
THE POST-APOCALYPTIC NOVEL IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Modernity beyond Salvage

HEATHER J. HICKS



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Heather J. Hicks

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For Steve

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INTRODUCTION: MODERNITY BEYOND SALVAGE

A resourceful loner, a dangerous voyage, a shipwreck, a desert island, a life of almost unimaginable solitude, desperate scavenging, despair, hope, the discovery of a footprint, conquest in the guise of love, bloody warfare, escape. These are the iconic plot elements of what many regard as the first novel written in the English language, *Robinson Crusoe*, by Daniel Defoe, published in 1719. We are approaching its three-hundredth anniversary, a fact that might seem to relegate the Crusoe narrative to the musty recesses of history. Yet striking allusions to these elements of Defoe's landmark text have appeared in very recent novels by some of the world's most prominent authors, including *Oryx and Crake* (2003) by Margaret Atwood, *Cloud Atlas* (2004) by David Mitchell, *The Road* (2006) by Cormac McCarthy, *The Stone Gods* (2007) by Jeanette Winterson, *Zone One* (2011) by Colson Whitehead, and the Ship Breaker series (2010, 2012) by Paolo Bacigalupi. Along with references to the story of the ill-fated adventurer, these novels have something else in common. They are all about the end of the world as we know it.

This presents us with something of a mystery: Why Crusoe? Why have major novelists of our own moment felt the need to reach back to a book that is centuries old when trying to imagine our global future? Why has the story of a single shipwrecked man been transformed into the story of a wrecked world? A range of answers come to mind, from Crusoe's mythic stature as a "sole survivor" to Defoe's role in founding the conventions of adventure narrative.¹ Yet, in my view, it is Crusoe's role as an avatar of modernity that is most crucial to understanding his haunting presence in contemporary narratives of global disaster. Michael Chabon notes, "Post-apocalyptic tales of lone survivors . . . have long played fruitfully with the pattern of [*Robinson Crusoe*], depicting as heroic if problematic a lone attempt to impose a bourgeois social order on an irrational empty wilderness after the bomb or virus strikes" (7). However, a bourgeois social order is but one of the many dimensions of modernity the characters in these

recent texts tentatively revive. By most measures, *Robinson Crusoe* is not a post-apocalyptic novel; at the very dawn of modernity, a single man loses his place in that newly modern world, but it goes on without him. Yet his predicament is the one writers of post-apocalyptic narratives since the Enlightenment have wanted readers to confront. Crusoe has lost his modern life and wants it back. He famously goes about salvaging and rebuilding that existence, scrap by scrap, pot by pot, "plantation" by plantation. In the troubling scope of these efforts, we see mirrored the challenge survivors in contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction face as they confront the question of what elements of modernity—if any—they should reclaim.

The Post-Apocalyptic Novel in the Twenty-First Century: Modernity beyond Salvage explores a recent development in what I view to be the long story of the post-apocalyptic novel's treatment of the episteme of modernity. That development is the publication of a series of post-apocalyptic literary novels by well-known anglophone authors from America, England, and Canada since the beginning of the twenty-first century. These books reflect a set of historical and epistemological transformations—the globalized economy intensified by the end of the Cold War; the international recognition of the menace of anthropogenic global warming; the attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror; the growing disavowal within intellectual circles of postmodernity as a category of periodization; and the international resurgence of the concept of "modernity." *The Post-Apocalyptic Novel in the Twenty-First Century* argues that, as an alternative to postmodern formal experimentation, these texts use the conventions of post-apocalyptic genre fiction to interrogate the category of modernity. One premise of this book is that with the emergence of modernity in the eighteenth century, apocalypse shifted from its origins as the story of the annihilation of a sinful human world to become, in novel form, the story of the collapse of modernity itself. Like most post-apocalyptic fiction dating from the Enlightenment period, the recent texts I examine at moments mourn this fall or retreat to fantasies of the premodern. Yet in addition to these traditions, they also attempt to reckon with modernity after reports of its death have been greatly exaggerated.

Modernity was placed under erasure in the latter decades of the twentieth century by the emergence of postmodernism. It is a commonplace that postmodern theory promulgated a post-apocalyptic sensibility; heralding the collapse of various pillars of modern thought from "man" to the "metanarrative," the structure of feeling known as postmodernism seemed to toll the death knell of modernity.² Indeed, from this new

theoretical perspective, post-apocalyptic narrative had always already been postmodern, rehearsing the foundering of modernity since its very inception. By a number of metrics, however, the influence of postmodern theory has waned since the end of the Cold War, and while what is staged in the twenty-first-century post-apocalyptic novel is still, as ever, the dissolution of modernity, alongside those conventions, we also see the distinctive enactment of the end of postmodernity as a cultural dominant in these texts. Whereas postmodern post-apocalyptic narratives written from the 1960s through the 1980s charted characters' departure from modernity into ever deeper aleatory terrain, the characters in many of these new millennial narratives begin in conditions of what we might call postmodern modernity, conditions that break down and from which the characters must then move forward.³

I have chosen salvage as a keyword for my study because salvage is a crucial practical and conceptual element of the twenty-first-century novels I consider here. From its earliest roots in the ancient Near East, apocalyptic literature has been profoundly intertextual, consistently borrowing and adapting material from earlier texts. All of the contemporary texts I examine continue this tradition of literary salvage. Beyond such literary appropriations, salvage also abides within these texts as a central action and theme. In the aftermath of catastrophe, the characters are confronted with the remnants of the modern world—from the immaterial domain of words and ideas to the physical detritus of objects and machines—and they must “shore” “[t]hese fragments,” as T. S. Eliot puts it in his post-apocalyptic masterpiece, *The Waste Land* (430). It is in this process of reclamation that we also see an unfolding relationship to modernity, and my title encodes a taut dialectic within these texts: either survivors should move beyond salvaging mere scraps of modernity and rebuild dimensions of it in earnest or they should concede that modernity is beyond salvage and attempt to devise something that transcends its historical forms.⁴

Accompanying questions of the sort of world that should emerge from the wreckage, there is an internal dimension to this confrontation with modernity; an essential process for the protagonists in each of these narratives is recognizing what they can or should become, what forms of subjectivity might be salvaged, jerry-rigged, or grown in the new conditions in which they find themselves. In addition to Robinson Crusoe, a kaleidoscope of other premodern, modern, and postmodern archetypes are introduced in these novels. Indeed, these books read as bestiaries, full of old and new creatures that profoundly transform the lineaments of the modern Western conception of the human self. From cannibals to clones, these are the archetypes of the new post-apocalyptic canon. Presented

with their tangled literary and historical genomes, we are invited to ask what should survive and why.

* * *

The long story of modern post-apocalyptic fiction begins with Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), texts that anticipate a larger body of work that scholar Warren Wagar terms "secular eschatology."⁵ Unlike Wagar's more catholic approach, however, I am particularly concerned with the specifically literary tradition of post-apocalyptic fiction, stretching from Defoe onward. It is my contention that the post-apocalyptic novel is the sine qua non of modern fiction, which is to say, the form that most directly addresses the nature of modernity in its totality both as an epistemology and as a lived experience. Berger observes, "The apocalyptic event, in order to be properly apocalyptic, must in its destructive moment clarify and illuminate the true nature of what has been brought to an end" (5). In text after text, beginning in the Enlightenment period, what has been brought to an apocalyptic end are the physical structures, social formations, and values of modern life, and like the chalk outline of a murder victim, the very absence of these phenomena becomes the primary concern of these narratives and a potent starting point for weighing their meaning.⁶

For the better part of two centuries of post-apocalyptic fiction, to lose the modern was unequivocally tragic. *Robinson Crusoe*, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, and another milestone of the genre, Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), depict the prospect of failed modernity in agonizingly negative terms. This elegiac treatment of a venerated modernity remains largely dominant through the publication of H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1898). Yet one also begins to detect a shift in the beginning of the twentieth century: the sharp eyes and light step of Edwin in Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* (1912) hints that perhaps the premodern might be an improvement over the swarming cities of the modern era, whose effete denizens have so readily succumbed to the plague. It is not until the Cold War period, however, that post-apocalyptic narratives begin to express gleeful relief at the collapse of modernity. As Brian Aldiss has suggested, a number of these texts present "cosy catastrophe[s]" (294); in John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), for instance, a small band of men and women enjoy freedom from the stresses of modern life after the remainder of the population is blinded by satellite weaponry and quickly perishes.⁷ The pastoral does not suffice for long, however, and writers like Philip K. Dick in *Dr. Bloodmoney* (1965) and J. G. Ballard in *The Drought*

(1965) begin to cast forward rather than back, marking a departure into a third stage of post-apocalyptic narrative by continuing to register the pleasures of modernity's fall but looking toward some new sort of post-modern existence for solace. Their work, along with post-apocalyptic texts by Doris Lessing (*Memoirs of a Survivor*, 1974), Russell Hoban (*Riddley Walker*, 1980), Denis Johnson (*Fiskadoro*, 1985), Paul Auster (*In the Country of Last Things*, 1987), and David Markson (*Wittgenstein's Mistress*, 1988), constitutes actively postmodern post-apocalyptic narratives, fervidly chronicling nonmodern ontologies and embracing what Linda Hutcheon calls the "'poetics' of postmodernism" (ix).⁸ By contrast, the texts I analyze here have reengaged more directly with what Fredric Jameson terms the "narrative category" of modernity (40), while also openly borrowing the conventions of genre fiction—in this case, post-apocalyptic science fiction.

This is not to say that the influence of postmodern aesthetics and theory are not evident in the novels I analyze. The most notable legacy is the narrative fragmentation that is operative to one degree or another in all the works save Bacigalupi's. To this technique, we can add Winterson's and Mitchell's metafictional gestures. At the level of epistemology, we also encounter Atwood's, Mitchell's, and Winterson's skepticism toward the destructive aspects of scientific rationality, while they, as well as Whitehead, present the dangers of a culture saturated and disoriented by simulacra. More generally, the novels in this study tend to reflect postmodern politics of difference through critiques of sexism, racism, colonialism, and humanism. Yet interlaced with these postmodern modalities are political and social narratives that torque toward modern ideology. And rather than the profound experimentation, fragmentation, indeterminacy, and mysticism of the fictions of their recent predecessors, these novelists skew back toward realist prose and the recognizable settings, characters, and plots of genre science fiction.

My intellectual lineage in this project becomes clear from the feminist, postcolonial, and Marxist critics, including Walter Benjamin, Wendy Brown, Jed Esty, Marianne Hirsch, Catherine Keller, Esther Leslie, David Medalie, and Franco Moretti, who inform my readings of the various novels of the post-apocalyptic canon. There has been a marked surge of critical interest in apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction since the turn of the twenty-first century, and this body of scholarship has been crucial to my thinking as well. These critical studies have typically focused either on works by major literary figures that include oblique references to Christian apocalypse or on popular writers and filmmakers who offer full-blown narratives of global devastation.⁹ One of the objectives of this book is to address a new literary phenomenon, an unprecedented outpouring

of fully developed post-apocalyptic narratives by major, critically acclaimed anglophone writers.¹⁰ While what Andrew Hoberek has called the “genre turn” in twenty-first-century literary fiction has begun to attract critical attention, the new post-apocalyptic canon seems a particularly fascinating case study: influential writers from across the globe, all taking up the same genre conventions in order to explore a range of urgent cultural, political, environmental, and economic questions.¹¹ In its prime, postmodern fiction was known for its incorporation of mass-market genres; that engagement, however, was frequently ironic and self-conscious. The texts I examine, in contrast, tend to traffic in the post-apocalyptic genre’s grim conventions not with scare quotes but rather with a sincere intention to *scare readers*.

Recent apocalyptic critics have come up with an impressive catalog of terms for the varieties of apocalyptic narrative: post-apocalypse, neo-apocalypse, crypto-apocalypse, counter-apocalypse, ana-apocalypse, ironic apocalypse, technological apocalypse, anti-apocalypse, capitalist apocalypse, slow apocalypse, and postmodern apocalypse, among others.¹² As this list suggests, terminology can pose considerable challenges when confronting fictions that portray global devastation. In the broadest sense, I treat post-apocalyptic literature as a subset of apocalyptic literature, since the former relies on the premise of the latter. Indeed, all of the texts in this study depict, at least in passing and often in detail, events leading up to a catastrophe of national or international proportions, as well as the catastrophe itself. In particular, the novels *Oryx and Crake*, *Cloud Atlas*, and *The Stone Gods*, which I discuss in the first three chapters of this book, give extensive attention to events preceding the collapse of human civilization. Aspects of these texts can be understood as “apocalyptic” in both the Christian and secular senses, and when treating the more traditionally apocalyptic aspects of the texts, I use this term. Yet in these novels as well as the remainder of the books I consider here, significant attention is also given to the aftermath of the disaster. In chapter three and beyond, I analyze *The Road*, *Zone One*, and *Ship Breaker*, novels that dedicate most of their narrative space to events after the collapse of modernity.

Most importantly, regardless of the extent of attention given to events before and during the cataclysm, the texts are powerfully united by a deep and manifest affiliation with post-apocalyptic genre fiction, including some or all of the widely recognized conventions of that form: ragged bands of survivors; demolished urban environments surrounded by depleted countryside; defunct technologies; desperate scavenging; poignant yearning for a lost civilization, often signified by the written word; and extreme violence, including cannibalism, enacted by roving gangs of outlaws. Within my own project, my baseline definition of

post-apocalyptic fiction is material that depicts what might be called “globalized ruin.” By this I mean works that portray catastrophe of at least a national level and, by nature of our globalized political economy, assume dramatic effects elsewhere as well. As these texts remind us, one of the most potent and distinctive aspects of our own contemporary apocalyptic fears is the *loss* of a global perspective—the luxury of global intelligence that we currently enjoy through access to 24-hour international news is one of the elements of modernity that is conspicuously denied the characters in these narratives.¹³ In many cases, they simply don’t *know* if the rest of the world suffers as they do.

In their studies of post-apocalyptic literature, critics James Berger and Teresa Heffernan illuminate an important question regarding the role of the Christian tradition of apocalypse in this fiction focused on the aftermath of cataclysm. On the one hand, Berger seeks to “understand the *apocalyptic* representations of historical catastrophes, how writing about history constructs scenarios ‘after the end,’ in which the ending . . . both does and does not take place” (emphasis mine, xii). Heffernan, on the other hand, argues that the twentieth century has fully departed from that religious tradition and is squarely concerned with “[c]atastrophic narrations . . . that are bereft of redemption and revelation” (6). My own stance is closer to Berger’s; that is, while the books that I take up in this study represent sweeping destruction primarily within a secular and existential framework rather than a religious or supernatural one, they are not strictly “catastrophic,” as Heffernan intends this term. Instead, they explore a variety of futures following the destruction of contemporary modernity, typically making reference both to Christian eschatology and to a range of other literary texts and historical events. As Quinby suggests, “The unusual elasticity of the term ‘apocalypse’ facilitates . . . [a] convergence of religious and secular attitudes and practices” (xii).

Pursuing matters of definition further, it is useful to consider the tension in these texts between the post-apocalyptic and dystopian traditions. Some critics, most notably Ursula Heise, use the term “dystopian” rather than post-apocalyptic to describe the many recent novels that constitute the literary trend that I am analyzing here. Certainly, if we think about a dystopia strictly as a degraded society, then “post-apocalyptic” and “dystopian” are essentially synonymous. In some respects, dystopian content is symptomatic of the distinction between the Christian apocalyptic tradition, which culminates in the utopian New Jerusalem, and the secular post-apocalyptic genre, which, without fail, imagines the destruction of modernity as leading to a state of at least provisional suffering and oppression. Yet it is not so easy to tease apart the impulses of the apocalyptic and the dystopian, since the Western dystopian tradition as it has emerged in

Soviet-inspired texts like *We* or *1984* is predicated on the notion that a society attempted to create a utopia only to conceive its opposite.¹⁴ If, as Heffernan suggests, the modern constructs of “History, the Nation, and Man” are all driven by “secular dreams” of “purpose, perfection, and permanence” that are distilled from “the Genesis to Revelation story” (4–5), then the stories of the collapse of the modern world into ruin do follow the utopia-to-dystopia telos. That thread is especially detectable in some of the narratives I examine here: In Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*, the text in this study most directly informed by the Book of Revelation, Crake aspires to create a new Paradise, only to lay waste to human civilization. In Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone Gods* the drive for a good life of unlimited consumerism has led to environmental collapse. In both authors’ visions, violent groups assert themselves in the power vacuum created by the plague or war that is born of these utopian yearnings. Yet in other texts, the events that have preceded the narrative have not explicitly focused on the effort to build a utopian world.

From another, related point of view, the dystopian tradition presents a world in which a single metanarrative has been imposed on a society. It is the oppressiveness of uniformity—indeed, of a particularly regimented expression of modernity—that lies at the heart of the form. Post-apocalypse typically depicts the opposite extreme: a social landscape punctuated by small communities adhering to various micronarratives. In these visions, the result is not Jean-François Lyotard’s imagined liberation, but instead profound uncertainty in the absence of any points of consensus on which social exchange can safely be predicated. Ultimately, then, while the term dystopian is appropriate in many cases, the term “post-apocalyptic” captures the elements of loss and transformation that are crucial to my analysis of all of these novels.

In her recent review essay “What’s the Matter with Dystopia,” Heise not only relegates all post-apocalyptic narratives to the category of dystopia, but also offers an impassioned critique of the contemporary proliferation of this fiction. According to Heise, the genre has become so recognizable and formulaic that it has lost its capacity to move readers to action. She sees in its “untiring attention to routines of everyday life” a homage to the contemporary DIY movement that makes life after a catastrophe appear more hip than horrifying (n.p.). And she ultimately regards it as a conservative form, offering no innovative ideas for potential change. I will take up the question of repetition and cliché at the end of this introduction, but here I will point out that the writers I examine create remarkably rich, provocative narratives by affixing layers of imaginative detail, intertextual reference, and historically specific critique onto the framework provided by the post-apocalyptic form. Whether matter-of-fact or

gut-wrenching in their tone, whether presenting the plangent reflections of a “last man” or the poignant struggles of a child, these texts retain their function as haunting admonishments about the legacy we risk leaving generations to come. While some texts might romanticize the elbow grease factor of a post-apocalyptic existence, as I discuss in chapter three, the itemizing of the skills required for daily survival that these novels rehearse becomes one of the most powerful ways they engage with the loss of modernity. Indeed, while DIY culture may have shaped these novels, it is equally clear that post-apocalyptic narrative has inspired DIY and maker cultures, motivating individuals to educate themselves about how to survive in a “worst-case scenario.” Finally, I concur with Heise in her call for narratives that generate innovative ideas for how the world’s social systems and economies might be reorganized. Yet the value of such material does not negate the usefulness of texts that extrapolate the bleak outcomes that are likely to be produced by contemporary trends. Nor are these texts strictly negative; as I demonstrate throughout this study, they also imagine new ways in which life might take shape after the destruction of contemporary modernity.

Moving from the laden signifiers of “post-apocalypse,” “apocalypse,” and “dystopia,” I now turn to “modernity,” perhaps the most unruly of the terms my project deploys. According to Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, “Western discourse on modernity is a shifting, hybrid configuration consisting of different, often conflicting, theories, norms, historical experiences, utopic fantasies, and ideological commitments” (15). Similarly, Fredric Jameson has demonstrated that the term modernity is one of the most overdetermined in the English language, enumerating 14 separate historical events or eras that might be understood as the birth of modernity and glossing its relevance in fields from philosophy to political science (31–32). Yet for Jameson as for his intellectual touchstone, Karl Marx, modernity is synonymous with capitalism (12–13). This understanding of modernity is a significant aspect of my own, but my definition includes Gaonkar’s broader characterization of “societal modernization,” which he explains “involves a set of cognitive and social transformations”:

[T]he cognitive transformations include or imply the growth of scientific consciousness, the development of a secular outlook, the doctrine of progress, the primacy of instrumental rationality, the fact-value split, individualistic understandings of the self, contractualist understandings of society, and so on. The social transformations refer to the emergence and institutionalization of market-driven industrial economies, bureaucratically administered states, modes of popular government, rule of law, mass media, and increased mobility, literacy and urbanization. (1–2)

Gaonkar's broad umbrella includes the intellectual, political, and material manifestations of Enlightenment thought. Modernity as I mean the term encompasses the set of developments he describes, as well as such negative effects as the restrictive philosophical notion of the human and the bourgeois drive for comfort and convenience that has created three centuries of racism, sexism, bloody colonial history, and environmental destruction.

The relationship between the concepts of apocalypse and modernity is similarly complex, even confounding. Sharing the perspective of Heffernan that I sketched above, M. H. Abrams and Catherine Keller argue that the Christian tradition of apocalypse gave birth to key aspects of modernity. Abrams famously argues in *Natural Supernaturalism* that the Western understanding of history is a by-product of the Christian tradition of revelation. According to Keller, the spiritual trajectory of New Jerusalem laid out in the New Testament inspired the development of several crucial components of modernity, including its emphasis on progress, its avid colonial drive, and its newly striving scientific inquiry. Frank Kermode, Lois Parkinson Zamora, and Elizabeth Rosen all present variations of an alternative (although not contradictory) perspective that the modern era is one of constant change and perceived crisis that stimulates narratives of apocalypse.¹⁵ Kermode, for instance, writes:

It is commonplace that our times do in fact suffer a more rapid rate of change technologically, and consequently in the increase of social mobility, than any before us. There is nothing fictive about that, and its implications are clear in our own day-to-day lives. What is interesting, though, is the way in which this knowledge is related to apocalypse, so that a mere celebratory figure for social mobility . . . acquires apocalyptic overtones and establishes the language of an elect; and the way in which writers . . . are willing to go along, arguing that the rate of change implies revolution or schism, and that this is a perpetual requirement; that the stage of transition, like the whole of time in an earlier revolution, has become *endless*. (Emphasis in original, 101)

For Kermode, history and eschatology have become coextensive, and apocalypse is our primary framework for understanding modernity (25–26).

In his pioneering examination of the proliferation of narratives of modern, secular eschatology, Warren Wagar takes yet another view, reading what he calls “terminal visions” as expressions of anxiety prompted by the beginning of the end of “the modern era of history” (xiii). Wagar does not see modernity giving birth to apocalyptic narrative—indeed, he traces

the apocalyptic form back to ancient Babylon. Instead, he maintains that it is the *death throes* of modernity that inspire modern apocalyptic literary texts, arguing, "Through their images, Western man expresses disbelief that his civilization can endure, in anything like its present form" (7). He dates the apocalyptic expression of this disbelief as commencing in the early nineteenth century, and intensifying in the 1890s, and then in the 1920s, the 1950s, and again in the late 1970s (13–30).

Perhaps the most widespread view among the latest generation of critics similarly links apocalyptic narrative with the decline of modernity, but locates that change in the early twentieth century. If these recent arguments do not exactly correspond to the critiques of modernity articulated by postmodern thinkers like Lyotard, they complement the general sense of modernity's failure articulated by postmodern theory. In the most influential book written on post-apocalyptic narrative in the past two decades, James Berger argues that we exist in a post-apocalyptic era because the Holocaust and Hiroshima marked the termination of Western civilization. He writes:

It seems significant that in the late twentieth century we have had the opportunity, previously enjoyed only by means of theology and fiction, to see after the end of our civilization—to see in a strange prospective retrospect what the end would actually look like: it would look like a Nazi death camp, or an atomic explosion, or an ecological or urban wasteland. We have been able to see these things because they actually occurred. The most dystopic visions of science fiction can do no more than replicate the actual historical catastrophes of the twentieth century. (xiii)

In Berger's account, the Holocaust is "the apocalypse in history that we are living after" and the "sense of post-apocalypse" that pervades American culture is symptomatic of this trauma that needs to be worked through (xiv, xiii). More recently, Heffernan turns to the writings of D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, Theodor Adorno, and Jean Baudrillard to suggest that a departure from modernity has taken place. She traces the ways that central narratives of modernity have depended on "the spirit of the Christian apocalypse, a narrative that posits an origin and moves definitively, through a series of coherent and concordant events, towards an end that will make sense of all that has come before it" (4). She concludes, however, that "we live in a time after the apocalypse, after the faith in a radically new world, of revelation, of unveiling," leaving her to ask, "what can possibly come after the modern or 'after' its after?" (6, 7).

While fascinating, the connections that Berger and Heffernan draw between "post-apocalyptic culture" and the implosion of Western

modernity are not altogether convincing. Certainly, the epistemological, political, and social impact of the events of World War II cannot be denied. Yet as Wagar has demonstrated, the conviction that society has reached its nadir of violence and corruption has been expressed repeatedly in Western civilization stretching back to Hesiod, who in the eighth century BC, “traces the decline of the world from ages of gold, silver, and bronze to our modern age of iron,” and “warns bitterly of an approaching time when children will be born old, bearing witness to the exhaustion of nature’s energy in a wicked world” (40).¹⁶ Despite his forceful claim, Berger himself implicitly equivocates about whether there is really anything distinctively post-apocalyptic about our own moment, invoking the Holocaust as an exception in various ways but also alluding to many earlier atrocities and traumas, including American slavery and the French Revolution (xii). While texts like McCarthy’s *The Road* do borrow imagery from the Holocaust, in general the twenty-first-century narratives I examine take both a shorter and longer view—the events of 9/11 cast shadows over several of the novels, and the texts also reach far more deeply into the history of modernity than the signal horrors of the first half of the twentieth century. Meanwhile, Berger’s full-throated political critique of the Reagan administration and Heffernan’s identification of the “the hope that the very openness of a narrative . . . keeps alive infinite directions and possibilities” reflect a fundamental aspect of modernity itself—what Gaonkar characterizes as modernity’s identity as “a form of discourse that interrogates the present” (14).

Indeed, a number of scholars have published work since the turn of the new century that makes convincing arguments about the rejuvenated status of modernity. In Gaonkar’s 2001 volume, he frames the centrality of modernity in the twenty-first century in terms of material and social conditions throughout the developing world:

[t]o announce the general end of modernity even as an epoch, much less as an attitude or an ethos, seems premature, if not patently ethnocentric, at a time when non-Western people everywhere begin to engage critically their own hybrid modernities. To be sure, there is a widespread feeling that we are at some sort of a turning point in the trajectory of modernity. That sense of being at the crossroads might have less to do with the ending of an era than with the fact that modernity today is global and multiple and no longer has a governing center or master-narratives to accompany it. (14)

This moment of perception that “modernity has gone global” makes the current elevation of the post-apocalyptic genre especially understandable