-shot / Was moderately admirable." In the final stanza, the poet seems to be in that future
world, the world which has resumed "the old lonely immortal / Splendor" where he
stands as if in the present and watches the stubborn grass "enjoy wonderful
vengeances and suck / The arteries and walk in triumph on the faces" (1:372).

Because it is eschatological, apocalypse must be concerned with time. Lois
Parkinson Zamora, in her introduction to The Apocalyptic Vision in America (2).
points out that "apocalypse is a revelation of spiritual realities in the future, realities
which are given temporal sequence and historical embodiment by the apocalyptist"
(qtd. in Tangney par. 12). As Tangney further states, in apocalypticism, progression
of time is linear, not continuous. There is a final point of rupture after which a new
time begins. Apocalypticism does not concern itself with rebirth, but with a new
beginning. On the other hand, Jeffers's concept of time is cyclical, following the
of American civilization settling in "the mold of its vulgarity, heavily thickening to
empire." The Tiresias-like poet reminds us of the cyclic nature of all existence, that
decadence can lead to fecundity and back to decadence—an unending cycle: "I sadly
smiling remember that the flower fades to make fruit, the fruit rots to make earth. / 
Out of the mother; and through the spring exultances, ripeness and decadence; and
home to the mother" (1: 15). "Shiva," however is one of the few poems where one
can see the apocalyptic linear progression of time. "Shiva" is a poem with apocalyptic
overtones, a poem that heralds the advent of pure destruction. Shiva is the Hindu god
of destruction and creation. The title implies that there will be no creation without
destruction. The hawk of destruction is "picking the birds out of our sky"—"the
pigeons of peace and security," "the lonely heron of liberty." Science, the arts, the
state, will all be her victims. Even the "wild white swan of the beauty of things" will
have to be offered as a sacrifice. But from destruction will come renewal—not a
renewal of the old order, but the birth of a new world. The hawk will "hatch a new brood. / Hang new heavens with new birds" (2: 605). Even though the poem ends with "all be renewed," the poet does not call for rebirth of the same old birds. He calls instead for entirely new birds, a new civilization and culture, the old one having been wiped from the face of the earth by the forces of Armageddon, in whatever form those forces might come.

Jeffers tries to give his apocalyptic voice a contemporary significance when in "The Day is a Poem," we are historically and politically located at the very beginning of the poem: "This morning Hitler spoke in Danzig, we heard his voice." Jeffers then blends political upheaval and natural upheaval. The description of Hitler, "Wailing in Danzig, invoking destruction and wailing at it," is followed by an apocalyptic description of the scene before him:

Here, the day was extremely hot; about noon
A south wind like a blast from hell's mouth spilled a light rain
On the parched land, and at five a light earthquake
Danced the house, no harm done. (3: 16)

Cataclysmic images persist: natural phenomena assume ominous overtones as signs of impending doom— "the blood-red moon drooping slowly / Into the black sea through bursts of dry lightning and distant thunder." But Hitler's wailing, with its implicit violence, somehow seems to be more threatening than the natural violence.

Because in apocalypse, by definition, the death of the individual and the end of the world coincide, personal and communal social goals become inextricably bound: for the apocalypticist, there is no distinction between history and biography (HT 4 14). In "Tamar," the House of Cauldwell seems to be a microcosm of the world, and its destruction seems to imply the destruction of the human race as a whole. The
fire that destroys the ranch seems to signify a holocaust that destroys the whole world. The families in his long poems lead such isolated lives, that when they are destroyed, human habitation itself seems to be wiped out. The holocaust that destroys the coastal ranch is very often a man-made disaster. But Jeffers does not stop with the devastation. In poem after poem, he implies that a world purged of humans by human engineered disasters would not be too catastrophic because wild nature in some form would be sure to endure. But rather than actual extinction, he seems to envisage periodic returns to primitivism, in keeping with his cyclic view of existence.

For Jeffers who rejected Christianity because it was anthropomorphic and exalted man to a central place in the universe (Cox, *Galaxy* [23]), the catastrophe results from man's presumption and short-sightedness. His god is the beauty of things and it is to a realization of that transhuman magnificence that he propels his readers. Along with the acute sense of disruption is the conviction that the impending crisis will have the cleansing effect of radical renewal. He uses imagery of cataclysm not to promote Christian theology but as a vehicle for or framework of an argument or an ethic that has much to do, as Tangney points out, with cultural and social criticism of America (par. 11). In "The Answer" (2: 536) Jeffers exhorts his readers "not to be deluded by dreams. To know that great civilizations have broken down into violence, and their tyrants come many times before." He can see that "evils are essential," but that one should "not be duped / By dreams of universal justice or happiness" and should "know that however ugly the parts appear the whole remains beautiful." "Integrity is wholeness," he tells us, "the greatest beauty is / Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty of the universe." One has to learn to love that organic wholeness, "not man/ Apart from that."
Like an apocalyptist who presents dilemmas which he cannot and does not want to resolve, who believes neither in answers nor in endings (WTA 5), Jeffers too does not have a final solution. His apocalypticism is not the prediction of disaster but the narration of the ethic of avoiding it. It is a metaphor central to his ecocentric projection of the future of a civilization that refuses to transform itself and seems bent on destruction.

In an essay entitled “Notes for a Novel about the End of the World,” Walker Percy expresses his sense of post-modern culture, and the relation of the novel to that culture. The subject of the post-modern novel is a man who has “very nearly come to the end of the line,” and the function of this fiction is to avert that end by writing about it (qtd. in WTA 6). Jeffers has always insisted that he writes his violent poems to “magic / Horror away from the house [. . .],” a strategy of the jeremiad, where images of doom are created in an attempt to avert doom. His is an ambivalent attitude that warns of and, at the same time, waits for the cleansing storm that would scour the cumbered earth of its accumulated filth as in “November Surf.” He sees the coming disaster as inevitable in the cyclic order of existence, and at the same time castigates man with a heavy prophetic hand. But this ambivalence of motives and odd mixture of tones characterizes all apocalyptic description. Jeffers’ s stance is like that of the apocalyptist who is both appalled and enthralled by God’s wrath (WTA 12). He sees it as both punishment for sins committed and as promise of redemption. Zamora points out that apocalypse is not merely a vision of doom: it is, on the contrary, a luminous vision of the fulfillment of God’s promise of justice and communal salvation (WTA 2).

Though one cannot deny the intensely apocalyptic nature of Jeffers’ s poetry, the poet is ambiguous about the nature of the disaster he portrays. His apocalypse
could be an environmental disaster: it could just as well be the inevitable destruction of the continually expanding and contracting universe, the manifestation of the evolutionary process or the natural downswing of a dominant civilization. At the same time, it is impossible to ignore the strong note of environmental concern that runs through the poems. At the end of the deluge he sees a new earth:

The cities gone down, the people fewer and the hawks more numerous.
The rivers from mouth to source pure; when the two-footed Mammal, being someways one of the nobler animals, regains
The dignity of room, the value of rareness. (2: 159)

The environmental apocalypticism of Robinson Jeffers can be seen in many of his poems in which he laments the decadence of the age and the despoliation caused to our planet by short-sighted human greed and indifference. He is the apocalyptic narrator crying out to the world, advising a course of prudent conduct in the face of inevitable catastrophe. In "The Beautiful Captive" (3: 428), Jeffers warns of the piling up of nuclear weapons, which would one day surely "infect the elements and blight the whole earth"

Those whom the blasts miss, the air and water will poison them.
Those who survive,
Their children will be dying monsters.
I have thought for a long time that we are too many . . . this will adjust us.
I have pitted the beautiful earth
Ridden by such a master as the human race. Now if we die like the dinosaurs, the beautiful
Planet will be the happier.
She is not domesticated. She weeps in her service. The lovely forehead
knows (13:428)

In many of his poems the filth that really burdens the earth is the human race itself and he often looks forward to a time when "the earth will scratch herself and smile and run off humanity." He reiterates in many of his poems that the natural world will resume its lost splendour with the passing of man. But even in the most apocalyptic section of "The Inhumanist," even after the holocaust, the human race survives, "slightly scorched." but sloughing off its skin like a serpent in spring. And the old man awakes to a "red dawn." The poet does not visualize the total annihilation of man but the evolution of a new human race able to recognize the transhuman magnificence and the organic wholeness of life and things. Like the Biblical apocalyptists who despaired of mankind's sinful existence and envisioned redemption after his destruction, Jeffers too rejects human solipsism and foresees redemption beyond humanity in transhuman magnificence. The despair of the Biblical apocalyptists is balanced by hope—hope of a New Jerusalem. Though he does not envision any future golden age for humanity, there is hope in his poetry to match his despair—a hope derived from his relationship with the physical world and his awareness of the "beauty of things." Jeffers sees beauty not as a static quality but as a dynamic force, a cycle of growth, decadence, death, and rebirth in which all forms of life would play a part respecting each other. This process he calls "discovery." He defines his God as the universe of energy, drawing on modern physics, as well as an ecological model of interdependency. As he explains to an inquirer: "[...]the universe is one being, all its parts are different expressions of the same energy [...] parts of one organic whole. This is physics. I believe, as well as religion.) The parts change and pass, or die. People and races and rocks and stars [...] This whole is in all its
parts so beautiful, and is felt by me to be so intensely in earnest, that I am compelled
to love it, and to think of it as divine. It seems to me that this whole alone is worthy of
the deeper sort of love: and that here is peace, freedom, I might say a kind of
salvation” (SL, 221). This finally becomes the revelation that Jeffers makes, as he
takes his readers to the edge of catastrophe and offers them an alternative, away from
their homocentric pretensions. As Nickerson says, discovery is thus another word for
uncovering or unveiling:

Discovery is apocalypse, the continual manifestation of evolutionary
struggle. In this process, the fires and windstorms, driving rains and
wrenching earthquakes of the California coast are part of redemptive
beauty just as much as the towering treeless mountains, the narrow
canyons with their little groves of redwoods, and the swirl and toss of
the sea against granite rocks. The coastal area's natural violence, as
well as its geographic position at the end of the world's westering
migrations, served to remind Jeffers continually of his concept of
discovery. Thus, considering anew his statement that the Carmel area
was his 'inevitable place,' one finds the adjective profoundly
significant. Apocalyptic poet and apocalyptic place were inextricably
and inevitably united. (WAL12: 121-122)

Note

1 The allusions in the poem are Biblical. The images used by St. John in the Book
of Revelation are echoed in the poem: "When he opened the sixth seal. I looked, and
behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full
moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds
its winter fruit when shaken by a gale; the sky vanished like a scroll that is rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place" (Rev 6: 12-14).

**Works Cited**


