‘The World is Always Ending’: Contemporary Eschatological Narratives

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I hereby declare that the data presented in this Dissertation report entitled, '"The World is Always Ending": Contemporary Eschatological Narratives' is based on the results of investigations carried out by me in the Discipline of English at the Shenoi Goembab School of Languages and Literature, Goa University, under the Supervision of Ms Priyanka Verekar and the same has not been submitted elsewhere for the award of a degree or diploma by me. Further, I understand that Goa University or its authorities will be not be responsible for the correctness of observations / experimental or other findings given in the dissertation.

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ABSTRACT

Apocalypse, as a genre, it is a nest of puzzles that invites critical reading. It is an all-encompassing mythical-metaphorical paradigm; history, theology, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and, most importantly, storytelling, are all gambits in the index of the apocalypse. To live is to be aware of death, and this awareness naturally pushes the limits of narrativization and reader reception. This dissertation relies on three closely interconnected critical methods – close reading, genre criticism, and myth criticism – as well as two overarching literary-philosophical traditions of metafiction and absurdism to form the framework in the light of which the texts under study shall be analysed. The dissertation traces the devices of apocalypse in the texts under study, which are found to express that (1) human apathy is the fundamental weapon of mass destruction and (2) the locus of spiritual collapse has shifted from the soul to the mind, reflecting new ideas and anxieties of coherence and human identity. Furthermore, the dissertation analyses the various roles and powers that these texts assign to literature in apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic states of being. Finally, it argues that absurdism is a quintessential perspective in postmodern eschatological narratives – thematically, at the very least, and in characterisation, since several of the apocalyptist figures are archetypical iterations of the absurdist rebel.

Keywords: eschatology, post-apocalypse, metafiction, absurdism, twenty-first century

EPIGRAPH

Hélicon ne viendra pas: nous serons coupables à jamais !

—Albert Camus, *Caligula*

But now – the fear is not of a rapture or a revelation. It is of *catastrophic* change.

—Jonathan Sims, *The Magnus Archives*

What thou seest, write

—The Bible (Revelation 1:19 KJV)

01. INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

To write that the 'end is near' is both a truism and a falsehood, and it has been repeated through practically all of human history. From primitive cultures and 'civilisations' that met with collapse to fundamental cosmologies that speak of the death and rebirth of the world to the undercurrent of apocalyptic sentiment in English Renaissance thought even as the 'New World' was being discovered to the oversaturated doom crying of the (post)modern era, stories of the End are inescapable. They are also necessary.

The corpus under study derives from the Christian tradition, of which the Revelation sets the standard for apocalyptic narratives. The Revelation, more so than the rest of the Bible, relies on and is open to *decryption*. It can best be described as a 'phantasmagoria of words, numbers, colors, images, and incidents in which the end-times are described' (Kirsch). Every apocalyptic story manages to impose upon this template a meaning of its own making, influenced by its own socio-cultural context; as these contexts shift, so do the cyphers and symbols being interpreted. Despite the ubiquity of its usage in interpreting every major event in Western history (and beyond), the Book of Revelation is only begrudgingly accepted as part of the Bible. It has the dubious distinction of being the only text within the Bible to have been 'dictated' by Christ rather than God, the Father, but the incongruity and incoherence of it is not so easily eluded. The Revelation disturbs even the most devout Christians, precisely because it is so open to interpretation: 'Freelance prophecy, the authorities feared, could lead only to theological error, social and political chaos, or even worse—a fear that turned out to be thoroughly justified, and never more so than in our own world' (Kirsch).

This idea is best encapsulated in an episode of *The Magnus Archives*, where a character is inexplicably assaulted by a 'numbers station' in his iPod. Numbers stations – which use shortwave radio to exchange coded messages amongst intelligence officers – originated during the World Wars, and continue to be used in the present day. They are the product and facilitator of this distinctly modern violence, rife with weaponised communication and paranoia. In the aforementioned episode, the numbers station spits out a string of digits in a flat monotone, which, when decoded using a Polybius square, spells out the sentence 'THE WORLD IS ALWAYS ENDING'.

The character is unable to carry out this simple decryption, but is nonetheless afflicted with an apocalyptic temperament so acute that he no longer needed his iPod to hear the numbers for they were 'pouring from the air' around him and 'threaded through [his] mind' (ep. 144). He becomes laden with the *certainty* of an impending disaster that would wreck not just him – that was not the locus of the fear – but would bring about '*all* our dooms' (emphasis in the original). Here, the end is inevitable and inescapable; the only thing left to do was to 'learn how to read' the numbers for they showed the 'course [that] is already plotted' (ibid).

Apocalypse, then, is a genre of narrative that invites critical reading; it is a nest of puzzles awaiting attention and engagement. Furthermore, it is an all-encompassing framework. History, theology, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and, most importantly, storytelling, are all gambits in the index of the apocalypse. To live is to be aware of death, to *fear* and revile it; this naturally leads to narrativization and reader reception. This narrativization is totalising; the apocalyptic sensibility suffuses one's very climate: both in the metaphorical sense of the collective mood being haunted by the apocalypse and the literal sense of ecological and socio-economic decay. DeLillo, one of the most prolific writers of postmodern apocalyptic fiction, remarked that the ubiquity of the apocalyptic sentiment in his œuvre is a reflection of reality, of 'movements or feelings in the air and in the culture around us' (qtd. by Rosen). Even when

the apocalypse is not *imminent*, the people of any given time believe it to be so, and thus the apocalypse becomes *immanent*. The End is always already here, and yet itself evolving.

Berger, in his seminal study *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*, astutely comments that 'conclusive catastrophe has already occurred' and 'apocalyptic writing itself is a reminder, a symptom, an aftermath of some disorienting catastrophe'. The reigning chaos can only be interacted with on the level of apocalyptic mythologising. Eschatological narratives are 'an organising principle imposed on an overwhelming, seemingly disordered universe' that facilitate any given society 'to understand itself and its own time' (Rosen). In other words, eschatological fiction is a sense-making exercise that makes use of this overarching mythical-metaphorical framework to tackle the fundamental questions of life and society/culture. It lends itself to self-definition in times of crisis, and integrates catastrophic change into a coherent narrative. It is a very human response to overwhelming fear.

This fear of universal death, though present in previous epochs, has been heightened in the current era. To begin with, the sheer scale of it is more acutely felt. Past cultures, though declaring the 'end of the world' were not connected with that world in the way that globalisation has made possible. When the end is declared now, it comes with images and symbols that more effectively convey the *mass* nature of the massacre. Secondly, the fear carries more weight of belief because it can draw from ample *evidence*. Global death no longer operates with the prerequisite of divine intervention; human hands have become capable and, in many cases, willing to bring about fire and brimstone on their own power. Furthermore, concepts like entropy and heat death were simply unavailable prior to the modern era. With the expansion of knowledge and the honing of scientific tools, the apocalypse can no longer be safely contained within the realm of paranoia, for it has now been *rationalised*.

The fundamental fear underlining the apocalyptic framework has thus morphed, as Adelard Dekker, the chief supernatural eschatologist within *The Magnus Archives*, posits:

> This fear is new. This is a fear of *extinction*. Of change. It used to be a part of the End [i.e., Death], perhaps; when the end of humanity was to be the end of *all* things. But now – the fear is not of a rapture or a revelation. It is of *catastrophic* change. A change in our world that will wipe out what it means to be us and leave something else in its place. Mankind will warp the world so much it kills us all, and leaves only a thousand years of plastic behind. Technology will strip us of what it means to be human, and leave us something alien and cold. We will press a button that in a moment will destroy everything we have ever been. Animals are witnessing the end of their entire species within a single generation. These are new fears, Gertrude, and a new power is rising to consume them. The Extinction, the Terrible Change, the Future-Without-Us. (ep.134)

Simultaneous with this changing fear has been a change in the tradition of apocalyptic fiction, under the aegis of postmodernism. Postmodernism destabilises any definitive conceptualisation of 'the End'; it has lost its once ubiquitous function of drawing the curtain on history, but now merely signifies a stage of catastrophic change, or at most an end to the anthropocene era. Rosen identifies the question of '[w]hat have we lost in losing this myth?' as a central thematic concern of postmodern eschatology; de Cristofaro similarly asks, 'how is this shift, in which the end is no longer the privileged site of meaning, reflected in narrative form?'

Apocalypse as a narrative form, sharpened by the urgency and extreme settings inherent to such stories, has always served as keen case studies on human identity as well as individual and communal roles in the functioning of real and imagined models of society. Postmodern apocalypses in particular are stories told by an 'order-hungry' people who no longer believe in

any order, a riddle-revelation that bears closer study. By analysing recent stories that people craft about their own fates, the discourses of the contemporary era will be made apparent.

1.2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical literature about apocalyptic fiction produced in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries has pointed out the new sources of fear of how the world will end – nuclear threat, global warming, extremism in both secular and religious beliefs, biological experimentation, artificial intelligence, &c. – which have, at this point, been proliferated and repeated *ad nauseum*. The focus of this body of criticism is almost always on written stories, typically novels, with brief mentions of the same theme in film and television, though there appears to be no systematic study of the latter media, let alone other forms.

Many critics (Hicks, Heffernen, Rosen to name a few) observe that apocalypses have shifted from being a 'utopian revelation' to a 'dystopian catastrophe' aligned with rising pessimism and post-nihilist hegemony in Western philosophy; Diletta de Cristofaro treats the subject at length.

Wielding the immense critical potential of the apocalyptic framework – which is a catalogue of sins, setting out rules for who shall be the 'sinners' and the 'saved' – eschatological fiction also critiques the structures of society. Hicks compares this process to using the 'chalk outline of a murder victim' – the corpse in this case being the world itself, or rather the socio-cultural systems on which it functions – as 'a potent starting point for weighing their meaning'. A society that is dysfunctional in reality is taken apart and sold for parts in eschatological fiction precisely because it allows that society to be known. Rosen theorises that that '[t]he New Jerusalem that replaces [existing society] is more than just [a] new identity [. It] also encompasses a new understanding about the nature of the universe'. In other words,

eschatological fiction provides a narrative space in which a society can ask questions and demand answers that are shaped by contemporary fears and values.

One of the fundamental characteristics of recent eschatological fiction has been identified as questioning the dogmatism inherent to organisational structures; they problematise the very nature of apocalyptic narrative templates and the reductive totalisation with regards to historicism, cultural identity, morality, and responsibility. Thus, they feed into metafictional concerns regarding the artificial construction not only of literature but also of philosophy, law, and social customs. Similarly, these stories also deal with the man-made nature of apocalypses: in materialist terms, most ends are brought about by irreparable damage done by humans to the rest of the ecosystem or technological advancement that has spiralled out of control; in idealistic terms, they examine the 'apocalyptic mentality' that seeks out some grand narrative to provide meaning and coherence, and how yearning for the end often brings it about. Thus, these stories provide an unprecedented agency to humanity in apocalypses as opposed to ends brought about divine Providence.

Certain themes and tropes enumerated by these critics include the alternative conceptualisations of the catastrophic conclusions as well as the deity figure. This can best be summarised by Rosen's remark that recent eschatological fiction evinces 'an unclear idea of what exactly a New Jerusalem would look like, or the alternative suggestion that it would have to incorporate the same evil that it traditionally is said to disavow, also reflects a less dualistic, more ambiguous worldview that seems to resonate with postmodern apocalypse'. The 'End' is often not the end, but is constantly shifting and evolving, in reflection of the ironic paradigms inherent to postmodernism. Additionally, contemporary eschatological narratives feature gods who are uncertain, doubting, and even suicidal; some stories, like Vonnegut's *Galápagos*, use impersonal forces as the deity figure that brings about undiscriminating destruction; yet other stories choose to leave the cause of their apocalypse unstated, content only to narrate the

effects. Thus, the apocalypse structure is destabilised in service of postmodern literary devices. These stories take typical postmodern conventions such as irony; unstable categories; pluralism and multiplicity; the mixing of high and low culture; scepticism towards authority and grand narratives; &c. to new heights.

Hicks, on the other hand, proposes that postmodern iterations of the apocalypse narrative have exhausted themselves and that there is a reversion back to modernist principles of storytelling. According to her, postmodernism informed only the post-apocalyptic narratives of the 1960s–1980s, and millennial narratives are of the breakdown of postmodern modernity and, in moving beyond it, return to modernism. She argues that this shift is also thematic/ideological: 'And rather than the profound experimentation, fragmentation, indeterminacy, and mysticism of the fictions of their recent predecessors [i.e., postmodern iterations], these novelists skew back toward realist prose and the recognizable settings, characters, and plots of genre science fiction.' Yet, within this rigid structure, such 'modern' eschatological fictions manage to be radical. By strictly adhering to formulaic plots and the inevitable fatality that characterises the more traditional model of apocalypse, Hicks finds that this subgenre of eschatological narratives elicit a pleasurable response in their audiences. In other words, the end, because it has been repeated to the point of cliché, becomes a source of comfort, and goes so far as to assert that 'this pleasure is a vestige of the hope of salvation once encoded in the Christian apocalyptic tradition'.

Heffernan begins with the same premise that the present world and its stories have exhausted their possibilities, but unlike Hicks' theorised reversion to modernity, she asserts that 'there is no better world that replaces it – these narratives refuse to offer up a new beginning or any hope of rebirth or renewal; the end is instead senseless and arbitrary'. In her study, postmodernism reasserts itself; she proposes that contemporary eschatological narratives have a 'double sense of the post-apocalypse' in which the end is not teleological, but that *resistance*

to an absolute end is the very thing that offers hope. In such a conception, the open-ended narratives pave the way to 'infinite directions and possibilities'.

1.3 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This dissertation will analyse common threads in twenty first century (post-)apocalyptic fiction in an attempt to articulate emerging ideas about the end of the world and how they reflect contemporary fears and values. In an era of questioning anthropocentrism, late-stage capitalism, post-colonial emergence of new national identities, post-Nietzschean conceptions of a dead god, and free play of meaning, the narratives of apocalypse have fundamentally altered, and this research will focus on such new iterations.

The end of the world – conceptualised in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries as the inadequacy of narratives and the breakdown of meaning-making – has understandably been used to express fears regarding the death of literature. This phenomenon explicates anxieties over coherence and the loss of human historiography. Moreover, apocalypse as a form of narrative has always been intertextual and self-reflexive. In postmodernist terms, this has particularly taken the form of rejecting a totalising narrative; as Hicks observes,

> […] 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.

Moving beyond that, however, this dissertation aims to find a synthesis between the hopelessness in narrative that can be traced through writers like Vonnegut and Don DeLillo as observed by Rosen, and the position of the novel as 'a powerful tool of literary self-preservation' as observed by Hicks in Atwood, McCarthy, and David Mitchell. It could be argued that recent eschatological fiction draws upon cultural and individual memory, self-narrated identities, communal storytelling, and archives, to hint at a new role for literature and the attendant responsibilities therein.

SFF and other (post)apocalyptic stories are fertile ground to observe the shift away from postmodernism and the resultant vacuum of literary theory. Not only can an analysis into the use of postmodernism in eschatological fiction reveal new elements or functions of the theory, but understanding the shift in the meaning and concerns of eschatological narratives will lead to a grasp of emerging and nascent themes underpinning this subgenre and beyond.

1.4 SCOPE

Theoretical underpinnings and analytical dissections of apocalyptic literature abound, both regarding secular and religious texts. Indeed, there have been a handful of studies covering twenty-first century literature – see Tate, Hicks, and Diletta de Cristofaro; this dissertation will continue the aforementioned thread of theorisation to examine the most recent proliferations of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction to identify new models of expression as well as add to existing frameworks.

As such, the texts under study will be limited to twenty-first century works, but with a diverse range of origin, including books translated into English, and those that have been overlooked for past study, or that were published after the completion of existing critical literature. Furthermore, it forays into digital media to provide a more inclusive analysis as the

fundamental nature of contemporary apocalyptic narratives is intertwined with technology, either in technocratic futures or the breakdown of all machinery and human reliance on them. The different methodical conventions of digital media also elicit relevant ideas regarding the nature of information and its role in the current character and impending fate of humanity, which are primary concerns of postmodernism and metafiction.

1.5 HYPOTHESIS/RESEARCH QUESTION

Critics dealing with postmodern apocalypse narratives observe a shift away from the determinism inherent to 'traditional' apocalypses (in which a deity metes out judgement), rejecting it in favour of reclaiming agency at the human level. This view can be expanded by considering that many stories posit a scenario in which *humanity* has ended irrevocably and only the world is allowed to move on, reflecting a new response to typical models of the eschaton. This dissertation will therefore argue that, contrary to traditional apocalypses in which humans are unchanging, only swapping one residence for another in accordance to whether they were 'good' or 'sinful', the texts under study posit *humans* themselves as the site of change. This new strain proposes a different species or conceptualisations of 'inheritors', thereby evincing new fears and judgements about the impact and (deserved) legacy of mankind. The ways in which this change of what it means to be 'human' manifests offer valuable insight into the ideological positions that suffuse more recent iterations of post-apocalyptic fiction.

Several recent eschatological narratives conceptualise the core identity of human beings in terms of information and memory, and as such their fictional apocalypses are extrapolations of Baudrillard's concern that the contemporary world consists 'more and more information, and less and less meaning' (*Simulacra and Simulation*). Similarly, recent iterations of apocalyptic figures show a marked inability to provide a totalising narrative simply because

they perceive no underlying meaning present for interpretation. They are characterised by a 'will to interpretation' that spawns 'new viable hermeneutic modes' (Salyer, qtd. in Rosen). This is the basis for absurdism, the starting point from which Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* develops, and which spawned the rest of his œuvre. Moreover, absurdism itself deals with suicide, controlled ruin, and meaninglessness, which are relevant to the questions posed in this study. In accordance with this premise, the dissertation will (1) identify the role of literature in this dearth of meaning and (2) trace and construct the archetype of the 'absurdist apocalyptist'.

1.6 METHODOLOGY

This dissertation relies on three closely interconnected critical methods as well as two overarching philosophical traditions to form the framework in the light of which the texts under study shall be analysed. The first of the aforementioned methods is close reading, which has become indispensable in postmodern criticism, which hinges on nuanced manipulation of meaning: denotative and connotative values and implications; the plurality of meaning; the structural patterns not only of diction but of larger linguistic units; the symbols, motifs, imagery, associations; the achieved content and internal logic wrapped up in tension, irony, paradox. The close reading referred to here is not that of the New Critics, but the 'critical reading' developed by Derrida and his followers under the name of deconstruction. Deconstruction aids the study of the free play of meaning and the tectonic forces of gesture and statement that undercut any given text. Such a close reading is suited to the 'rhetoric' of postmodern eschatological fiction which heavily courts self-referentiality and ironic self-distance. Furthermore, since the End is often a contested site of meaning, only a clear-sighted understanding of aporia can hope to be useful in dealing with it.

Since the dissertation operates within the remit of post-apocalyptic fiction (a genre on its own, a subgenre of SFF), and uses texts from multiple 'media' (novel, podcast, video game), genre criticism becomes highly relevant. Frye, a chief proponent of genre criticism, wrote in *Anatomy of Criticism* that '[t]he purpose of criticism by genres is not so much to classify as to clarify such traditions and affinities, thereby bringing out a large number of literary relationships that would not be noticed as long as there were no context established for them' (Guerin et. al). There is no method better suited for apocalyptic fiction, which is essentially a forensic autopsy, and the 'implicit shared contract'. It is appropriately used, abused, and negotiated in the texts under study. They feed upon established themes, motifs, and plot structures that belong to the postmodern apocalypse, in order to regurgitate, subvert, and deconstruct them. The functioning therein can be made apparent using genre criticism.

In addition to, but not separate from, genre criticism, this dissertation also employs myth criticism. The primary myths in usage within the texts under study are the traditional apocalyptic model; the postmodern, post-death-of-God human existence; and the existentialist Absurd. They are cosmic, sweeping concerns, perhaps, but nonetheless, quintessentially human. Myth criticism takes as its subject the reader response to *reality* itself; to the incongruous, uncanny, horrifying, inspiring, and empowering aspects therein. Practically speaking, it studies the 'archetypal patterns that the writer has drawn forward along the tensed structural wires of his or her masterpiece and that vibrate in such a way that a sympathetic resonance is set off deep within the reader' (Guerin et. al). Frye identifies myth with literature, asserting that myth is a 'structural organising principle of literary form' (ibid), which is an echo of how apocalypse serves as an organising principle for a society's fears. Necessarily, this process shall draw upon the writings of Derrida; the overarching frameworks of the dissertation, draw from metafiction and absurdism. The specifics therein will become clear further into the study.

02. THE ANTHROPOCENE END: MAN-MADE GODS AND CATACLYSMS

2.1 LIMITS OF THE HUMAN

The world is always ending but the stories about *how* it ends reveal the fears that are incubated in a culture. As discussed previously, one of the staples of postmodern apocalypses is that the End is often brought about as a direct consequence of human actions. This phenomenon has thus far been interpreted as a bid to reclaim agency, to assign responsibility and credit where it is due. However, it has become increasingly apparent that reality does not operate that neatly, and contemporary eschatological narratives attempt to grapple with the problematisation of agency under totalitarian structures.

The labelling of an entire epoch under 'anthropocene' is not simply a matter of ego or anthropocentrism, but rather a reflection of the extent to which human actions impact the entire ecosystem of the planet, often in irrevocable ways. Moreover, this age extends from the premises of (1) man as a rational animal and (2) God as an absence. Nietzsche claims that 'God has been sacrificed for the nothing'; in other words, reliance on a spiritual authority has been abandoned, resulting in a vacuum of meaning. However, within that nothing, postmodern writers have found both nihilistic despair and the freedom of infinite interplay of meanings, or micronarratives. Out of this arose variegated conceptualisations of gods; a veteran postmodern eschatological writer has remarked that 'humans create god, and not the other way around' (Moore, as qtd. in Rosen). The significance of this phenomenon is two-fold: not only does it open up the possibility of non-traditional gods to articulate contemporary values and fears (i.e., mythologies), it also ascribes an unprecedented agency to human beings within the apocalyptic paradigm. Diletta de Cristofaro eloquently addresses these concerns: 'What are the implications for agency of a culture obsessed with the thought of its own approaching end? […] what is at stake in the shift from narratives that uphold a teleological conception of history

to narratives in which this utopian end is removed?' These stories resurrect God as a signifier, in a more human shape, only to kill it again.

Postmodern apocalypses provide a strain of the myth that breaks away from the biblical model in which an external, transcendent deity acts as judge and saviour. The traditional model has often been criticised – most notably by Martin Buber, D. H. Lawrence, and Robert Alter – as representative of human 'withdrawal from history' and, thereby, an abdication of personal responsibility. If the 'biblical apocalyptist proposes nothing less than God's own plot for history' (Zamora, as qtd. by Rosen), then postmodern Ends extrapolate trajectories based on mankind's historical impact in this self-assigned epoch. It is a reclamation of agency, which allows for meaningful social critique. Where the biblical model of apocalypse narrative formulated by the Revelation could only ever be a catalogue of sins where the slate is wiped clean by a divine authority, the postmodern model allows for a more nuanced discussion of the harm perpetuated by humans and the practical consequences therein.

Diletta de Cristofaro observes that 'the contemporary post-apocalyptic novel subverts the utopian teleology at the core of apocalyptic history, emphasizing its determinism, complicity with oppressive power structures and implication in the escalating contemporary risks'. The last phrase is the most important: these 'risks' are played out not by the species as a whole, but by those in power, those with the ability to choose not only the costs and benefits that affect them, but that would extend outwards on a global scale. As an extension of this idea, it could be argued that the extent of mankind's course of action that brings about the end of the world takes two forms in representational literature: a passive reinforcement of harmful structures and an active, willing proliferation of destruction. This divide of course is not rigid, but manifests as an imbricated message within the narratives under study.

2.2 THE SINNERS AND THE SAVED

The Magnus Archives is a horror anthology podcast in which the religions that exist in real life are functionally useless; when the characters that populate the world of *The Magnus Archives* cry out to their 'well-trodden' gods, there is no answer. Amongst its vast repertoire of characters, a handful can be read as prophet-figures. The earliest to make an appearance as such is Father Edwin Burroughs, a Jesuit priest who is called upon to exorcise a house that shows signs of haunting. When he attempts the ritual, however, he is met with powerful resistance from the Entity lording over that building; in response, Father Burroughs recounts: 'I began to pray again for protection, not for the place this time, but for me. As I did, I felt… something answer me. And yet, I cannot stress this enough: what answered was not G— God. It wasn't Him. Something else answered my call for protection' (ep.20).

A similar sentiment is expressed by another prophet-figure, Jane Prentiss. Though of a different faith from Father Burroughs – she was a self-professed pagan witch – she, too, took pride in the rituals she enacted. However, she connects with one of these Entities and is physically, morally, and spiritually corrupted and transformed by It. She laments: 'I thought that those [pagan rituals] were my spiritual raptures. I wish, deep inside, below the itch, that they were still my raptures. I have touched something now, though, that all my talk of ley lines and mother goddesses could never have prepared me for' (ep. 32). The protagonist and central prophet-apocalyptist of the podcast, Jonathan Sims, goes on to achieve omniscience, and even then, cannot determine if the gods of the religions of the 'real' world exist or not, for they do not respond to those who pray to them, and appear completely incapable of saving them.

These Entities – sometimes termed 'the Dread Powers' – are the only gods available to the people of *The Magnus Archives*. Crucially, they were not meant to be, nor do they intend to act as, gods. Over the course of the series, it is revealed that the Entities, fifteen in number,

feed upon and *are* embodiments of the most acute fears of living creatures. They are fundamentally unknowable; trying to work out if they embody pre-existing fears or if they are the reason those fears exist at all is a futile endeavour. In fact, it is impossible even to determine if they have consciousnesses of their own or if they simply exist, unthinking and unfeeling. They are more accurately described as 'phenomena' that are considered 'god-like' and that have 'the power to affect the world in unnatural ways, […] rely[ing] on avatars or—or servants that they corrupt and… sometimes monsters that they create' to empower themselves, which is their only true goal (ep. 111).

As must be apparent by now, these 'gods' are archetypical cosmic horror entities, that sit adjacent to physical reality, feeding upon the terror of its inhabitants. The universe crafted in *The Magnus Archives* is thus actively hostile to the humans populating it; the actions of the individual are rendered completely meaningless in the face of their overwhelming and incomprehensible influence. It serves as an analogy for the limited agency that the average human possesses in systems beyond their control. One's choices are constrained and the results are never entirely foreseeable; in such a state of existential risk, morality becomes suspended; anything goes, even apocalypse.

Each of these Entities wishes for a 'ritual' enacted in its honour in order to 'remake that physical reality into something closer to itself. It wants to make this world its own' (ep. 092) so that it may feed freely. The system is explained thus:

> GERARD. Well, think of it this way: right now, all the Entities have to act like a hunter, they pick off the weak [creatures] around the edges, the ones that wander too close, and the rest of the time they have to just graze on whatever fear we all passively give away.
>
> ARCHIVIST. And if one of the rituals succeeds?

GERARD. The world becomes a factory farm.

ARCHIVIST. …Why would anyone want that? I—I mean, there are people, or they used to be people, who are trying to do this. Why?

GERARD. I dunno. Power, maybe? Or they've just got close enough to their patron or whatever that they also feed on it. I guess maybe some people just have a weird relationship with fear. (ep. 111)

Indeed, there are several characters – 'avatars' of the Fears – that seek to enact rituals on their behalf. To them, it is almost a compulsion, a dream-purpose that hounds them. Even though they exist in an unfathomable system, they *choose* reverent worship. In fact, one such avatar states: 'And honestly? The idea that this is all some grand cosmic joke – thousands of us running around spreading horror and sabotaging each other pointlessly – while these impossible, unknowable things just lurk out there, feeding off the misery we cause? I find that interpretation *quite appealing*' (ep. 151, emphasis in the original). Thus, it is human desire, and most importantly, human *choice* that brings about the End.

This, too, is quite a postmodern sentiment. In Rosen's seminal study, she quotes from John W. Aldridge: '"If religions of the past offered promise of some form of transcendental redemption, disaster holds out the possibility of infinite and deliciously horrible forms of damnation, the ultimate titillation to orgasm of world holocaust, which in our ultimate boredom is one of the very few experiences left that is likely to bring us to feeling."'

Moving away from such a fantastical world for a moment, a more realist example shall be taken into consideration to provide as illuminate the overarching argument by its differences. The patently obvious root cause of such man-made disasters is capitalism, which is thoroughly critiqued by *Severance*, another text under study. Partly set in the heart of New York and partly taking place through a road trip across the decaying debris of the imperial-capitalist titan that

is the United States, *Severance* exposes the abstract structures of production that actively harm the world. The apocalyptic phenomenon is caused by 'Shen Fever' – so-called because of its origins in the poorly maintained factories of Shenzhen, China. The disease itself originates from the cocktail of chemicals that is used in manufacturing, and it gets spread on a global level owing to the sheer number of exports from China.

In a subversion of the typical attribution of disease and destruction to Asian countries, the Asian-American author of *Severance* is quite explicit that the reason that trade occurs on such a massive scale is precisely because 'First World' countries – i.e., the imperial core – by and large outsource their labour to 'Third World' countries. Furthermore, it is imperial greed that allows for the poor working conditions in the 'Global South'; to express this paradigm in *Severance*'s own words: 'The company had huge collective buying power, so we offered even cheaper manufacture rates than individual publishers could achieve on their own, driving foreign labor costs down even further.'

Saraf's analysis of *Severance* pertaining to its capitalist critique is relevant here: 'Notably, the fevered in *Severance* do not affect others through infection or consumption, as Shen Fever is spread through fungal spores. Instead, the fevered are incorporated into the rhizomatic structure of Shen Fever's global dispersal, which is a reminder that the decisions made under global capitalism to expel migrant laborers and outsource production to inhumane working conditions in the Global South, has already "made monsters of us all".' By making humans the proponents of its apocalypse, *Severance* confers humans with agency; however, it also simultaneously reduces large swathes of these humans to no more than carriers of the pathogen that devastates them in a direct parallel to how capitalism is a dehumanising force.

Severance follows multiple timelines, where the one after the End follows a group of survivors who are, at the outset at least, unaffected by Shen Fever. They are first introduced,

tellingly, by their job titles, which point to capitalist jobs divorced from any actual, meaningful labour: ‘We were brand strategists and property lawyers and human resources specialists and personal finance consultants. We didn’t know how to do anything so we Googled everything.’ One such thing that they Google is ‘is there a god’, to which the ever-benevolent search engine responds by referring them to suicide hotlines. This loaded vignette from the book’s prologue neatly summarises one postmodern attitude to ‘the God question’: the existence of God is irrelevant and empty because both the people and the means of approaching the question are deeply entrenched in the capitalist system. The characters do dial the suicide hotlines, hoping to connect to other survivors if not to a deity, and there is no answer.

Despite this totality of the failure of capitalist structures – markets close, primarily because the ‘Third World’ is the first to fall, and the imperial core is unable to sustain itself after the loss of cheap foreign labour – the survivors central to the story do not give up on the capitalist ways that they were used to. Their chosen asylum is an empty shopping mall; they loot, preferring products not for their practical use in a post-apocalyptic landscape, but in service of the transient pleasures to which they were slaves even before the fall. Their philosophy is telling: ‘Strike fast, strike first. The key thing, we reminded ourselves, was never to stop, to always keep going, even when the past called us back to a time and place we still leaned toward, still sang of, in quieter moments.’ The fast-paced, callous lifestyle fostered and fed upon by capitalism goes unexamined and unrectified despite the apocalypse all around them. They operate under a sort of sunk cost fallacy outlook to the fast pace at which the world moves; it feels impossible to slow the wheel at this point; there exists a fear that it would just crush those who try, they must convince themselves that they are winning in their conformity.

This self-delusion, however, does not save them from the shame that is the consequence of such an apocalypse:

> We had shame, so much shame at being the few survivors. Other survivors, if they existed, must also feel this way. We were ashamed of leaving people behind, of taking our comforts where we could find them, of stealing from those who could not defend themselves. We had known ourselves to be cowards and hypocrites, pernicious liars really, and to find this suspicion confirmed was not a relief but a horror. If the End was Nature's way of punishing us so that we might once again know our place, then yes, we knew it. If it was at all unclear before, it was not now.

A similar sentiment is expressed by the Antichrist-apocalyptist figure of *The Magnus Archives*, Jonathan Sims, who is given a position of power in the post-Change world which was brought about with him as the lynchpin. In a rare moment of true expression, he confesses that he feels '[a] shamed of the fact that I just destroyed the world and have been rewarded for it, the fact that I can walk safe through all this horror I've created like a… fucking tourist, destroying whoever I please. The fact that I… enjoyed it' (ep. 166). In classifying different archetypes in post-apocalyptic fiction, Hicks identifies one of them to be 'the survivor' and notes that 'in some cases the experience of the survivor seems less enviable than the fate of the suicide'.

In *Disco Elysium*, a video game set in a post-apocalyptic city ravaged by ideological rifts, crushed revolutions, and a quite literally unstable reality, the fantastical and the realist find a more synthesised expression. The protagonist, Harry du Bois, is an officer of the Citizens Militia; his unorthodox approach to a social task can best be understood by his own definition of himself as a 'paranatural detective' in that the remit of his investigations consists of both the socio-political and the supernatural. The writers are of Eastern European origin and therefore have prescient concerns, which are expressed through the game's political alignment mechanics and magical realism. The player can choose to mould Harry in accordance with any – or several – of four ideologies: communism, fascism, liberalism, and moralism. After a failed

leftist revolution, the city is reorganised as a ‘zone of control’ under the aegis of a coalition government which is staunchly on the side of moralism – i.e., radical centrism.

In the world of *Disco Elysium*, politics directly overlaps with religion. The greatest political leader – termed as an ‘Innocence’ – is also deified and persistently worshipped: Dolores Dei, the representative of moralism and the person who historically facilitated the discovery of the ‘New World’, was considered by some to be the ‘perfect mother’ who embodied all that was worthy in humankind, and by others, as a war criminal. She employed the ‘The Army of Humanity’, and the characters within the game readily point out that this deliberately implied that anyone who was not on her side were therefore not part of ‘humanity’. The movement created in her wake, called Dolorianism, was a violent paradigm that discriminated against the working class and foreign nations: ‘The source of the system is up there, you're at the bottom. They really dug that power vertical. Liked to show off large and intricate structures, arches, spires. Put you down with them.’

The game itself is set at ‘the twilight of history’, in a city firmly placed under the control of the Moralintern that arose from such a deified human. The Moralintern is the game’s equivalent of the EU; one of the characters, acting as its spokesperson, explains that the Moralintern is always happy to aid developing countries – which were destroyed in the first place by the Moralintern – by adopting them into the system. However, once the player starts reading between the lines, it becomes readily apparent that one such developing country has been a ‘candidate’ for membership in the Moralintern for over thirty years with no hope of ever actually attaining it. The Moralintern also actively and decisively crushes any attempts at self-determination by the other countries, which is a blatant allegory for the violent disruption of communist systems by capitalist powers.

The Moralintern despises upheaval of any sort, allowing progress only in increments so languid that the betterment of humanity, by their own admission, is estimated to take three thousand years. The central function of the Moralintern is to maintain an unchanging status quo, despite the overarching threat of 'the pale', which is the apocalyptic phenomenon in *Disco Elysium*. The pale is an ever-expanding hole in reality, whose origins and characteristics are unknown, perhaps even unknowable; it can only be unhelpfully described as an 'antipode of matter'. The genius of the pale as a narrative device lies in the fact that it is 'the suspension of properties: physical, epistemological, linguistic'; it defies all codified laws of physics, psychology, and even history. The pale is '[b]igger than all the other things combined'; it has advanced so far as to become 'the dominant geological feature' of the planet, covering 72% of its surface.

The in-universe infra-materialists believe that it was caused by the greedy, ever-expanding quest for capitalist progress: 'what was once a gesture of great power has been hijacked to signal the ceaseless march of annihilation'. The player discovers that there is more pale than there is matter at a ratio of 2:1, and in a poignant commentary of the harm inflicted by inaction, it is revealed that 'the ratio is slipping' in favour of the pale and the complete extinction it will inevitably bring.

Timothy Morton coined the term 'hyperobject' to refer to objects that represent a much larger scale of time and space as compared to humans. Some of the examples he uses to illustrate this concept – such as a black hole or the Solar System – are rather neutral, but his primary usage of the term is in relation to ecology. As such, a hyperobject 'could be the very long-lasting product of direct human manufacture […] or the sum of all the whirring machinery of capitalism'. The pale eroding the world of *Disco Elysium* can be read as one such hyperobject. It fulfils the properties of the hyperobject as laid out by Morton: viscosity, which he defines as 'sticking' to people touched by the hyperobject; non-localisation; producing an

alternate scale of spacetime; multidimensional, with associated intermittent invisibility to human perception; and interobjective, which can be alternatively phrased as the familiar ‘overdetermination’, only able to be studied through the various traces it leaves.

This large-scale, unknowable apocalypse that eats at the world finds a parallel in the apocalyptist Harry du Bois, who acts as a stand-in for the ‘human’ as a whole. He is an addict, extremely dysfunctional and debilitatingly ill. However, it is gradually revealed that the damage he has done to himself has been in service of his job; he grows dependent on amphetamines in order to keep up with the impossibly vast load of work that comes with being an officer of the Citizens Militia; he is one of the best at his job, by a significant margin, but at great cost to himself. The plot of *Disco Elysium* is a sort of quest for meaning and redemption that he embarks upon; towards the end of the game, one explicit theory put forth by another character addresses the systematic causes for his condition: ‘“What if [Harry’s breakdown] is an absolutely normal reaction to the world we’re living in? What if this is not a significant anomaly at all, something to be explained, approached as a defect?’ He argues that Harry, like the others around him, is ‘[h]ard-wired to the free market’ and ‘just needed for it to end’.

Just like the unknowable gods of *The Magnus Archives* nonetheless found worshipful cults, within the world of *Disco Elysium* are those who hold a similar ideology of worship: ‘Entropolism’. Such people desire to proliferate the Pale to greater extent so that humanity and/or reality itself may achieve its ‘rest state’, i.e., absolute meaninglessness and loss of all information. Rid of the oversaturation of data, of ideologies and stories. They mythologise themselves: ‘There is a *protagonista* […] And an *adversário*. I am on the side of the Adversary. There's no coming back from that haul.’

In the broader narrative of the game, too, there are two classes – human and all other animals; they are not antagonistic, despite the harm inflicted by one upon the other. An insect, representative of the ecology at large, addresses the prophet-protagonist, Harry:

> I am a relatively median lifeform – while it is you who are total, extreme madness. A volatile simian nervous system, ominously new to the planet. The pale, too, came with you. No one remembers it before you. The cnidarians do not, the radially symmetricals do not. There is an almost unanimous agreement between the birds and the plants that you are going to destroy us all. […] What if you blink? Are we still here? (Please don't blink). What if you misplace us all one day – or just forget?

This can be read as an earnest desire to be spared, but more crucially, it is a desire to be *seen*.

2.3 SUBJECTIVITY AND APATHY

Jonathan Sims is the avatar of the Entity known as the Ceaseless Watcher or the Beholding; it is an embodiment of the fear of '[n]eeding to know, even if your discoveries might destroy you. The feeling that something, somewhere, is letting you suffer, just so it can watch' (ep. 111). Furthermore, he works as the Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute; his profession has both mundane and supernatural implications, but it is fundamentally his job 'to chronicle these things, to experience them, whether first-hand or through the eyes of other' (ep. 092). Though it begins as an innocuous office job, it devolves into a hunger that he cannot escape: 'His only fear is that even here, at the centre of the world, barrelling towards a lightless, infinite tomb, still, he will be watched. Still, *he* will watch' (ep. 120). He tries to use his power for the sake of the collective good by thwarting other avatars' attempts at an apocalypse, but he cannot ignore the fact that his powers are fuelled by immeasurable horror.

In the depths of his hunger which can only be fed by other people's terror and suffering, he finds a parallel to his condition in one of the people whose story he investigates as the Archivist; this statement-giver is supernaturally compelled to repeatedly be injured fatally, and the only way they can survive is by stealing life from others. Jon muses:

> What is the value of a life? Is it something that can be quantified, put down as numbers, good deeds, bad? And when your life your existence is at the cost of doing harm, what then? […] Do I restrain myself, keep my appetite in check, even at the cost of my life? Or do I try to rationalize what I am, like Ms. McHugh? I find myself hating her, her callous self-deception. But am I so different? (ep. 155)

The problem of perspective is most prominently expressed in *The Book of Strange New Things*, which is set in a distant planet, 'Oasis', that has a budding human settlement. Its protagonist is a married pastor, Peter Leigh, and his wife Beatrice was disqualified from travelling to Oasis with him. As they are separated by numerous light years, Peter adapts to existence upon Oasis whereas earthly existence breaks down under the weight of irreversible ecological disaster. Though Peter is the only narrator, Bea's plights – and, through her, that of the earth and the other people in it – find expression in epistolary form through messages received by Peter. However, separated by physical distance and caught up in his duties as a minister to the native population of Oasis, Peter finds it difficult to empathise or connect with Bea and Earth.

Ahlberg, in an analysis of the novel, identifies this storytelling technique as 'representational distance' and crystallises its properties through comparison to photography. She writes:

> Representation itself is given special status in this novel as it draws attention to representational distance as much as interstellar distance. Seen this way narrative

> description can offer readers a perspective that enables a better grasp of phenomena that are otherwise hard to comprehend as coherent wholes. Representational distance is not the same as actual distance but it operates in a similar way by reducing the very large, diffuse, or otherwise vaguely defined to a more cognitively manageable scale. […] His novel raises awareness of how an impending catastrophe is preceded by its own iconography, including vocabulary, imagery and syntax, long before it erupts literally into our field of vision.

Peter gains 'a god-like perspective' which is the only viewpoint that is *capable* of seeing, i.e., narrativizing, apocalypse. However, the very faculty that enables him to attempt an understanding of apocalypse also renders him apathetic to it.

This apathy is shared by the other settlers sent to Oasis; in fact, it is gradually revealed, to sinister effect, that the characteristic that allowed them to qualify for the space project was this apathy. These people were chosen to form humanity's last safe haven, away from Earth, and maintain that settlement without discord, without egos. One of the characters who critiques this selection bias – where '[o]nly zombies need apply!' – identifies the flaw in their reasoning:

> You cannot create a thriving community, let alone a new civilisation, by putting together a bunch of people who are no fucking trouble! […] USIC thinks it can sift through a thousand applicants and pick the one man and the one woman who'll get along with everybody, who'll do their job without being a pain in the ass, who won't throw tantrums or get depressed or freak out and spoil the whole damn thing. USIC is looking for people who can feel at home anywhere, even in a big fat nowhere like this, people who don't care, they're not fussed, no sweat, keep cool, hey ho, hey ho, it's off to work we go, who needs a home anyway, who cares if the house where you grew up is burning down, who cares if your old neighbourhood is underwater, who cares if your folks are

being slaughtered, who cares if a dozen scumbags are raping your daughter, everybody's gotta die sometime, right?'

Ahlberg astutely comments, 'The survival of a few on a remote planet is akin to a suicide note that no one will be left to read if their survival means losing the capacity to care for others.'

The 'god-like' perspective of these callous survivors is, in fact, the hyperbole – or rather, the deification – of a very human-made capitalist error. Adorno, in his *Negative Dialectics*, criticises 'rational observation' divorced from any empathy. According to him, to survive in a capitalist state 'calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz; this is the drastic guilt of him who was spared'. His use of the Holocaust is significant, for the scale of human atrocity that it represents in the collective imagination of contemporary society can only be rivalled by extinction. Adorno goes on to argue that privileging such cold reason above all else cannot help but be detrimental: 'The inhuman part of it, the ability to keep one's distance as a spectator and to rise above things, is in the final analysis the human part, the very part resisted by its ideologists.'

Capitalism creates two distinct, though not by any rigid definition, two modes of living: (1) the bourgeoisie, who are inured from most of the damage they cause by their callous inaction, and (2) the most vulnerable people of society, who are alienated and forced to resort to horrible deeds by the illusion of free choice. By positioning such people as the privileged class of post-apocalyptic society, these texts identify the cause and after-effect of the apocalypse as being the same: apathy. Candace Chen, the protagonist of *Severance*, is haunted by this truth of the postmodern condition: 'I tried to observe this feeling of shock, to observe its difference, but in fact I couldn't detect any difference from all the other days that blurred together on this road trip. I couldn't point to any deviation from the routine, everyday feeling, which was nothing. I didn't feel anything.' This non-feeling is, fundamentally, the weapon of

mass destruction; ‘godhood’ and ‘humanity’ are concepts stuck in a recursive loop eliding the fundamental truth that everyone is guilty, to varying degrees, either through passive complicity or active callousness.

This feeling, though expressed through (post-)apocalyptic settings, clearly has its origins in current society. In other words, the apocalypse is already here; the world is already ending. In many cases, ‘the End’ is rectifying the error by disrupting the ceaseless forward momentum of capitalism; the cause and effect are both violently destructive. In essence, then, the apocalypse is an amoral and natural response to an already shattered world. The throughline through these stories, then, is a plea to focus one’s eyes, metaphorically speaking, so that humankind may become aware of its own godlike impact. This awareness must be directed outwards (the world being affected), and also inward (the systems causing harm). A focused perspective, a clear-sighted narrative, is posited as a redemptive, anti-apocalyptic force.

03. ‘THE-FUTURE-WITHOUT-US’: ANXIETIES OF MEMORY AND IDENTITY

3.1 CULTURAL MEMORY

It has been assumed that the most blatant shift envisioned by the apocalypse narrative in the contemporary era is that the premise of the ‘death of the world’ can actually be followed through since, for the first time in history, the world *does* involve the whole planet. However, this is incomplete reasoning; these stories of the apocalypse still originate from specific cultural sub-groups – be it liberal capitalism, Anglo-American imperialism, former colonies, &c. – and as such preclude a subjective viewpoint. Hicks quotes Gaonkar (‘On Alternative Modernities’) to note that ‘[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’. Bearing out this thesis, apocalypse narratives that arise from communities undergoing postcolonial state-building and entrance into the global theatre naturally contend with lingering trauma of already having their history erased and further reflect fears of losing their hard-won right to an identity.

History is a difficult concept to pin down definitively; indeed, it has been (aptly) problematised under postmodernism, which points out the inherent unknowable nature and artificial construction of history. After all, it is yet another grand narrative imposed upon a chaos that is overdetermined by socio-economic interests. In the context of eschatological myths, pre-modern societies appear to have had a preference for cyclical models of history in which, though the world ends, it shall be reborn. This cycle is repetitive; all events are reversible and yet nothing new occurs. *Moon of the Crusted Snow* is a novel written by Waubgeshig Rice, who belongs to the Anishinaabe group of indigenous peoples from Canada, and whose characters are of the same lineage. The community consists of the generations immediately after decolonisation facing the extinction of ‘all’ history. Even before ‘the End’,

they are traumatised by the colonial erasure of their culture. To them, the apocalypse is nothing new, but a repetition of the horrors they'd already faced.

They engage with modern technology but do not *own* any of it, for amenities like supermarket supplies, electricity, the internet, &c. are provided by the majority White population and government of Canada. This technology is unreliable, both due to the comparatively remote settlements of the indigenous population and due to the lax official management of the facilities. When the apocalypse hits the 'main' areas of Canada, it ripples out to the Anishinaabe settlement in the form of their technology ceasing to function. For a considerable period of time, they do not experience any fear – only annoyance – because this breakdown of technology is not out of *their* norm. The internet, which now functions in the majority of the world as a global repository of connection and history, was nonetheless a less-than-indispensable part of Anishinaabe lives. 'Old' tech (landlines, radio, diesel generators, &c.) is still used and maintained, for backup, because of the unreliability of the 'new'. The 'advancements', provided by the White-owned businesses of Canada, offer freedom and opportunity to the Anishinaabe, but only on a surface level: 'They relied less on the airstrip for supplies and travel and now had the freedom to drive out on their own, theoretically. The weather and lack of maintenance often played havoc with that fine thought, though.' The novel never states *what* caused the apocalypse because it is, ultimately, irrelevant to the Anishinaabe.

The progress offered by technology does represent, at the outset, the hope of a better future for the children, but the Anishinaabe place greater emphasis on passing down their own traditional customs like hunting and learning to live off the land in an organic and peaceful manner. This is significant to a community which had undergone cultural genocide and was still reeling from the after-effects; it also had a practical significance: 'Evan [the protagonist] ate southern meats when he had to, but he felt detached from that food. He'd learned to hunt when he was a boy out of tradition, but also necessity. It was harder than buying store-bought

meat but it was more economical and rewarding. Most importantly, hunting, fishing, and living on the land was Anishinaabe custom, and Evan was trying to live in harmony with the traditional ways.' When the full impact of the loss of these external resources hits the community, they are understandably flustered, but they begin the process of recursion back to the 'traditional ways' that had been made inaccessible to them.

How, then, is 'the End' conceptualised by this community? The author uses the figure of Aileen, an elder among the Anishinaabe, to express the suspension of anxiety: 'She's lived through it all, [Evan] thought. If she's not worried, then we shouldn't be.' A conversation that takes place between Evan and Aileen expresses the extent to which the novel deconstructs the typical apocalyptic model. Aileen, though quite competent in the English language, does not know the word 'apocalypse' – Evan has to supply it for her – and when she learns it, her immediate reaction is a dismissal saying, 'What a silly word. I can tell you there's no word like that in Ojibwe [their native language]. Well, I never heard a word like that from my elders anyway'. She goes on to further dismiss that their current predicament was a definitive end because '[o]ur world isn't ending. It already ended'.

Here, she is referring to the colonial atrocities carried out by White people in which they not only displaced the indigenous population, but also destroyed the environment through deforestation and reckless killing of native wildlife. Even the settlement that the Anishinaabe occupy now was not their original homeland but a different stretch of Canada assigned to them by White people. Aileen exclaims, 'But we had to adapt and luckily we already knew how to hunt and live on the land. We learned to live here.' Crucially, the genocide did not end there for 'then they followed us up here and started taking our children away from us! That's when our world ended again. And that wasn't the last time'. Aileen laments that they've seen 'apocalypse' over and over again, and they have *always* survived. She comforts Evan, 'And we'll still be

here, even if the power and the radios don't come back on and we never see any white people ever again.'

The key takeaway here is that 'apocalypse' is subject to the cultural and historical context in which it is used. In other words, the end is malleable in its meaning. Furthermore, Evan pays attention to the elder, but she is also in dialogue with him, drawing from his knowledge. Their survival is a communal effort, in which 'learning to live' is posited as the solution – specifically, learning to live in harmony with the environment and with other people, i.e., possessing the freedom to maintain their culture and to untangle their history (or rather, trajectory, backward and forward) from violence.

In this novel, three characters experience dreams, which terrify them and contradict one another, but nonetheless hint at a hopeful path forward. Evan's father, Dan, dreams that the forest surrounding the Anishinaabe settlement was burning down, and he gradually realises that the Anishinaabe themselves had set the fire to drive the moose into a trap, because they'd grown desperate in the post-apocalyptic world. Evan's wife, Nicole, dreams of a comfortable fire in the midst of a campsite that was located far from the settlement; she does not recognise the place and therefore panics within the dream, but finds her children, several years older than they were in reality, reassuring her that all was well. The third dream is from Evan himself, who 'sees' a room full of covered corpses lit only by a faint fire 'suspended ominously' above the area, emitting no smoke or heat, but only light. All three dreams feature fire, but it serves different functions. Furthermore, the dreams stress that the survival of the community depends on their ability to ensure the continuation of their people and customs.

The third dream is acted out in reality by the latter half of the book as members of the Anishinaabe community fall prey to the harsh winter climate and scarce resources as their supply line is cut off by the apocalypse. Evan has one final dream of a Wendigo, the

cannibalistic monster common to the First Nations mythologies. Crucially, this monster is a warped version of the White man who invades the Anishinaabe community after the apocalypse hits. Scott flees the chaos of central Canada to seek refuge with the Anishinaabe; he claims that '[f]ar away from so-called civilization seems like the best place to be right now', which expresses a typically imperialist perspective in that he considers *his* own community – i.e., White-populated Canada – to be part of 'civilisation' and the Anishinaabe to be an easily exploitable Other. Over the course of the novel, Scott spreads discord amongst the community, stoking their fear and destabilising any policies they initiate to cope with the loss of resources. By the end, he does in fact steal one of the bodies of the Anishinaabe because, in his view, it is natural, and even *rational*, that he feed on them to sustain himself.

When Evan finally confronts Scott, the latter claims that the Anishinaabe will not be able to survive without following his philosophy, i.e., cannibalising the dead to save a few. Evan counters that Anishinaabe traditions will enable them to re-establish ecological harmony and live off the land. Evan explains, in an echo of Aileen before him, 'We were okay without you. And we'll be okay without you. We been up here longer than you been. [… The knowledge of the land is] in all of them. They know it.' Scott refuses to believe him to the very end, claiming that the newer generations have lost that knowledge; he dismissively tells Evan, 'Don't get all Indian on me now'. The novel ultimately posits that while the cultural genocide – the Anishinaabe's own apocalypse(s) – *has* robbed them of their customs and knowledge, that knowledge is a renewable resource. It has been painstakingly preserved in enough of them to someday revive the community as a whole, a stance that is utterly incomprehensible to the representative of the imperial core.

3.2 THE MENACE OF TIME

Just as a 'cyclical apocalypse' is a source of hope in one narrative – in a specific cultural context – in typical postmodern fashion, the same model is played out to detrimental effect in other texts. Hicks' study of circular ontologies is useful here:

> Whitrow and Wagar, however, understand such a modern preoccupation with the cyclical as part of a despairing and unproductive outlook. Whitrow remarks that for the [modernist] thinkers he describes, to understand time as cyclical is to 'feel the menace of time as much as its promise'. Wagar, meanwhile, maintains that cyclical apocalyptic narratives 'reflect a conserving temperament', He explains that in these texts we see that 'the world of the author's experience does not end in his consciousness or in his loyalties. He does not escape its boundaries. The future he envisages is . . . an empty repetition, because he is firmly attached to the present order of things.'

Though Whitrow and Wagar fear the 'conserving temperament' of cyclical apocalypse, it must be noted that it is a neutral device, subject to contextualisation. In *Moon of the Crusted Snow*, as has been described thus far, conservation is *necessary* to a people who have undergone a cultural genocide. It follows that, provided a different context, the cycle *can* be menacing.

What has been referred to as 'context' here is nothing but the process by which history is written. Currie, in his seminal study of metafiction – i.e., the mechanisms of all writing – proposes the rise of 'a new philosophy of historical representation in which the ideological function of story-telling is central'. Within *Moon of the Crusted Snow*, the ideological function is in favour of self-determination for indigenous peoples; to the Anishinaabe, *their* past is a repository of hope and renewal. However, other texts react differently to the weight of the past.

As has been discussed in the previous chapter, *Severance* is a narrative from the point of view of a deeply capitalist society which can only conceptualise history as a linear forward-

march that cannot be allowed to cease or even slow down. The community here is the bourgeoisie, who, as previously observed, form the cast of survivors. The prologue to *Severance* narrates their immediate reaction to the apocalypse:

> Making plans heartened us, and as we stayed up late, drinking, we theorized grandly. What is the internet but collective memory? Anything that had been done before we could do better. […] Lurking in our limited gene pools may swim metastatic brain tumors and every type of depression and recessed cystic fibrosis, but also high IQs and proficiencies with Romance languages. We could move on from this.

This might at first seem to be as hopeful a response to the loss of technology (conflated with progress in modern history) as the Anishinaabe community, but it is immediately revealed that this was all bravado, because the narrator self-reflexively remarks, 'but in the beginning of the Beginning let us brag, if only to ourselves in the absence of others. Because who was there to envy us, to be proud of us?' They need a myth to frame their wretched existence because the truth is unbearable. Candace Chen, despite using 'we' to narrate the prologue, admits that she was not present for these events. Time needs to be controlled and contorted to reduce its effect; Candance does just that to find her place within the community: 'It had been the nostalgia-yellow of the Yellow Cab that the group had first spotted, […] an older fleet model that cab companies had almost phased out. It looked, Bob later told me, as if I'd driven a broken time machine right out of the eighties. It was my in.'

The apocalyptic phenomenon in *Severance* – 'the Shen Fever' – is a direct result of market greed, but the novel curiously uses *nostalgia* as the catalyst that can exacerbate this illness. Shen Fever, though caused by fungal spores grown out of poor working conditions, manifests as 'a disease of remembering' because the fevered are trapped in their own memories. At the onset of illness, they appear no different from the unaffected, but as the illness worsens,

they devolve into ‘creatures of habit, mimicking old routines and gestures they must have inhabited for years, decades’, until it finally results in a ‘fatal lack of consciousness’. The fevered lose all sensory perceptions of the present reality around them, repeating some arbitrary task – eating dinner, watching television, driving a car, &c. – over and over again until their body gives out. Interrupting them would change nothing; shooting them is seen as a mercy.

This conceptualisation of the apocalypse is directly critical of the homogeneity of existence under capitalism, with its forty-hour work weeks and abundant overtime that forbids all but the most basic routines that are necessary to maintain the machine-like human being. Candance relates an episode that took place before the Shen Fever spreads through the world; caught by an unusually potent storm, most of the people in New York City are delighted by the news, rather than anxious about potential destruction. Candace explains that ‘the problem with the modern condition was the dearth of leisure. And finally, it took a force of nature to interrupt our routines. We just wanted to hit the reset button. We just wanted to feel flush with time to do things of no quantifiable value.’ This perverse desire to ‘reset’ their lives finds ironic fulfilment; the apocalypse resets their world, but it also traps them in routine.

The group goes on a road trip looking for a place where they can permanently settle down; in anticipation of this, they rob the houses of the fevered along their route. These robberies are termed ‘stalks’, regarding which the leader of the group, Bob, claims that the correct strategy is to visualise what they would find inside any given house before going in so that they may most effectively collect their supplies. He considers this an easy task, for:

> You know what’s here. You’ve been here before, if not this exact place, then variations of it. […] You are not accumulating new knowledge. You are remembering, even though you have not set foot in a mall since you were a teenager. And whether the memories source from some collective memory (enshrined in movies, books, magazines, blogs,

> shopping catalogs) or from personal memory, try to see as much as you can. Try to remember as much as you can. And because memories beget more memories, you always remember more than you think is even there.

Most importantly, he adds that these stalks – these recollections – must not be made personal. In essence, he is advocating for memories devoid of feeling, a collection of images unconnected to any meaning. Once again, this is a capitalist sentiment because mass production has rendered everything homogenous and alienated.

Of the cast of survivors, two fall prey to the Shen Fever over the course of the novel, both triggered by nostalgia. The first is Ashley, who visits her own childhood home which happened to be along their route. Once there, she goes through her old wardrobe, trying on various outfits to ascertain if any are worth taking with her. It is also implied that this familiar action is her coping mechanism as she is in denial after having discovered the rotting corpses of her parents within that home. However, this action is one that she had repeated often, i.e., a looping routine, and thus causes her to become fevered. Similarly, the settlement that the group eventually decides upon was the mall that Bob often wandered around in when he was a child. He patrols the building every night after the group moves in, and as he retraces the familiar routes, he succumbs to Shen Fever as well. It must be noted that both these actions, while nostalgic in feeling, are distinctly capitalist behaviours; Ashley is acting through the wastage that comes of excessive production and slavish adherence to trends, and Bob's most treasured childhood dwelling turns out not to be a home but a shopping mall. *Severance* advances the position that one's identity in a capitalist society has become irrevocably tied to market-driven behaviours, and continuing the same patterns is dangerous.

Candace Chen, despite never contracting Shen Fever, is the most obsessive creature of capitalist habit within the story. Even before the apocalypse, she was prone to routine; not only

was it comfortable to her, disruptions to her routine were acutely distressing. Early on in the story, it is established that Candace possesses a considerable inheritance from her deceased parents, which could fund her for several years. She has no material necessity that forces her to work – like the factory workers in the 'Third World' – but she finds a job and exhibits an extremely slavish devotion to it. She confesses, 'Not working is maddening. Bob understands this. The hours pass and pass and pass. Your mind goes into free fall, untethered from a routine. Time bends. You start remembering things. Past and present become indistinguishable.'

When Shen Fever starts spreading, the book production company in which she works allows its employees to work remotely (at least, up to the point when the death toll is too high and all work ceases), leaving behind only a skeleton crew of volunteers to manage the main office and co-ordinate the remote workers. These volunteers – one of whom, predictably, is Candace – are contracted only for a certain period of time into the foreseeable future. The horror sets in when, despite the complete breakdown of labour and society, she does not *stop* working. Initially, she 'remained out of ambition, in the hopes of career advancement after this catastrophe passed', but this is a thin veneer to cover up the fact that she does not know how to exist without a routine that numbs her mind. Even when the other volunteers, the only friends she has, leave to weather the apocalypse with their loved ones, she declines the invitation to go with them. Instead, she moves into the office and continues executing her rote tasks.

When she has no work to manage because everyone but her had quit, she returns to an old blog that she had abandoned, and begins documenting the decay of post-apocalyptic New York City, in an eerie echo of how she used to post about vibrant city life before joining the company. Candace is self-aware of her obsession with routine, which makes it all the more haunting; she explains, 'It was my new job. If there was no work for me to do, then I would make my own work.' Only when her contract ends – which is well beyond the point where she has no meaningful tasks to execute for the company – does she begin to acknowledge the

apocalypse: ‘For the first time, I felt scared. I hadn’t thought of what I would do when the contract ended. I hadn’t thought that far ahead.’

However, just as memory and an obsession with the past are capable of ruining the lives of the people in *Severance*, they also act as a redemptive force. The thing that saves Candace is her recollections of her family. Throughout the novel, Candace relates a few instances of her parents and her relatives who remained in China. As the story progresses and she is trapped with the cast of survivors who grow increasingly discordant, she reverts back to these memories. It is also revealed that, through a fling she had before the apocalypse with a man named Jonathan, Candace was pregnant. So, towards the end of the novel, Candace functions as an embodiment of both the past and the present. Bob grows obsessed with the unborn child, seeing it as way to exercise control on the future; he imprisons Candace is one of the shops within the mall. As she plots her escape, Candace hallucinates her mother.

Though Candace’s mother died long before the Shen Fever epidemic, she also suffered from a neurological illness. Like the fevered, her mother had deteriorated enough that she could not identify who was around her or what the year was, but she compulsively told stories of their family. These stories consisted of scrambled memories in that events that happened to her husband or sister or mother would be narrated as if it had been *her* own past, and vice versa. This is doubly haunting in that Candance recalls how her father was reluctant to share his memories; in a way, Candace’s mother was keeping his past alive alongside her own. As an extension of this, the hallucination that Candace experiences orders her to do everything she can to preserve her own life and that of her baby. Candace accordingly flees, this time setting her destination to Chicago, which used to be Jonathan’s home, and of which he had shared stories with Candace. She remarks that, ‘[e]ven if it is a secondhand familiarity, it is a familiarity all the same. As if all of the stories Jonathan told of his years in Chicago, while we lay drowsing in bed, had seeped into my own memories.’

Though it appears on the surface that memories and the past are only ever a source of disruption, *Severance* draws a line between memories divorced of emotion that represent only the emptiness of a capitalist existence, and a communal repository of memory that points the way towards a hopeful future. It is significant that *Severance*, similarly to *The Moon of the Crusted Snow*, focuses on marginalised communities living within the imperial core.

3.3 PERSONAL APOCALYPSE

As much as the apocalypse is the death of the *world*, it is increasingly narrativized as the death of the self as well. As observed in the case of *Severance*, the apocalypse can be an intensely private catastrophe in that the violence takes place within a person's mind. Shen Fever, after all, is a madness that shifts between people. Many of the prophets of myth are characterised by maddened ravings; postmodern apocalypses are not exempt from this trope, as Rosen goes on to identify a subgenre of apocalypse that focuses on the 'internal landscape', i.e., the mind: 'Such twists on the apocalyptic myth depend upon perception, rather than actuality, and argue that the way one understands (and acts in) the world essentially make it "real".' *Disco Elysium* stages a version of such an apocalypse in that the pale is, by definition, an erosion of reality, and is differently perceived and mythologised by different people.

Furthermore, the pale is known to damage the human mind directly. One significant in-universe theory on the pale in *Disco Elysium* is that it '*consists* of past information that's degrading. That it's rarefied past, not rarefied matter' (emphasis in the original). Travelling through areas affected by the pale can cause the human mind to be 'over-radiated by past'. Harry du Bois, the apocalyptist avatar of *Disco Elysium*, meets one such 'over-radiated individual' having taken self-admittedly 'heroic doses', who never shares her name and is only known by her designation as 'the Paledriver', i.e., someone who transports cargo through areas

ravaged by the pale. Harry finds the Paledriver in a stupor, staring at a photograph; she must be wrenched back to consciousness in order for him to have a conversation with her. She explains that she was reminiscing on memories, and when Harry enquires about them, she tells him the memories are not necessarily hers, but that they are beautiful and that was all that mattered. She informs him that the past is '*coming* for this' reality and derives 'some bitter pleasure' from the idea that the past will soon wipe away the present. This is the same zeal that was described in the previous chapter with regards to Tiago.

When Harry questions her on why she would give herself over to the pale knowing how harmful it can be, the Paledriver counters, 'It's more than dangerous — it's sad. But... at first, I had to make a living'. The shattered economy and market-driven democracy that set the rules for the society of *Disco Elysium* offer her no choice but to subject herself to the worst of the apocalypse. Furthermore, the apocalyptic phenomenon is her only source of comfort. The past with which she is infused is alluring, a vision far better than the pathetic remnants that constitute their reality. She offers, 'It doesn't have to be like this. We can just give up. We can just become vapour.' Upon passing a skill check to empathise with her, Harry learns that what she feels is '[t]errible nostalgia. For yourself. For humans. It's too much to bear. She loves it.'

Later on, Harry theorises that, if a person travels far enough into pale territory, 'Your mind becomes so radiant with the past – there is a flip. […] Instead of writing, it erases memory. Nearing some kind of... Indescribable *finale*.' Harry himself is no stranger to writing and erasing memories. The game opens with Harry in an alcohol-induced blackout; he had drunk copiously – a veritable 'deluge' – specifically in order to erase his own memories of his breakup, the atrocities he'd witnessed as an officer of the Citizens Militia, and the general despair at the state of the world. However, this does not work. Immediately after waking up, Harry, with the player's help, begins analysing his surroundings because he is hard-wired to be a detective; this job is all that he is. Moreover, the first character with whom Harry and the

player interact informs him that he is a police officer (which he had intentionally forgotten). The second character to initiate a conversation is a fellow officer from a different precinct who asks Harry to accompany him in a murder investigation to which they were both assigned.

As the player speaks with different characters and moves through the setting, it becomes apparent that Harry had arrived there shortly before the beginning of the game; not only had he established relationships (or, rather, first impressions – often negative) with the people in the district, he'd also done significant property damage, having crashed his car, and lost his badge and gun. Thus, before the story even begins, there is a past to Harry, and both he and the player must pick up its pieces. Harry also lost all memory of the *world*, and thus must relearn basic concepts of history and reality as the game progresses. However, this loss is also not fixed; should the player begin the game with a preference for the skills based on intellect, Harry himself will remember facts at the starting point of the narrative: 'Despite the damage you've done to yourself [… some information] has survived the deluge and haunts you still. And will haunt you forever, as it haunts all men.' The past not only haunts him, but also *hunts* him, eliciting an acute fear response whenever he recovers a bad memory he'd intentionally lost. Even as Harry attempts to revert his identity back into a blank slate so that he may rewrite himself to be a better person, or at least a more bearable version of himself, he cannot outrun his and the world's history.

Just as the player is not entirely in control of Harry's past actions, Harry is not entirely in control of his future choices, which are dictated by the player. However, this is not a strict dichotomy as, depending on how the player shapes Harry's personality, his actions pre-blackout vary in their details as they are recounted, and the player is limited by the dialogue options available to them. Harry's identity is further complicated by the fact that, unlike characters in a novel whose trajectories and fates are fixed, video game protagonists are subject to a much more malleable process. Not only does a game's story have multiple branching routes and

endings to be explored and decided upon by the player, it also allows the player to manipulate events by reloading a saved game, which is analogous to a small-scale apocalypse from Harry's perspective. Furthermore, if a player has already finished a play-through of the game, when they return to the beginning and replay it, they are in possession of a 'vision' of the future. Inevitably, the player would then impose upon Harry choices that are in accordance with information that Harry does not himself possess, but that nonetheless shape his identity.

The creators of *Disco Elysium* are acutely cognisant of these game mechanics and use it to their advantage in constructing the mechanics of the apocalypse and the in-game historiography. The characters within the game are haunted by the promise of 'Le Retour' – the Return. It is not a rapture in the traditional sense, but simply the hope of a better future. As mentioned before, the game takes place at the 'twilight' of history when the Revolution is already over and they live under foreign occupation with no hope of self-determination. The Return is 'part urban myth – part political science', and it is the only hope that most people have left, for it theorises that 'there will be an *event*. […] They say it will happen soon -- and that it will change everything' (emphasis in the original). The hope it offers is a blank template; no one knows what the event is, or what they shall be returning to, only that it will once again be an opportunity for Revolution, for change. Every school of political thought – communism, moralism, fascism, and liberalism – professes its own interpretation.

If the Return sounds similar to Harry – a blank slate haunted by the past and an active agent of the future – the conflation is intentional. One of the things that Harry forgets during his blackout is his own name, and the player has the choice, depending on skill checks, to either conceptualise a new name for him or reclaim 'Harry du Bois'. If the player chooses for Harry to act as an apocalyptist, he will prophesy the end – utter annihilation by the pale – under the name 'Tequila Sunset', in keeping with the 'twilight' period of history. One of the characters with whom Harry shares this prophesy pre-blackout reminds him: 'I think you said that *you*

were the event, and that you would smash the looms of reality'. Similarly, towards the end of the game, the final task assigned to the player is titled 'The Return', and the insect mentioned in chapter one confirms that Harry, as representative of humankind, is the 'miracle' – history and the conditions for change are domains of humanity.

Such apocalyptic longing to manipulate history and overwrite memory is a poignant theme precisely because as much as humans fear their own annihilation, they cannot help but also desire it, if only a little. *The Book of M* has a similar loss and longing at the heart of its apocalyptic phenomenon, in which, sans a known cause, people spontaneously lose their shadows, which subsequently results in them losing their memories. It plays out as an intensely private apocalypse, steeped in grief and interpersonal drama as people forget each other and themselves. In an acute conflation of the fate of the world with the fate of humanity, any facet of reality that is forgotten by one of the 'shadowless' is subsequently altered or even erased from reality. This results in the power grid of a city disappearing and reappearing, guns shooting bullets that contain thunderstorms, crocodiles that are as large as cruise ships, and other, increasingly elaborate, conceptions belonging to the realm of magical realism. This is in accordance with Rosen's 'internalised' apocalypse in that reality is catastrophically altered by human perception; just as she theorises, *The Book of M* is given to pondering epistemological issues.

The apocalyptist figure in *The Book of M* does not lose his memories due to the supernatural cause of apocalypse, however, but owing to a mundane accident that leaves him suffering from retrograde amnesia. Since he has forgotten his name – a recurrent theme in personal apocalypses – he goes by many titles. He receives the first of these before the apocalypse: Patient RA, signifying his condition. He prefers this name, or simply 'the amnesiac', to his birth name because he has lost all self-identification with the person he used to be. Even restoring that history back to him does not spark a connection:

> The man grew skilled at reciting his personal information from the flash cards he'd made, but it was worth nothing. It was like learning the stale, meaningless biography of another person. He didn't want to know that he learned how to sail in high school. He wanted to singe his palms on the rough rope, breathe salty air. He wanted to feel whether he had hated it or loved it. He should have clung to it, but he began to despise the name that was stated on his driver's license. It was not him. It was someone else, whom he was never allowed to know but also not allowed to forget.

The memories, divorced from any actual experience, cannot constitute an identity. Once the apocalypse begins and this divorce of memory and identity takes place on a large scale, the amnesiac begins gathering the shadowless to offer them his own sympathy, and eventually sanctuary and a community in New Orleans, where he has rebuilt the city into a functional society where shadowed and shadowless may co-exist in peace.

The novel's first chapter is narrated from shadowed Orlando Zhang's point of view, and the opening line reads, 'The end of Ory's world began with a deer', because in the isolated dwelling he shares with his wife Max, one of the deer grows wings because she had forgotten that deer do not possess such anatomy. This sighting drives home the fear in Ory (as he is most often called) that he would inevitably lose Max to her shadowless condition. Once again, *The Book of M* shows that the apocalypse can be intensely personal; different people perceive and experience the apocalypse in different ways. The shadoweless, terrified and disorientated by the gradual erosion of their self-identities, find different ways to cope. One observable pattern of behaviour is that they rename themselves just as Patient RA had, and they choose names that they hope (but cannot be certain) would 'remind themselves of the most important things', whatever they may be. Like all the aforementioned instances within this chapter of attempts at filling in the vacuum of identity, this is yet another imperfect method.

The first person to lose their shadow is Hemu, who is treated as a novel curiosity, replete with abundant international media coverage, right up until he forgets – and thereby erases – a large portion of his neighbourhood. He is then restricted to a hospital, whose staff invite Patient RA in the hopes that interacting with him might make Hemu's condition easier to diagnose and cure. For the two patients themselves, this is the first opportunity since the beginning of their respective afflictions where they can interact with another human being on equal footing for they have both lost something. Hemu adopts a now-familiar response to the apocalypse, which he shares with Patient RA; rather than seek out a new identity for himself, he draws upon cultural memory – in a manner reminiscent of the psychoanalytic concept of the deep, collective unconscious – and turns to mythology. He explains that these myths are '[t] he oldest memories, in a way—not that any of us were there, but we all know the stories. We all know them in almost the same words. It makes me happy to think about them. To realize I still remember them, too.' Between Hemu and Patient RA, they piece together a 'simulacrum to personal memory' to substitute what they lack, similar to how 'Candace herself remembers in pastiche, stitching together locations and experiences in lieu of a specificity of place but in search of a feeling' (Saraf). However, unlike the 'disease of remembering' that plagues the world of *Severance*, this is a disease of forgetting; Hemu knows that he will only retain access to this collective well of memory for a short while, so that, when he shares the myths, he implores Patient RA to remember them on his behalf, and to remember Hemu himself along with them.

One of the myths that Hemu recounts is that of Sanjna and Chayya: Sanjna, after having been wed to Surya, realises that his blinding brightness is too much for her to bear – so she crafts a double for herself out of her own shadow, named Chayya, whom she sends to serve Surya as his wife in her stead. Surya eventually discovers the truth and goes out in search of Sanjna; Sanjna's father has to dull his brightness to a degree so that the couple may live

together. When Hemu ends the myth here, Patient RA is disappointed because the fate of Chayya is left ambiguous, and more importantly, he finds no solution for the epidemic of shadowlessness in this tale. Hemu then offers another myth, that of Gajarajan Guruvayur Kesavan, an elephant from the 1970s which has been the subject of Hemu's personal research, which he himself acknowledges is a 'modern' scientific project. Hemu states that the collective noun for elephants is 'memory' and follows it up with the idiom that 'an elephant never forgets'. The story goes that Gajarajan was an elephant that had been poached from the wild by a noble as an offering to the Guruvayur temple where the elephant spent decades carrying out rituals; simultaneously, one of Gajarajan's siblings – who was born *after* Gajarajan's capture – was taken up by a biologist as a subject for study, and gradually taught to paint. This elephant's paintings were usually of the biologist, but the significant part of the tale is that, once when Gajarajan itself found paint lying around, it was seized with the random urge to paint, and what it produced was a portrait of that same biologist, despite never having met her. Hemu is fascinated by this notion of a species that can share a collective pool of memory amongst itself, that can then act as a fallback and unifying force for the individual specimens. He cannot explain why it fascinates him, concluding only with an enigmatic pronouncement: 'Too bad we're human.'

Upon hearing this urban legend, Patient RA is seized by the idea that Hemu was telling him these stories as a way of talking around an idea that he himself could not get at, but which Hemu was hoping that Patient RA would be able to deduce. Hemu then offers him one of his own truths; momentarily disentangling himself from the watchful gaze of the hospital staff, Hemu confesses to Patient RA that the loss of his shadow is not the *cause* of his memory loss, but only the means. Unlike the amnesiac who 'forgot everything on accident', Hemu admits to feeling a 'pull' after the loss of his shadow; this pull 'just makes it *possible* [to forget]. But you don't *have* to' (emphasis in the original). Hemu admits that when he initially gave into the pull,

he felt ‘better and better’, but upon realising that he was feeding the pull with his memories, he grew afraid. Though he tried to stop, it had been too late; the pull had grown too strong now, and Hemu does not know if he truly wishes to stop, because in return for sacrificing his memories to the pull, he is receiving ‘magic’.

This magic is nothing but the ability to rewrite reality. In the face of the abject terror that comes with losing one’s own selfhood – for the pull is a demanding presence – Hemu clings to the only source of power he can access. However, Hemu realises that this poses a danger to more than just his own person. Given his inability to stop forgetting, he instead chooses to commit suicide to avoid causing harm.

In typical postmodern fashion of worshipping one’s own annihilation, many characters in the novel are subsequently faced with the same choice, which in turn becomes a source of fear for their loved ones. Ory wonders if Max would end up ‘lov[ing] the strange magic of her amnesia more than him, and stop fighting to remember’. There are also practical constraints in that resisting the pull required an immense force of will; giving into it was as natural as gravity. Moreover, surviving in a post-apocalyptic landscape where reality itself was being constantly, chaotically rewritten, people were forced to forget in order to gain material advantages like fuel, shelter, &c. In other words, *The Book of M* stages an apocalypse which may operate using the logic of magical realism, but the underlying question is one of cost-benefit analysis. It expresses the fear that the only way to survive in a hostile world is to trade away fundamental parts of one’s own personhood, until whatever is left is completely alien from a human’s original identity.

The myths that Hemu shared – remnant of a distant collective past and product of modern research – function within the novel as prophetic visions. The amnesiac knows that there is an underlying truth which Hemu couldn’t articulate, so he begins obsessively reading

Hemu's research and expanding upon it himself, until 'they were memorized [more thoroughly] compared to a handful of notecards about the amnesiac's former life that he'd lost long ago and never cared about anyway. He knew Gajarajan more intimately than he would ever know his old self. It almost felt like he was more elephant than man.' Thus, over the course of the novel, as the amnesiac forms new experiences and memories, his identity also takes on a more solid shape. One of the ways in which the novel expresses this idea is that his shadow eventually morphs into the shape of an elephant; furthermore, the shadow becomes more real, far more representative of the amnesiac's identity than his physical body, that the shadow ends up dragging his flesh in its wake in a reversal of the usual process. The resulting creature, which is no longer called the amnesiac or Patient RA, but by the numerous epithets he gains as legends of him spread by word of mouth amongst the survivors, shadowed and shadowless alike. The most significant of these epithets is 'The One with a Middle but No Beginning'. Upon learning of this epithet, Orlando Zhang remarks that the amnesiac had the opposite problem to the scant few survivors who had retained their shadows for they were '[a]ll beginning, no middle. Middle had become an ever-shifting, never-ending apocalypse'.

Rosen posits that apocalypse is a sense-making paradigm that aids a society in concretely defining and knowing itself, contemporary eschatological narratives appear more open to admitting that such self-definition is not always possible. Furthermore, individual memory and personal identity are also not exempt for the violence of uncertain times. History has failed as a signifier; or rather, the conception of history as a single, homogenous body was a faulty assumption, and human identity should not have been based on it. In Derrida's essay 'Ends of Man', he challenges this idea of a unified, universal human being who is subject to extinction. He recontextualises the signified 'man' in its rightful place of overdetermination by specific historical, cultural, and linguistic limits; by freeing 'humanity' from being a single abstract category, he allows for multiple origins and endings.

As has been traced through this chapter, the past is both unbearable and yet something that people long for; either way, it cannot be retained, but neither can it be lost. These texts stage apocalypses that reflect the fear that time and memory – the very properties on which both individuals and communities base their self-identities – are not directly subject to human control, and further disrupted in that harmful structures like capitalism and imperialism can withhold what little choice remains from certain subsets of society. By problematising historiography and memory, these texts reveal the various mutations and morphologies that the 'human' undergoes in an apocalyptic setting.

04. DEATH OF THE WORD: LITERATURE AFTER THE END

No metafictional analysis can begin without first itself being metafictional. Furthermore, metafiction is a relatively nascent field, so some background becomes necessary. A working definition can be taken from Mark Currie who proposes that metafiction is 'a borderline discourse, a kind of writing which places itself on the border between fiction and criticism, and which takes that border as its subject'. In what could be read as happy coincidence, but is in fact not, the word *eschaton,* which is the etymological basis of 'eschatology' and indeed 'eschatological', can be parsed as 'the edge' (Hicks) or 'the furthermost boundary' (Rosen). The fact that it is not a coincidence arises from, in the first place, my deliberate use of metafiction to analyse these texts, and secondly, because metafiction as a field has been largely shaped by writers of eschatological fiction. It would be a fallacy, a recursive loop, to attempt to determine if the field arose to study these radical postmodern writers or if it influenced their styles.

A more useful endeavour would be to provide a survey of metafictional concerns and stylistic devices. Broadly speaking, metafictional writers (a considerable number of whom are, again, postmodern writers of apocalyptic fiction) begin from a stance that emphasises the subjective nature of all interpretive systems; 'reality' and 'truth' are themselves constructed. These constructions are sometimes overtly artificial, sometimes 'subtly subjective' as with myths, religions, historical/political perspectives; useful shorthand for complex analogues. The characters within such stories:

> also feel themselves victimised by a repressive, cold social order to such an extent that their lives seem meaningless, drab, fragmented; in response to this powerful sense of personal isolation and violation, these characters decide to create or invent a system of

> meaning which will help to supply their lives with hope, order, possibly even some measure of beauty. (McCaffrey)

In other words, metafictional stories have characters and plots that are about the fundamental incomprehension and incoherence of their own (fictional) universes, and they make use of language processes that respond to the incoherent universe of its authors.

If their themes and methods are so similar, can metafiction and postmodern eschatological fiction, or SFF more broadly be collated into a single genre, under a single category? No, and the reason for this 'no' exposes the most significant characteristic of metafiction: 'metafiction might be better understood not as a generic category but, in the words of Patricia Waugh, as "a function inherent in all novels"' (Currie). It is *a* function of literature, co-existing with others, that serves to dialectically connect storytelling and critical commentary. It is a conceit that allows authors to more explicitly reflect on and question the processes of literature-making from within the literature that they make. Similarly, because it is a characteristic of the text as produced by the author, it follows that reader interpretations of text are also often metafictional.

Consequently, everything is theory, in a Barthesian sense: 'Theoretical does not of course mean abstract. From my point of view, it means 'reflexive', something which turns back on itself: a discourse which turns back on itself is by virtue of this very fact theoretical' (qtd. by Currie). Criticism has taken on a literariness in its language, an increased awareness of the critical faculty of fiction, and its own limitations with regards to authority and objectivity. Fiction has heightened its integral critical function, a self-awareness regarding its own artificiality, and a fixation on the relationship between language and the world.

4.1 MYTH AS OBJECT

Just as the apocalypse myth has been adopted as a postmodern literary device, the Bible has also been increasingly studied as a piece of literature situated within various socio-cultural contexts, which is true of all mythology as has been demonstrated in the previous chapter. Rather than an untouchable repository of universal identification – or, to phrase it in more familiar terms, a transcendental signifier – mythology is merely one system of meaning. It holds no more ontological or teleological power than any other system, and is open to interpretation and reappropriation. As has been established previously, postmodern apocalypses tend to keep the world intact and focus on the collapse of its structures. The Bible, which is a narrative device supporting the apocalyptic myth, and signifier in the system of human identity, is similarly deconstructed.

Candace Chen of *Severance* works for a company with an 'impressive range of book products we were capable of producing: Cookbooks, Children's Books, Stationery, Art Books, Gift and Specialty'. Recognising that books are products is sensical (the school of Marxist criticism, for instance, would not function without this basic assumption), but the list provided here reduces them specifically to the category of 'commodities'. Candace's specific position is that of 'Senior Product Coordinator of the Bibles division', and her first in-text commentary on this is telling: 'No one can work in Bibles that long without coming to a certain respect for the object itself.' Here, respect and objectification are simultaneous. She further remarks:

> It is a temperamental, difficult animal, its fragile pages prone to ripping, its book block prone to warping, especially in the humidity of South Asian monsoon season. Of any book, the Bible embodies the purest form of product packaging, the same content repackaged a million times over, in new combinations ad infinitum. Every season, I was trotted out to publisher clients to expound on the latest trends in synthetic leathers, the

> newest developments in foil embossing and gilding. I have overseen production on so many Bibles that I can't look at one without disassembling it down to its varied, assorted offal: paper stock, ribbon marker, endsheets, mull lining, and cover. It is the best-selling book of the year, every year.

The Bible has gone from assuring the certainty of spiritual well-being to signifying nothing but market vitality.

This vitality, however, is reserved for the Western world, and must be sustained at the expense of 'the Other'. Though Candace, as an Asian-American woman, is herself an 'other' within her country, she is still an agent of the imperial core, which was built on the Biblical myth, and which others the rest of the world. When Candace visits a foreign manufacturer who handles the actual labour (while her task is simply to 'co-ordinate'), she is given a 'tour' of the facility by a native Chinese worker. The manufacturer owned seven web presses, which were largely used for native newspapers and magazines (note the practical, usable printings as opposed to ornamental 'Stationery' and 'Gifts') and, the guide adds with barely disguised contempt, 'of course, your precious Bibles'. Candace does not miss the subtext:

> We manufacture the emblematic text to propagate your country's Christian Euro-American ideologies, and for this, for this important task, you and your clients negotiate aggressively over pennies per unit cost, demand that we deliver early with every printing, and undercut the value of our labor year after year.

The repetition of the phrase 'year after year' is significant here because it provides a glimpse at the sheer scale of difference in profit between the two companies. By using the Bible specifically to point that Western countries outsource their labour to Asian countries in order to cut costs, *Severance* provides its own larger subtext. One of the most widely-used 'justifications' for the colonial endeavours of the imperial core was to 'spread the Gospel',

thereby ‘saving’ the populations of the colonies. This was, of course, a thinly veiled excuse to gloss over the material exploitation that was the true motive. The neo-colonial exploitation in the twenty-first century does not depend on that same rhetoric, but does make use of the same cultural artefacts to aid its cause.

One of the other staff at Candace’s company openly acknowledges that ‘[t]he market has shifted […] Whenever I walk into chain bookstores like Barnes & Noble, the gifts and stationery section grows bigger and bigger; all these journals, board games, crafts kits. It makes you wonder if anyone reads anymore.’ However, this is idle chatter, a brief digression between colleagues who continue on with their jobs.

Just as the characters in *Severance* continue to operate within systems of harm, knowing the consequences, Candace continues to rely on the myth, knowing that it is an empty object. She begins her narrative (i.e., the novel, which is told in the first person), with ‘After the End came the Beginning. And in the Beginning’, in an echo of the Genesis. This is a deliberate metafictional device; the novel, for all its critique of capitalism, still operates within it. It was published and marketed within capitalist structures. Framing the entire narrative with this reference to a myth that has lost all signification except that awarded by the market, *Severance* acknowledges the irony of its own existence.

Furthermore, Candace is aware of the unreliability of her memories (as discussed in the preceding chapter), and reflexively attempts to sort them into a coherent narrative. For further elucidation, Heffernan’s commentary on the integration of trauma into post-apocalyptic narratives becomes relevant:

> memories cannot be secured by objectivity and reason but are instead governed by the contingencies of place and time: narration is at the mercy of the present moment,

leading to a constant re-evaluation of the event and culminating in the traumatic realization that the "witnessed" past can not be accurately documented or recovered.

'When you wake up in a fictitious world, your only frame of reference is fiction,' Candace confesses – not in dialogue with any of the other characters, but directly to the reader.

The event that immediately precedes the beginning of the novel (in a chronological sense) is also one of the last episodes she narrates. She had to kill a taxi driver, who was an acquaintance, in order to obtain a vehicle for escape from a critically uninhabitable NYC: 'Maybe, despite his frail, weakened state, he had stopped to help me, a familiar person he knew by the side of the road, and maybe I had misidentified him as fevered. It's possible. I can't be sure. Because I wasn't really all that careful. All I thought about was myself. It got me where I needed to go.' Her words of encouragement are this philosophy made explicit, and couched in the language of her socio-economic context: 'Sell the story to yourself. Believe in this story up until the moment you can't anymore.' Much like the novel is critiquing capitalism whilst being complicit in its systems, Candace requires a story to comprehend her own complicity without balking from it; neither has much room for choice, but the burden of awareness demands a narrative response. *Write what thou seest*.

Given the complexity of the events that take place in the future revealed by the Revelation, and the commandments that God imposes upon the seven churches, the function of the prophet John of Patmos appears relatively simple: 'write what thou seest'. Yet, as has already been discussed, perspective is a subjective, amoral, double-edged instrument, and much the same can be said for writing. *The Book of Strange New Things* uses the Bible as a potent symbol to explore these concerns.

The protagonist Peter, a pastor sent to minister to an alien population, has the whole of the Bible memorised 'within him', but it is a clunky, unwieldy thing in Oasis because the

natives are limited in their use of English. There are certain words that they have trouble pronouncing; not to mention, a completely different context from the Bible, which for all its narrativization of a spiritual transcendent story, is a worldly endeavour, textured by the Earth where it was written. He spends much of his time making an accessible 'translation':

> He'd gently urged them to tackle a different episode, because this one involved sheep and wolves, two creatures they'd never seen, and besides, it was full of sibilant letters. But they insisted, as if worried that their natural limitations might prevent them from comprehending something utterly crucial. So, he was tinkering with it. For sheep, he could substitute whiteflower. God could be the Good Farmer, making sure that the crops were tended properly and picked at the correct times; the Hireling could be . . . what could the Hireling be? The Oasans knew nothing about money and recognised no difference between vocation and employment. And what about the conclusion of the story, where the Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep? A farmer couldn't lay down his life for his crops. The whole parable was untranslatable. Yet the Jesus Lovers would not be fobbed off. He would have to teach them about sheep, wolves, shepherds, hirelings. It was an absurd challenge, although it might be worthwhile if it allowed the Oasans access to the concept of the Lamb of God.

Except, the Oasans do not want such a 'translated' Bible; they desire the original, which they call 'The Book of สีรี่range New Thingสี'. The only person whom such a translation serves is Peter, because he spirals into this unnecessary task to avoid the news of apocalypse on earth.

Despite being the Christian minister central to the novel, Peter is not the prophet figure; the Bible's command 'write what thou seest' is problematised in Peter. Even before the apocalypse, he had a predilection to ignoring the world. He bemoans: 'The world changes too fast. You take your eyes off something that's always been there, and the next minute it's just a

memory.' It was always his wife, Beatrice (possible allusion to Dante's Beatrice), who kept up with the news and informed him of worldly events; she performs the same role in the novel as well, for it is through her missives to Peter that both he and the reader become aware of the apocalyptic devastation.

In the beginning, Peter is uncomfortable with the news (as discussed regarding apathy in chapter two), going so far as to ask Beatrice to speak less about the catastrophe; this is an overt condemnation of how prone 'real' people – i.e., the readers – are to ignoring news cycles as well. Beatrice, though initially obliging, spirals into a justified breakdown without Peter's emotional support. Rosen warns that 'being an End-time prophet is maddening' and the same plays out in this Beatrice: 'I also needed to see these things WITH you, or else be spared from seeing them at all,' she laments. Ahlberg reads this as Faber pointing out the 'responsibility for ensuring the safety of the perspective […] We are not, as we once may have thought, passive observers. Rather, we are the co-authors of what we see. This is the world of our making.'

4.2 ARCHIVES IN THE (POST-)APOCALYPSE

Many eschatological narratives posit that, in a society that is disordered and dysfunctional, literature will not retain a privileged position, or any position at all because it will lack people to preserve it. Two novels under study explicitly contradict this supposition. *The Slynx* is set in post-apocalyptic Russia, with loaded commentary regarding its own history of censorship and 'illegal' publishing endeavours that disseminated counter-ideologies. In *The Slynx*, books are referred to as 'Oldenprint' and, at the outset, positioned as an almost mythical object; Benedikt, the narrator, conveys rumours that some people may still be in possession of them and wild imaginings on where they may be secretly stored. Benedikt's mother, an Oldener who was alive before the apocalypse, had preserved one such book, but because of a reigning

superstition that these books – artefacts from before the nuclear disaster that was 'the End' – still carry traces of radiation, Benedikt's father burns it.

This is particularly distressing for her because had belonged to a middle-class family, in which several members enjoyed a university education, which was a ludicrous impossibility in her current reality. Because of her perceived superiority to the 'Neanderthals' that had become the society of people born after the disaster, she, and the handful of Oldeners who remained, exhibited naked hatred towards them, and vice versa. These other Oldeners also tried to preserve what 'literature' they could, but were able to scrounge up only ticket stubs, receipts, instruction manuals, and such like; still, they revere it anyway, for they have nothing else to preserve.

The only books that are in wide circulation are copies made by a class of people (the 'Scribes'), who are given texts 'written' by their leader Fyodor Kuzmich. Benedikt is one dutiful Scribe, and as a consequence, is quite well-read. However, he does not comprehend what he is reading and has a less-than surface-level understanding of them. Crucially, he quotes some excerpts from these texts he transcribes within his narration and it becomes quickly apparent *to the reader* that these lines are taken from extant Russian writers. Benedikt only gradually learns the truth: using the myth of irradiated books, the authorities of this post-apocalyptic remnant of a settlement, Fyodor Kuzmich amongst, have employed their 'Saniturions' to seize and collate whatever books that the common people had possessed.

Benedikt's lover is the daughter of one such Saniturion, and upon their wedding, he is allowed to read these secretly archived books. He devours them at an alarming speed, and when he has finished with the collection that they have, he dissolves into a mania. He goes out as a Saniturion (no longer a Scribe) and attacks people, who may or may not have had a book. When his father-in-law overthrows Fyodor Kuzmich, Benedikt is given an even bigger position of

power. His first act is to pass a decree that permitted the widespread reading of Oldenprint books, but 'within reason', a clause that he adds of his own initiative. This phrase was used previously by Fyodor Kuzmich, and by using it himself, he finally gains understanding of a text. He enthusiastically narrates: 'I understand the governmental approach!!! All by myself'. Though Benedikt is not aware of the harm he is perpetrating, the reader can understand the irony implicit in these events.

Furthermore, the Oldeners who *did* possess the socio-cultural context necessary to interpret these texts have lost it; years of existence after and outside that context has eroded its influence. However, they refuse to accept or even acknowledge this loss. The spokesperson for this Oldener attitude within the novel is Nikita Ivanich, who is also Benedikt's guardian and mentor in the earlier parts of the novel. He bemoans, 'why is it that everything keeps mutating, everything? People, well, all right, but the language, concepts, meaning! Huh? Russia! Everything gets twisted up in knots.' This inability to comprehend the free-play of meaning proves detrimental. He raises Pushkin from his place as one author (however significant) amongst many to be an idealised god/father for the 'spiritual renaissance' he hopes will restore society to its former glory. To facilitate this coping mechanism of a belief, he conceives of a 'Book of Being', a transcendental book that acts as a repository of all the knowledge essential to a human being. In other words, it is yet another Platonic ideal. This book, which Nikita Ivanich holds is 'hidden from our myopic eyes', is instead a mirage that blinds him and Benedikt from their reality.

The Slynx raises again the issue of literature as an institution that, given the right surrounding structures, can and will cause harm. It further asks: What use is knowledge if it makes no material difference? What use is privileged access to an archive when divorced from a cultural context (that can no longer exist) and can no longer confer the same meanings?

The Book of M exists in collaboration with these same questions. Here, too, there is an archive, obsessively put together by a friend of Ory's, Immanuel (let the Christ-connotation not go unnoticed). Immanuel's husband, Paul, had been a poet before being warped by the memory-magic into a hulking giant with no more than an animal-like intelligence. In the moment before they get separated, Immanuel tries to save a copy of Paul's poetry from his monstrous hands, but fails; crucially, Paul notices this behaviour, but does not understand its significance. In an instinctual fury, he picks a nearby library to be his fortress as he gathers other shadowless to him, forming an army. Immanuel, forming his own rag-tag group of shadowed survivors, attempts armed trade with Paul's group to receive a copy of his poetry that the library would have stocked. Paul never brings out that specific book for trade, however, and though Immanuel ends up with a truly immense collection, he never attains the book he truly wants, even until his death in a skirmish. Crucially, at no point do either of them desire this book of poetry for its contents; it acts an empty symbol – sentimental to one, and instinct to another.

Immanuel bequeaths this archive – which they refer to as a 'war chest' – to Ory, asking him to take it to The One Who Gathers, because they'd heard a rumour that he was collecting 'something'. Ory then places his entire hope and meaningful exertion on this task, and in a series of events that reads more like adventure fiction than the sustained interpersonal drama that had been taking place up to this point in the novel, he does manage to take the archive to The One Who Gathers. When Ory asks him if this what he had been looking for, there is a moment of despair that resonates with the reader: '"I'm not sure," the shadow said. "But most likely not. I'm sorry." Zhang waited for something more, because it seemed impossible that they'd come all this way, that they'd risked so much—and failed. But there was nothing more. Most likely not. He let it sink in. Imanuel had been wrong. They were just books after all.'

Since *The Book of M* does not follow a linear timeline, the reader has been following The One Who Gathers' storyline as well. Shortly after morphing into the shadow-flesh-thing

described elsewhere, he gains the power to manipulate shadows. Though the lost shadows, once detached from their human owners, were permanently lost, he theorises that he can reattach other shadows to those humans and stop their memory loss. He experiments with different objects but none fit right until another one of the narrators arrives at his camp, seeking refuge.

Max, Ory's wife, was also a POV character, but her narration operated within the framing device that she was recording her thoughts in a tape recorder, addressing Ory, so that she may feel like he was still with her, and that he might eventually find it, after she is dead, as some sort of comfort. The One Who Gathers – now using the epithet Gajarajan to signal his mutated nature that has adopted both the form and the values (or 'content') of the eponymous elephant – assumes that because these tapes contained Max's own memories, reattaching the shadow made from the player onto Max might work. The experiment *is* successful, but it is then revealed that the woman was not Max at all, but another shadowless – Ursula – who had been travelling with her, and who only happened to possess Max's tapes. Ory's despair is even more acute when he meets her, but Gajarajan cannot comprehend why. The newly re-shadowed person is neither Max nor Ursuala; she renames herself 'M' as the first step in attempting to cohere the memories that do not belong to her, the past that cannot decide her future.

The significance of the novel's title then comes into play, for it is M that acts as an augury for a new age of literature:

> Gajarajan didn't understand what memories mean to humans—only how to restore them. You understand what they mean, but not how to make them. Together, you both can be wise enough. You and your army turned out to be the key Gajarajan had been seeking after all. In all of New Orleans, there is only one thing that both contains human memories and also carried no danger of re-creating my accident. Your books. It's not as

> good as bringing back a body's original memories, but that's impossible now—Gajarajan has proven that the result could be far worse than simply losing someone forever. The next best thing is to give a shadowless some memories, so they can have some concept of self to start from. But because the shadow will now be made from a past that never existed, because the source of the shadow has never been alive in the real world, there will be no chance of discovering later that the memories are an accidental perversion of nature—a recycling of a person already in existence.

Fictional memories – the simulacrum – rather than being the reviled shadow of true literature, is now the rising archive that replace 'real' stories; this new archive corresponds with the new species of re-shadowed humans.

Before turning to the analytical lens for the metafictional findings thus far enumerated, it would be useful to aggregate them for convenience. Firstly, all literature has a material dimension that cannot be ignored; books are objects, operating within a specific economical mode of production. They are necessarily shaped by their production and are also reflections of it; these structures may be hard to tease out at times (not all texts are as explicit as *Severance*), but it is a necessary endeavour. Secondly, literature also operates within a socio-cultural context, which cannot be ignored lest they lose half their potency or intentions. Third, the writer of a text is not the supreme authority of its meaning, but neither is the reader. Authors, texts, and readers always exists in dialogue, in an in-between space, feeding into each other. No singular interpretation can be considered *the* definitive message of a text; more importantly, there is no underlying message, only an infinite hall of mirrored meanings. In postmodern terms, there is no 'truth', only 'truths'.

What these novels point out is that cultural context is essential for a definition of the archive; this is the starting point of Derrida's theory of 'archive fever'. In his book-length essay,

he traces how, both etymologically and practically, archives were first and foremost an institution. The word '*arkheion*' carries traces of both *commencement* (history, ontology) and *commandment* (authority, nomology), feeding into each other. It was called so because the residences of law-makers ('archons', i.e., patriarchs) housed the archives; they held the right both to the physical medium ('substrate') and the hermeneutics (i.e. interpretive systems) of the archive. The archive is inseparable from institutionalisation; it reflects the ideological aims and practices of its keepers. This system must be deconstructed, questioned on who has the right to unification, identification, classification, ownership, access, publication, reproduction.

Furthermore, Derrida theorises that the archive expresses a need for *consignation*, i.e., it aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration. This is similar to the Freudian death drive, which

> always operates in silence, it never leaves any archives of its own. It destroys in advance its own archive, as if that were in truth the very motivation of its most proper movement. It works to destroy the archive: on the condition of effacing but also with a view to effacing its own 'proper' traces—which consequently cannot properly be called 'proper'. It devours it even before producing it on the outside.

To summarise, the death drive – which is really the apocalyptic drive – 'will always have been archive destroying, by silent vocation'. The archive is not spontaneous experience or even memory but occupies the point of originary and structural breakdown of said memory because it requires externalisation, codification, and recall/repetition. In essence, it is hypomnesic *and* anamnesic. Codification allows for the possibility both for the knowledge to reproduced and proliferated but also for it to be destroyed; thus, the archive functions, *a priori*, against itself. There would be no desire to archive without the death drive that seeks total destruction/amnesia. The archive, then, is not an opposing drive, but a *fever*, an illness ('le mal

d'archive') that represents the compulsive, repetitive, nostalgic desire, or homesickness, for the place of absolute commencement.

Derrida, speaking of nuclear war, worries of 'possibility of an irreversible destruction, leaving no traces, of the juridico-literary archive' (Cristofaro), which is here subverted. The archive – and, by extension, literature – is not necessary for the survival of the 'human' as an identity, but it *shall* exist regardless, carrying traces of all the ages through which it has existed. Indeed, Cristofaro identifies a tradition of 'anti-apocalyptic archive fever' in the contemporary post-apocalyptic novel, given the proliferation of remnant and emergent archives. Moreover, despite being completely divorced from the same socio-cultural context as present society, these societies continue to archive; this is essential because to assume that there would be no archive left after a postmodern apocalypse is to ignore all the past archives that have brought 'history' – or, more accurately, 'histories' to this point.

However, the archive fever as Derrida conceived of it, is not absent from contemporary eschatological fiction. Derrida, having written this work in 1995 before the internet really came into force, lacked the foresight to understand its implications fully. He posits that the e-mail would be the medium by which archives are irrevocably altered, with no conception of other, more appropriate catalogues, whereas the e-mail has been relegated to 'co-ordinating' mindless bureaucracy. This is significant because the e-mail is primarily a *written* medium, and Derrida, like most (post)structuralists, has a tendency to privilege the graphic sign above all others. It is in an audio medium, however, that Derrida's concept of archive fever is fully realised.

The Magnus Archives, as mentioned elsewhere, takes place in an academic institution run by Jonah Magnus, with Jonathan Sims as its Head Archivist. They both act as apocalyptist figures; however, Jonah is clear-sighted and Jonathan, blind. At the outset of the story, Jonah is already aware of the existence of cosmic Entities that shape their world; however, much of

the world does not; any paranormal incident that the average person experiences is rationalised away by themselves. Indeed, though Jonathan was traumatised directly by an Entity in his early childhood, he believes it to be an isolated incident and not part of a larger pantheon of horrors. For this reason, and owing to Jon's characteristically obsessive curiosity, Jonah uses him to set off the apocalypse.

The Magnus Institute collects 'statements', from anyone who wishes to give them, regarding significant paranormal experiences that they have had. Jon spends most of his time organising the incredibly messy archives as it was left by his predecessor, but he does occasionally take direct statements from people. They gradually affect him, both because he is curious enough to try to tease out the larger patterns and because the supernatural Entity that is the institute's patron by Jonah's allegiance, begins to favour him. He grows in his capabilities to *see*, to know everything, to feed on horror and be empowered by it. He even develops the ability to psychically compel people to tell him their story under 'the Eye's clarifying influence' (ep. 157), and enjoys doing it, despite the guilt.

Though quoted elsewhere, Jonah's definition for the role of the Archivist is worth re-iterating: 'It is your job to chronicle these things, to experience them, whether first-hand or through the eyes of others' (ep. 92). Jonah later reveals that calling him the 'Archivist' is 'a bit of a misnomer', for he is more truly an *Archive*. Throughout the story, Jonah orchestrates a series of events that brings Jon into direct and detrimental contact with each of the Entities; Jon follows along, unaware of the larger plan, but fuelled by his hunger, his '*need to know*' (ep. 67, emphasis in the original). Having marked Jon, physically and mentally, using these encounters, Jonah then pulls the extra-dimensional Entities into this specific reality so that they may remake the world and remove death – specifically for himself. Therefore, Jonah amends his definition, when he reveals the culmination of his work to Jon: 'Because you do not administer and preserve the records of fear, Jon. You are a record of fear, both in mind as you walk the

shuddering record of each statement, and in body as the Powers each leave their mark upon you. You are a living chronicle of terror' (ep. 160, emphasis in the original).

Here it must be noted that, for all his manipulations, Jonah never forced Jon into seeking knowledge; that was always Jon's choice. One of the teasers for the podcast foreshadows this exceptionally well: 'You can stare all you want, make your notes and your inquiries, but all your beholding will come to nothing. When the time arrives, and all is darkness and butchery, you'll wish you had stopped listening and run' (ep. 0.2). *The Magnus Archives* uses a typical device of the tragedy to suggest that the gravity and inevitability of the narrative led Jon to this point. In using Jon's desire for *consignation*, the archive drive realises its apocalyptic function, erasing the world that was archived, just as Derrida theorises.

The archive, like literature in general, serves no higher purpose than itself. Derrida himself argues that a text exists beyond the radical absence – i.e., the death – of the person who 'wrote' it, and it performs functions that were not intended at its conception. Similarly, any human archive, in moving past 'the End', shall not always fulfil the intended meaning. This does not, however, call for a disavowal of all intentional creation, but rather opens the remit of that intention to include a wider range of expression.

05. THE APOCALYPSE OF THE ABSURD

Camus begins *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and thereby his entire philosophy, by establishing that '[t] here is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide'. Human extinction, far from being a divinely ordained and inevitable event, has firmly been placed within the confines of human agency. It is now within mankind's power to decide if life – our collective life – is worth living. Camus' positions arise from the same point as much of postmodern, the Nietzschean 'death of God', i.e., the awareness that one lives in a world with no transcendental signifier, no comprehensible system that would neatly explain the nature of existence. Camus writes,

> A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and this life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. (*Myth*)[1]

It is this figure of the alien, the exile, the 'absurd man' that shall be the subject of this chapter, taken from Camus' musings on individual suicide and extended to that of a species.

Earlier in the dissertation, it was stated that a prophet figure in an eschatological narrative acts as a sort of mediator between God and man, in order to collaborate on a plan for the future of the world. Rosen distinguishes the apocalyptist proper from the prophet:

> An apocalyptist, on the other hand, sees God's behavior as fixed; God will intervene and bring human history to an end. Apocalyptists warn of an unalterable End. Their aim

[1] Further unspecified quotations from Camus will all be from *The Myth of Sisyphus*; when a different work from Camus is cited, the name shall be appropriately mentioned in parantheses.

> is to comfort and prepare those who are already 'saved'. There is nothing that mankind, even the righteous, can do to avoid this ending. About this, apocalyptists are unequivocal. There is nothing which the faithful can do to alter the end which God has planned; all they can do is endure it.

Except, in Camus' conception, there is no God at all, which does not make much of a difference. The fundamental truth remains the same: death is unavoidable, and does not discriminate. It is a much fairer state of existence than has been allowed before.

A similar sentiment is echoed in *Disco Elysium*, which runs on dice rolls made by the player to determine the outcomes of in-game dialogue choices and proposed action. In a metafictional conceit, the game features its own in-universe role-playing games, which also use the same dice mechanics. One of the characters with whom the protagonist Harry du Bois can interact is a novelty diemaker; if the player deliberately chooses to mould Harry as a 'Cop of the Apocalypse', she will craft an apocalyptic die for him. It is carved with six phrases – 'God is indifferent', 'Take all', 'Lose all', '50/50', 'Nothing happens', and 'pale' – but she admits that she weighted the die slightly so that it will always land on the side that reads 'God is indifferent'. The player can then choose from three different replies for Harry: 'What a relief', 'That's so depressing', and 'I don't agree with you'. It is precisely in this space between the three possible responses, this desert without God, that absurdism can be felt.

The Magnus Archives, though it does not allow for the existence of God, does admit the existence of a pantheon of Fear. In this corruption of worship, it arrives at the same point of an uninterested, perhaps even actively hostile, universe. As has been discussed before, the Entities do not think or feel in a way that humans can comprehend, if they think at all. They certainly do not offer any explanations to the humans who cry out in desperation: 'It warps us and changes us and feeds on us. Though not in the ways we expect. […] The one thing it never does

is just… tell us what to do' (ep. 145). The best comfort that the characters who worship these Entities as gods can come up with is to tell themselves that, 'It all makes about as much logical sense as a nightmare. Which is to say, there is a certain sort of *emotional logic* to it all: things feel like they flow together in a way that makes sense, but if you try to stop and do the maths, then it all comes apart' (ep. 151, emphasis in the original). However, this would not be enough for Camus, who proposes that one should adopt nothing more than an 'unjust' but nonetheless logical thought devoid of all emotional excuses. The only character willing to go to the farthest reach of such logic is Jonah Magnus:

> Why *does* a man seek to destroy the world?
>
> It's a simple enough answer: for immortality and power. Uninspired, perhaps, but – my god. The discovery, not simply of the dark and horrible reality of the world in which you live, but that you would quite willingly doom that world and confine the *billions* in it to an eternity of terror and suffering, all to ensure your own happiness, to place yourself beyond pain and death and fear. It is an awful thing to know about yourself, but the *freedom*, Jon, the freedom of it all. I have dedicated my life to handing the world to these Dread Powers all for my own gain, and I feel… nothing but satisfaction in that choice.

Camus understands that this is a difficult, perhaps even nigh impossible, position, but to him, there is no other appropriate state of existence for a rational being. Rationality, in his conceptualisation, is different from the 'cold reason' that Adorno attacked; in any case, both understand that whilst rationality is an imperfect tool, it is also intrinsically human; rather than abandoning or reviling it, he advocates for learning to wield it with integrity. He writes, 'I want everything to be explained to me or nothing. And the reason is impotent when it hears this cry from the heart.' It is perhaps the most human sentiment to have been articulated.

Rationality has always been attacked to the point that, as a faculty, it is not as developed as it could be. Human beings instinctively privilege the irrational precisely because they are afraid of the ability of rational thought to fully illuminate, with no hope of escape, the condition of absurdity ('absurd walls') within which a human is trapped. Camus embarks upon a survey of the modernist spiritual landscape by assessing the concepts put forth by Heidegger, Jaspers, Chestov, Kierkegaard, Husserl and other phenomenologists. Though their ideas are vastly different, he contents himself with pragmatically assessing what their conclusions have in common: (1) life is humiliating because of its meaninglessness; there is no real relief to boredom, and the fear of death is inescapable; the result is existential anguish (2) religion cannot offer true freedom because it is also irrational, i.e., every system has flaws in its internal logic (3) similarly, pure rationality also cannot act as a transcendental signifier; there is no overarching system of thought that can resolve all contradictions and offer a coherent explanation of life. Despite the inability of rational thought to act as a telos, it does still offer the best means of existence: 'Thinking is learning all over again to see, to be attentive, to focus consciousness.'

Having thus armed oneself with uncompromising logic, it is necessary to assess the problem, i.e., the absurd. The absurd is first glimpsed when one achieves a critical point of weariness with the unrelenting routine of life; this results in an awakening of the consciousness that had been dulled into compliance, and one begins questioning *why* one continues with existence. There are two options available at this point: suicide or a return back to the chain of events, having suppressed the pricking of one's consciousness. To Camus, both these options are a means of *escape* and not a proper contemplation of the absurd.

The second observable characteristic (for this is an empirical process) is man's horror of time, the repulsion of the body from decay. True awareness of mortality, the inevitable and all-consuming End, is often the moment of awakening of absurdist feeling. Camus explains,

> Yet a day comes when a man notices or says that he is thirty. Thus he asserts his youth. But simultaneously he situates himself in relation to time. He takes his place in it. He admits that he stands at a certain point on a curve that he acknowledges having to travel to its end. He belongs to time, and by the horror that seizes him, he recognizes his worst enemy. Tomorrow, he was longing for tomorrow, whereas everything in him ought to reject it. That revolt of the flesh is the absurd.

Jonah Magnus confesses the same: 'I was getting older, and mortality began to weigh more heavily on my mind. How much in this world is done because we fear death, the last and greatest terror?' (ep. 160). Indeed, the very motivation for his bringing about the apocalypse, as has been discussed before, was to re-write reality and attempt to place himself beyond the reach of death. In this way, he is agreeing with Camus: 'No code of ethics and no effort are justifiable *a priori* in the face of the cruel mathematics that command our condition.'

If death induces the awareness of the absurd, living exacerbates it. The third characteristic of the absurd that Camus discusses is the irreconcilability of the world with the human; both appear uncanny, dissimilar, alien to each other. The dissociation that one often feels when meeting one's own reflection in the mirror and 'the mechanical aspect of [other people's] gestures, their meaningless pantomime mak[ing] silly everything that surrounds them' constitute a sense of 'nausea' or existential anguish that forms the bedrock of the absurd. In *The Magnus Archives*, this problem is made much more explicit in that the Entities actively corrupt their avatars (i.e., humans who align themselves with the Entities), and make them into something *other*. Jonah Magnus guides Jonathan Sims along the path of their god, initially without Jon' consent. Though Jon did make those choices, he was not aware of the consequences. In a painful moment of self-doubt, he asks Jonah if he is 'still human', to which Jonah replies: 'Jon, what does human even mean? I mean, really? You still bleed, you can still

die. And your will is still your own, mostly. That's more than can be said for a lot of the 'real' humans out there' (ep. 092).

This positioning of free will is significant. Camus addresses the question of 'freedom' or 'free will' in a designated section of the *Myth of Sisyphus*. He argues that whether or not humans are metaphysically free is irrelevant because it would necessitate that there must exist an external authority – i.e., God – to allow human will to be *free* from that authority. The only constraints on will that Camus recognises is the authority of the state. He writes, 'History is not lacking in either religions or prophets, even without gods. He is asked to [take] a leap [of logic]. All he can reply is that he doesn't fully understand, that it is not obvious. Indeed, he does not want to do anything but what he fully understands. He is assured that this is the sin of pride, [… but] I feel innocent.' The world of *The Magnus Archives* is fundamentally different from ours in that, it does have 'gods' that affect human will. There is an entire Entity dedicated to manipulation and forced takeover of control. However, this is why Jonah adds the qualifier to his pronouncement: 'your will is your own, *mostly*' (emphasis added). This would satisfy Camus, who only calls for '[t]hat discipline that the mind imposes on itself, *that will conjured up out of nothing*, that face-to-face struggle' with the absurd (emphasis added). This *is* pride, but in an absurd world, it cannot be classified as *sinful*, merely human.

Having thus described the absurd, one must recognise the burden of its awareness:

> At that last crossroad where thought hesitates, many men have arrived and even some of the humblest. They then abdicated what was most precious to them, their life. Others, princes of the mind, abdicated likewise, but they initiated the suicide of their thought in its purest revolt. The real effort is to stay there, rather, in so far as that is possible, and to examine closely the odd vegetation of those distant regions. Tenacity and acumen

> are privileged spectators of this inhuman show in which absurdity, hope, and death carry on their dialogue.

To acknowledge the absurd requires an 'inhuman' show, a more-than-human effort of will. Harry du Bois, having recognised the absurdity of existence, attempted suicide; it is not clear if his aim was death or merely the erasure of his memory (which Camus classifies as 'suicide of thought' or 'philosophical suicide'). However, he does awaken from the black-out, and this is the point at which the game begins. The world is irrational; the human is suffused with the ardent desire, nonetheless, to understand the world completely, and attain fulfilment therein; the confrontation between these immutable truths is the absurd, the desert of existence, 'the desert that we must not leave behind.' 'To examine closely the odd vegetation', then, is the aim of *Disco Elysium*, transposed to an apocalyptic landscape, apt for the absurdist feeling.

Camus warns that 'the magnitude of the absurdity will be in direct ratio to the distance between the two terms of my comparison.' The real world, which is Camus' theatre, is absurd enough; it gets more acute in the SFF settings of *The Magnus Archives* and *Disco Elysium*, where reality can be or is constantly being re-written, and only ever in actively hostile ways. In *The Plague*, Rieux muses, 'since the world is shaped by death, mightn't it be better for God if we refuse to believe in Him, and struggle with all our might against death, without raising our eyes towards the heaven where He sits in silence?' When Tarrou offers that taking on such a game would render all of Rieux's victories temporary; still, Rieux cannot conceive of a different way, for that would not be logical:

> 'Yes, I know that. But it's no reason for giving up the struggle.'
> 'No reason, I agree… Only, I now can picture what the plague must mean to you.'
> 'Yes. A never-ending defeat.'

Disco Elysium, which has its own version of Camus plague (the pale) and the added 'real' complications of economic oppression, is nonetheless a video game. One would expect the game to have a 'win condition', but precisely because it reflects an absurdist world, it subverts this expectation.

Functioning on dice mechanics, it simulates the random chance inherent to life; the beauty of the game, however, lies in the fact that it rewards the player *both* for successful and failed skill checks. The alternative version of events is narrated with the same aching sincerity and integrity; Harry can even say that '[c]oincidence is all that safeguards us', for acknowledging the absurd is truly freeing. In one of the final episodes of the game, succeeding a skill check nonetheless effects a negative scenario to advance the point that one barely has any control over one's own actions in an absurd, overdetermined world, and the consequences are even farther out. The game then offers this insight: 'This was not about failure or success. This was always going to be horror.' *The Magnus Archives*, which operates on such horror at a cosmic scale, extends a similarly absurdist position through Jonah. When Jon insists that he never chose to serve a patron, Jonah counters, 'You never *wanted* this, no. But I'm afraid you absolutely did choose it. In a hundred ways, at a hundred thresholds, you pressed on. You sought knowledge relentlessly, and you always chose to see. Our world is made of choices, Jon, and very rarely do we truly know what any of them mean, but we make them nonetheless' (ep. 092, emphasis in the original).

The Novelty Dicemaker once remarks, 'there's something inherently violent even about dice rolls. It's like every time you cast a die, something disappears. Some alternative ending, or an entirely different world...' This is an apocalyptic expression of the absurdist feeling; it then prompts Harry to seriously consider the problem that there are 'not a lot of victors in sight. Everyone's mostly losing. Why is that? And how do you *not* lose?' The solution that Harry comes up with is that of the absurd man: 'It is impossible *not* to [lose]. The world is balanced

on the edge of a knife. It's a game of frayed nerves. You're pushed on by numbers and punitive measures: pain, rejection, and unpaid bills. […] The only way to load the dice is to keep on fighting.' It is Rieux's never-ending defeat that is nonetheless impossible to abandon.

Camus firmly holds that, 'This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. For the moment it is all that links them together.' In essence, the absurd is the product of the conflict that occurs when a human mind exists in an irrational world. Consenting to give into the absurd, i.e., resignation or suicide, would destroy the confrontation that is a necessary condition for the absurd to exist; therefore, the absurd demands ceaseless struggle. There can be no hope of escape, for true logic cannot reject that existence is absurd. Metaphysically speaking, abandoning this absurd struggle would be tantamount to destroying the two parts of the equation: 'A man devoid of hope and conscious of being so has ceased to belong to the future. That is natural. But it is just as natural that he should strive to escape the universe of which he is the creator.' In other words, it is the natural state of the rational animal that is man to seek extinction. Just as Camus declines to make value judgements in his theoretical exploration of the absurd, this dissertation would also stay away from contemplations of morality beyond pure description. These characters are fictional, and serve as enriching case studies; they are not models for replication, but simply an understanding. To refer back to Camus: 'It simply testifies to the "interest" that reality can offer.'

As has been discussed throughout these chapters, both Jonah Magnus and Harry du Bois are apocalyptists in the truest sense of the word; they are both the human watching and dying, and the means by which extinction occurs. This state of being is natural, and absurd; having recognised this, they 'take up the heart-rending and marvelous wager of the absurd' as Camus invites the absurd man to do. In doing so, they enter into the archetypical absurdist

revolt which ‘gives life its value. Spread out over the whole length of a life, it restores its majesty to that life’ (ibid).

The first step in this revolt is to reject death. Death is the end not only to life, but to freedom; because there is no eternity, there is no possibility left after death. One must acknowledge that death is inevitable and that there is no future, for this constitutes the absurd, but the absurd man must then prolong his life as much as possible. ‘But what does life mean in such a universe? Nothing else for the moment but indifference to the future and a desire to use up everything that is given.’ Jonah Magnus does everything in his power (which drives the plot of *The Magnus Archives*) to achieve just this; he damns the future in order to prevent his own death. He is possessed with a hunger for life that Camus would applaud. He is one of the few characters who unambiguously chooses a patron Entity in *The Magnus Archives*, and his deity, too, is the Ceaseless Watcher, precisely because it is a twin to him in its hunger: ‘The Ceaseless Watcher of all that is, and all that was; the voracious, infinite hunger the tears at his soul, invoking him to discover, to observe, to experience all, and everything, and forever’ (ep. 120).

However, suicide was never a consideration for Jonah; the appeal of death, the natural desire to escape it in the face of the absurd, was not something he experienced. True despair, which is a part of the absurd condition, but not one that even Camus fully explores, finds expression in Harry du Bois. Though just as in love with life and all that it has to offer, Harry is seized by an equally powerful desire to end *his* life regardless of the world. ‘The absurd man thus catches sight of a burning and frigid, transparent and limited universe in which nothing is possible but everything is given, and beyond which all is collapse and nothingness.’ This pale, burning universe is a very real phenomenon in Harry’s world. In fact, when the insect at the end of the game asks Harry to describe what existence is like for him, he can reply that is like ‘[f]ire, burning’. The insect asks where the fire is, to which he may respond: (1) ‘Inside’ or (2) ‘In the city, all around. It's going *down*.’ or (3) ‘On the horizon. Pale fire. This thing we’re both

sensing is coming to an end.' These choices are in essence the same response; they converge from different play-styles for Harry but they point toward the same fundamental truth in him.

Jonah Magnus fears and reviles death; Harry fears and yearns for it; they are both equally absurdist positions. As mentioned before, Harry attempts suicide, but he spends the rest of the game, learning how to live in revolt. As discussed elsewhere, the insect remarks that the world ends because Harry is alive; he is 'the miracle' and 'the return'. Both in-universe and on a meta-game level, the world ends because Harry is there to witness it. Arguably, if Harry had not survived his initial alcoholic binge, the player would not have had a game to play, and in finishing it, would not have ended the world. However, had Harry not awoken, there would be no world in the first place. This is the tension of the absurd, man and world bound together in hatred.

One of the earliest quests in the game is to obtain some armour, prompted specifically by Harry's fear response: 'Bullets will fly, they always do. And the coil is fleshly and mush and permeable. Cast it in ceramic shell. Resist death.' This prompt is important not only in a practical sense (Harry is a police officer in a distinctly volatile city), but because it reveals that Harry does desire to live. Moreover, once the aforementioned armour is obtained, Harry perceives that the way the ceramic plates are arranged causes his movements to elicit a sound 'like dice rolling'. Harry cannot place himself beyond death, for he is subject to the mathematical fatality of the universe, but his desire to do is significantly absurdist.

Jonah, similarly, finds himself unable to escape death. Though he re-writes reality, he cannot erase the Entity of Death from it. The entire 'new world of fear reviles death as a release' (ep. 168); in order to keep human in fear forever, the new rules as dictated by the Entities attempts to give them immortality. However, since these rules must be given by all Entities unanimously, Terminus imposes upon them the inevitability of death:

> The End does not fear its own cessation, for it is the certainty and promise of all life, however strange, that it will one day finish, and that includes its own stark existence. It shall be the last, and when the universe is silent and still forever, it shall, perhaps, in that impossible moment before it vanishes, finally be satisfied. (ep. 168)

Jon informs him, 'Immortality. It's impossible. […] nothing escapes entropy. Not forever. Not even fear.' Jonah responds, 'Pity.' He admits that he knew this truth, deep down, and all he sought was to *live* as much as he could in the meantime, which he achieved. After the apocalypse, he is rewarded with the power to see 'more than I could have lived in a thousand lifetimes' (ep. 200), and he savours every single moment of it, in a glorious fulfilment of Camus's assertation that 'what counts is not the best living but the most living'.

Jon kills him, both in revenge for manipulating him to set off the apocalypse and in order to revert the world back the way it was before. Jonah pleads to be spared, but is denied. This death, too, is an absurdist sentiment. To Camus, freedom in 'temporally limited' and therefore death must be deferred as much as possible; 'the succession of presents before a constantly conscious soul is the ideal of the absurd man', as Jonah plays out in his post-apocalyptic apotheosis. However, lacking such fantastical means in real life, Camus understands that the absurd man *must* eventually die; for this, he allows, '[i]t is essential to die unreconciled and not of one's own free will'.

This idea is better illustrated in Meursault. He reviles every aspect of death; at the moment of his execution, he remarks upon the indignity of the means:

> He walks up to [the guillotine] the way you walk up to another person. That bothered me too. Mounting the scaffold, going right up into the sky, was something the imagination could hold on to. Whereas, once again, the machine destroyed everything you were killed discreetly, with a little shame and with great precision. (*The Stranger*)

He further despises the emptiness of it: ‘For everything to be consummated, for me to feel less alone, I had only to wish that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with cries of hate’ (ibid). Thus, the hatred that Jonah glimpses before his violent but dramatic death would have, in the last analysis, satisfied him.

The condemnation of Meursault shares further similarities with that of Jonah. During the investigation on Meursault, he maintains a cordial outlook on those who seek to exorcise him from society: ‘I was almost surprised that I had ever enjoyed anything other than those rare moments when the judge would lead me to the door of his office, slap me on the shoulder, and say to me cordially, “That’s all for today, *Monsieur Antichrist*.” I would then be handed back over to the police’ (emphasis added). In a tellingly tragic narrative convention, Camus has Céleste, the prosecuting attorney, exhibit a clear-sighted understanding and empathy with Meursault:

> “The way I see it, it’s bad luck. Everybody knows what bad luck is. It leaves you defenseless. And there it is! The way I see it, it’s bad luck.” He was about to go on, but the judge told him that that would be all and thanked him. Céleste was a little taken aback. But he stated that he had more to say. He was asked to be brief. He again repeated that it was bad luck. And the judge said, “Yes, fine. But we are here to judge just this sort of bad luck. Thank you.” (*The Stranger*)

As discussed previously, Jonah and Harry, in their role as the absurdist apocalyptist, are acutely aware of the extent to which luck governs their respective worlds. For Jonah specifically, at the moment when they set of the apocalypse, he tells Jon, ‘It does tickle me, that in this world of would-be occult dynasties and ageless monsters, the Chosen One is simply that, someone I chose. It’s not in your blood, or your soul, or your destiny. It’s just in your own, rotten *luck*’

(ep. 160, emphasis in the original). Even in death, through the agony of being strangled, his fondness for Jon and his absurdist reasoning cause him to whisper, 'Good… luck.'

Absurdist reasoning is mentioned here to elucidate what Camus asserts in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: 'All systems of morality are based on the idea that an action has consequences that legitimize or cancel it. A mind imbued with the absurd merely judges that those consequences must be considered calmly. It is ready to pay up. In other words, there may be responsible persons, but there are no guilty ones, in its opinion.' Later in the essay, Camus remarks that 'it was the fact of living that assured his innocence. It was from death alone that he derived a guilt now become legendary.'

Jonah and Harry are both concerned with their own story; this is their 'inhuman show' to achieve the 'best living'. As a result, they are the most metanarratively self-aware characters in their respective fictions. They deliberately construct their personalities and their narrative arcs. Given that both their worlds are absurd and apocalyptic, this is a futile endeavour.

In the beginning of the game, when Harry is unconscious, he has a psychoanalytical conversation with himself, in which his own brain tells him, 'Oh yeah, baby. Frame your suffering as a masterpiece. Only one problem – no one's watching. It's boring, buddy, boring as death.' One of the skills that Harry can possess in *Disco Elysium* is 'volition', i.e., will; in a moment of suicidal despair, if Harry can pass a skill check based on this volition, it tells him that his situation is '[n]ot a disaster. Weave this into the story of you. Walk out of its *ruins*. Save those who still can be saved – *I'm* on your side' (emphasis in the original). With Jonah, who lives in an actively hostile cosmic horror universe, insists that 'it's also very important to me, in a personal capacity, that you understand I'm answering you of my own free will'. He constructs his own archive (as discussed in chapter four) and, in doing so, writes his own story to the best of his ability.

This is what Camus calls ‘absurd creation’: in an inherently meaningless world, where extinction is not a threat but a certainty, the absurdist apocalyptist creates in order to reshape fate, resembling ‘the conqueror’s attitude’. What Jonah and Harry manage to do is to live enough that they ‘exhaust the limits of the possible’, which is the only directive that Camus provides. It is the same directive that his Caligula takes up. Just as Caligula is an ‘anomaly’ for being ‘an artistic emperor’, Jonah and Harry are pariahs of their society, and each of them is condemned for it:

> CALIGULA. I repeat—that’s my point. I’m exploiting the impossible. Or, more accurately, it’s a question of making the impossible possible.
>
> SCIPIO. But that game may lead to—to anything! It’s a lunatic’s pastime.
>
> CALIGULA. No, Scipio. An emperor’s vocation.

Creation is the most sustained method of maintaining the awareness and discipline that a confrontation with the absurd demands. It is the epitome of an existence based on the principle of revolt. He references Nietzsche’s pronouncement (“All that “for nothing”’), but moves beyond it, claiming that it is necessary ‘in order to repeat and mark time. But perhaps the great work of art has less importance in itself than in the ordeal it demands of a man.’ Still, because of the absurdity of existence, even the most effective revolt will ultimately achieve nothing. As Camus says in reference to Sisyphus, the myth is tragic because the hero is consciously undertaking his burden; but this lucidity, and the scorn that it begets, are enough to fulfil him, and to convince him to push the boulder up the hill yet again. The futility of the absurdist existence is a certainty, by Camus’ own admission; it is even more true for an apocalyptist who is defined and confined by his ability to endure; but the daily effort is the still the point of life, and it is a point worth making. ‘The sight of human pride is unequalled.’

06. CONCLUSION

This dissertation has been a narratological exploration of the ultimate narrative framework. It has argued that contemporary eschatological fiction shows especial anxiety towards the mechanisms of narrative-building. In an age characterised by obsessive self-documentation through the internet, these stories call for a more responsible use of one's perceptive capabilities, to resist alienation and exercise mutual understanding. Moreover, it argues that there can be no singular model for the apocalypse as different narrators require or refute different flavours of apocalypse. In a paradoxical turn, however, this multiplicity of apocalypses is the only framework capable of uniting 'human' as an identity and then playing out the anxieties about the death of this ephemeral thing.

One of the most profound lines in *The Plague*, delivered with Rieux's characteristically absurd style of narration that is universally indifferent, is often overlooked: 'What's natural is the microbe. All the rest – health, integrity, purity (if you like) – is a product of human will, of a vigilance that must never falter.' It perfectly encapsulates the nature of this world, which is ridiculously prone to harm (extinction, if you like), and the most human answer that can be offered is an absurdist conjuration of will and an empathetic viewpoint. *Disco Elysium* phrases this equally eloquently; at the very end of an emotionally charged game, past the credits that lists everyone involved in producing it, it offers a simple message that seems to come from this collective of creators to the collective of its players: 'Mankind, be vigilant. We loved you.'

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