

ENGENDERING THE MILLENNIUM

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Ms./CALCULATING THE APOCALYPSE

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These prophets feel that, if something divine can still come to us, it will do so when we abandon all calculation....These predecessors have no future--they come from it. Within them, it is already present. But who hears it? Obscurely their song waters the world. Of today, of yesterday, of tomorrow. -Luce Irigaray¹

i

The calculations of endtimes--of the hour and the day, or at least the month and the year--has generated a temporary academic industry of metacalculators. We assess the symptoms and effects of the naive apocalypses, measure their historical and social extremities, calculate the miscalculations of past calendars and predictions, argue with each others' miscalculations of the meaning of past miscalculations (had the world been expected to end a millennium ago, and by whom?), estimate the dangers and disappointments of various apocalypses still pending. If this meta-apocalypse betrays a calculating opportunism of our own, it is also driven by a sense of social responsibility. In the case of this symposium our research articulates its hermeneutics in feminist terms.

My own work as a feminist theologian (that is one who occupies a position internal to, though not uncritical of, the textual tradition of which John's Apocalypse caps the canon) may indeed be tempted to "abandon all calculation." But of course the purity of such a prophetic stance already begins to ring apocalyptic bells. So my analysis will continually loop back into the 'methodological ambivalence' which I learned, in writing *Apocalypse Now and Then*, must haunt my research into apocalyptic and millennialist movements.²

We recognize that these movements emanate from an underestimated power, or powder keg, often though not always aggressively misogynist, turned up only through revisionist

¹Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, tr. G. Gill, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 53

²Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World*, (Boston: Beacon), 1997. The principal ambivalence which characterized the theological methodology indicated a refusal to occupy a disengaged position; and at the same time a refusal to apologize for the effects of the apocalyptic edge of the Christian tradition.

historiography; that they also represent a dimension of Foucaultian “subjugated discourses,” (though he did not consider them) popular or arcane. The more one works over the historical and cultural material, the more one inhabits a reassuringly ironic distance. For of course it is the sheer fact of the endless repetition of the prediction of the once-for-all, one time End that defangs its beast and deflates its fervor. When I bump into dirty haired prophets on the streets waving their “end of the world” messages at me, I feel now a disarming, iterative sense of cultural kitsch--American as bibles and atom bombs; sometimes seeming as harmless as, for instance, NY times cartoon of the bearded prophet cum sandwich board: “the apocalypse is coming. Unless I have it confused with the millennium.” When Jeff MacGregor analyzes “Wrestlemania” as “the end of the world as we know it,” the harbinger being the “seemingly inexplicable resurgence of professional wrestling,” he omits comment--perhaps as too grossly evident--of the gender regression embodied in these bizarre new mythic heroes of postmodern hulldom. “The apocalypse will be televised,” he quips; but he does not fail to unveil our own metacalculus : “1990’s red-hot growth sector for media analysis: apocalypse theory.”³ If the feminists working at analysis of millennialism have not as far as I know been privy to that growth sector; yet we do wrestle with the threatening hulk of millennial machismo.

Between the apocalyptic calculators and the second order, disapocalyptic calculators, dialogue is rarely possible: these folk are objects, not subjects of our metamillennialism. As part of the second order, however, I have had to recognize that the relationship of dependency to the first implies a certain reciprocity: the apocalyptic fringe turns out not to be merely Other. At a certain historical angle, it turns out also to be part of Self. The neat, dissociative gesture characteristic of traditional modern claims to a disinterested objectivity, appears from this angle not only opportunistic but mistaken. Indeed, I suspect it is precisely this dependency, which takes the very specific form, for instance, of the apocalyptic origins of the women’s movement, that keeps us--consciously or not--“interested.” I have needed to acknowledge in the feminist ethics, which has shaped me, which has inspired this conversation, a particular apocalyptic mimesis (to borrow from postcolonial theory Homi Bhabha’s “colonial mimesis”).

ii

Early in my work on apocalypticism, at which point I had intended a rather straightforward expose of the self-fulfilling apocalypse prevalent in 80’s nuclear/ecological/gender politics, I realized that the more strident the opposition to Christian apocalyptic ideology--as in the paradigm case of philosopher Mary Daly--the more irresistibly the discourse takes on the demonizing dualism, the righteous rage for justice, the purity of a community of martyrs, the impatient hope for a qualitatively transformed future, soon and very soon. Blasting the “so-called ‘First Coming’ of Christian theology, “as an absolutizing of men,” she proposes an antiapocalyptic “overcoming of dichotomous sex stereotyping, which is the source of the absolutizing process itself.” That’s very well, but note the terms of this overcoming: “this event, still on its way, will mean the end of phallic morality. Should it not occur, we may witness the end of the human species on this planet.” Possibly true, but certainly apocalyptic. Or “Seen from this perspective

³Jeff MacGregor, “The New Pop Hero: A Mirage Of Muscle and Mean,” *The New York Times* Sunday March 28, 1999, Arts and Leisure, 1ff. MacGregor’s account of this ludicrously masculinizing version of the end of the world should be read in tandem with Stephen Moore’s recent *God’s Gym*, a ludic expose of the voracity and bulk of the apocalyptic God Himself. (Routledge: 1998)

the Antichrist and the second Coming of women are synonymous.” This is early second wave feminism, its satiric inversions now rarely appreciated in the drive to “end” essentialism (of which Daly is the usual suspect.)

Yet Daly stands in a long--and quite undilutedly apocalyptic-- tradition of what she likes to call “revolting hags.” A young proletarian writer over a century earlier had written “The word of the WOMAN REDEEMER WILL BE A SUPREMELY REVOLTING WORD.” It will be “the broadest, and consequently the most satisfying to every [sexual] nature, to every humor.” she evoked “the Mother with her thousand voices” embodied in all women as a principle of resistance to masculine repression.⁴ Demar and the proletarian women’s journal, the *Tribune*, had appeared in the margins of the Saint-Simonians, a millennialist community led by the charismatic Enfantin, akin to the Oneida community, or Winstanely’s diggers; these movements, which prepared the way for Marxist socialism, were apocalypse-intensive, in the Joachite vein. And they envisioned full gender egalitarianism---identified with the “woman clothed with the sun” of Revelation 12. However, as Demar soon learned, the male leaders preferred their own fantasy of “the Mother” or “Lady Wisdom,” to the work of the journal.⁵

It took female-led utopias to resist effectively the tug of what Lee Quinby has called “apocalyptic masculinity.” For instance, an apocalyptic millennialist movement such as the Shakers, led by Ann Lee, who herself became identified by her followers as the Wisdom figure of Revelation 12, maintained a fascinating hybrid of gender egalitarianism and apocalyptic revolt. Yet it has substituted the trinitarian pattern of Joachite third age millennialism with the radical concept of the divine couple, “the Mother/Father God.” The following subversive ditty in fact identifies the age of the Antichrist--extending from the onset of orthodox imperial Christendom to her time--with trinitarian hegemony:

The monstrous beast, and bloody whore
Reign’d thirteen hundred years and more;
and under foot the truth was trod,
By their mysterious threefold God:
But while they placed in the *He*
Their sacred co-eternal *Three*,
A righteous persecuted few
Ador’d the everlasting *Two*.

One can then follow rather precisely the increasing secularization of feminist millennialist rhetoric. In 1881 Matilda Joslyn Gage wrote in that “the male element has thus far held high carnival, crushing out all the divine elements of human nature...The recent disorganization of society warns us that in the disenfranchisement of woman we have let loose the reins of violence and ruin which she only has the power to avert...*All writers recognize women as the great harmonizing elements*

⁴cf ANT 228. Also, viz the strategic essentialism of Demar’s language, cf Leslie Wahl Rabine, “Essentialism and Its Context: saint-Simonian and Poststructuralist Feminists,” in Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed, eds., *The Essential Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 135.

⁵“All that is a preparation for the public work of woman, but it is not a work of woman”, opined Enfantin of the work of the *Tribune*. “It is we who give birth in pain to woman.” cf ANT228

of the 'new era.' (emphasis hers.) A delightfully melodramatic example of this widespread sentiment was recorded as a toast from the Illinois Women's Press Club, a bastion of New Womanhood, in 1891:

Pealing! The clock of Time has struck the woman's hour,
We hear it on our knees.'
All crimes shall cease, and ancient wrongs shall fail;
Justice returning lifts aloft her scales,
Peace o'er the world her olive wants extends,
And white-robed Innocence from Heaven descends.⁶

The New Jerusalem here descending as an enlightening "Innocence" suggests the virginal purity--perhaps not separable from its implication in racism-- of an apocalyptic essentialism to which, like it or not, the women's movement is indelibly indebted.⁷

iii

I have needed to expose the (feminist) apocalypse hidden in my own (feminist) antiapocalypse.⁸ The mirror play of course does not cease just because it is seen. Perhaps it permits a wider refraction, a concave mirror in Irigaray's sense of the speculum, which belies any easy distinction between apocalyptic other and antiapocalyptic self. Yet the opposition of feminism to apocalypticism seems at first absolute (sic). We articulate this "anti" in resistance to the consuming dualisms that irresistibly merge any excessive, any threatening, female force, with the Great Whore. From John of Patmos' hysterically misogynist denunciation of a female competitor as "Jezebel," to the polygamous terror of Bockelson's 16th century New Jerusalem, to fundamentalism's founding inscription of the 19th century New Woman as "silly women of the last days," to David Koresh's harem, these examples are innumerable, structural, radical. One is struck by the utilization of sexism as a source of empowerment for the socially marginalized male believers in a literal apocalypse--and of course always symbiotically their women. Apocalypse has promoted an ascetic, heroic and dominative masculinity that energizes resistance to marginalization, that indeed fuels revolutionary flames. It can declare the New Woman, or feminism, or for that matter any of its male opponents (often popes or enemy empires), the Whore of Babylon--and it can do so with a purity of rage unavailable to the compromised mainstream of Christianity.

⁶ANT 225f.

⁷ANT 240.

⁸Antiapocalypse is a concept I had developed well before encountering Lee Quinby's delightful *Antiapocalypse: Exercises in Genealogical Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), which I was able to write into my book rather late, but as a pointed illustration of the persuasive force of this position. She has followed it up with *Millennial Seduction* (Ithica and London: Cornell University Press, 1999). Here she performs insightful genealogies of the "apocalyptic gender panic" of the Promise Keepers, of the "programmed perfection" through bioengineering--staged as "skeptical revelations of an american feminist on Patmos." Tina Pippin's *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1992) provides the collegial analogue of a feminist deconstruction of Revelation within New Testament studies proper.

In Revelation itself, women are offered three representational options, amidst a much wider and more interesting array of masculine types: whore, mother, virgin. That is really it. There is the *whore in power*, who has a human manifestation in Jezebel, the infamous name John lends his apparent female competitor, perhaps a prophetic leader, in the community of Thyatira (Rev. 2:22ff); and who has the dramatic allegorical form of Babylon the Great, the Great Whore—“for all the nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication.”(Rev 18:2f.). There is the *mother in agony* of Rev. 12, the “woman clothed in the sun” who gives birth in torment, only to have her son--as he is born--whisked up to the Father for safekeeping, while her cosmic radiance fading into desert exile; (to be discovered occasionally as Wisdom by various dissident millennialists). And of course there is the *virgin in the end*, bride of the Lamb, the New Jerusalem herself, as perfect urban antitype to wickedness of Rome/Babylon.

Yet the paradox begins there, in the binary of the two feminized cities. For the whore of Babylon symbolizes imperialist injustice, with its global marketplace of luxury goods for the affluent. So liberation and third world Christians find in this text a radical solidarity with the plight of the oppressed.⁹ Recently, Nestor Miguez’ analysis of the allegory of the Whore of Babylon deploys its rhetorical power to expose late capitalist global economics. Given the economic intricacy of John’s trope of the obscenity of the global trade in luxury items (hence his lengthy diatribe against the merchants and the sea captains, by which Roman trade and rule extended throughout the known world), such an economic hermeneutics seems fitting and effective.¹⁰ “Babylon... stands for whatever system enthrone the marketplace..., For whatever turns the human body and soul into merchandise for trade. Within such a system the only need that exists is the need of those who have the ability to pay; consequently the basic needs of all human beings yield to the luxury markets of great merchants and traders.” Martyrdom then can be read not as addiction to butchery, but as an inevitable consequence of subversion: “As in the case of John, the system condemns those who expose the fetishistic nature of the marketplace.”¹¹ Indeed the “apocalyptic hermeneutic” stands in intertextual fidelity to the western revolutionary tradition, which as Ernst Bloch, the socialist philosopher, has argued in the *Philosophy of Hope*, derives its radical futurity, its utopian hope for the fullness of justice for the poor, from the revived medieval apocalyptic tradition that runs from Joachim. So some feminist scholars, identifying, as feminism surely must

⁹In Boesak’s brilliant commentary, *Comfort and Protest*, much of which was written from a South African prison cell, not a vengeful or violent but certainly a radical and militant vision of resistance to the apartheid systems, as client of the current superpower and its Babylonian system of power and commerce.

¹⁰Nestor Miguez, “Apocalyptic and the Economy: A Reading of Revelation 18 from the Experience of Economic Exclusion,” in *Reading From This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, ed F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 250-262. Miguez argues “that the mythopoetic language of apocalyptic and revelatory polysemy of Scripture make it possible to read this text from the perspective of the victims of the neoliberal capitalist marketplace and its imposed instrumental logic.” This is no naive identity politics, no simplistic liberation polemic.

¹¹ Its constant presentation of GNP orthodoxy/free market reform as the only way, “its conviction that another alternative is bound to fail also form part of this logic of death. In the end, such logic also includes self-destruction.”[262] Miguez straightforwardly names his hermeneutic apocalyptic: “apocalyptic literature stands out as the place par excellence for the expression of such a perspective.”[253]

to some extent, with liberation movements based on economic, class and race analysis, defend it fiercely (Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza). These mirror its righteousness assertively.

Indeed, from this point of view, which focusses on the power of “comfort and protest” this text affords the oppressed, it is surprising that it made it into the canon. Augustine, a theologian ensconced uncritically in the new christian empire of the 4th century accepts it as canonical, but warns in elitist tones against those chiliasts who read it literally. Yet he seems less concerned with heading off a proto-fundamentalism than defusing its revolutionary implications for history. His insistence that the millennium has already come with the church triumphant of the new christian roman empire, that therefore there can be nothing qualitatively better within history, would become the basis for all orthodox Christian eschatology; and, of the constitutive anti-apocalypticism of the western mainstream.

But the imperial center has turned systematically toward its apocalyptic margin nonetheless, disciplining the combustible mythos toward disciplinary , anti-revolutionary ends. Thus it has emulated Augustine’s emphasis upon the final judgement and a hell for the disobedient (for which he argues in exquisite detail for the miraculous new creation of bodies capable of burning eternally in torment.) So mainstream Christianity, for all its antiapocalyptic defenses, strengthened itself with the vision so foreign to most of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, of a holy, messianic masculinity ennobling itself before the spectacle of the stripped whore and all her lovers burning in naked agony. In other words, the conservative anti-apocalypse of classical Christianity has nurtured its apocalyptic underside, its hellbelly. It has been reflecting and absorbing the apocalypse in ways we ourselves, as perhaps euroamerican feminist scholars and other de-apocalypticizing critics may also find ourselves mirroring: the damning¹² of the damners, the demonizing of demonizers, the raging against its rage. Hegemonic secular modernity has repeatedly renewed itself by reabsorbing apocalypse, as well: thus the surprising testimony of Christopher Columbus as to his own apocalyptic self-identity has been repressed: “Of the New Heaven and Earth which our Lord made, as st. John writes in the Apocalypse, after He had spoken it by the mouth of Isaiah, He made me the messenger thereof and showed me where to go.” I have elsewhere excavated the gendered morphology with which he envisioned this paradise as breast, whose conquest he initiated. The fruits of his inspiration literally funded and founded the “new world” constitutive of modernity itself.

iv

Attention to our own implication as North Americans, as progressives, as feminists, within the story of apocalypse would not damn our efforts, but intensify that interest with which we study the ‘apocalypse habit.’ The point would be not to purge or purify our discourse of its apocalyptic elements (and thus continue the mirror game) but in good Vipassana Buddhist fashion, to watch them arise; to practice a kind of apocalyptic attention--or attention to apocalypse-- while avoiding final judgment, and thus to take right action. A certain ironic apocalypse, a set of millennial manoeuvres, may decenter the pattern in its religious and secular, sexist and feminist forms. The

¹²ANT 159; or cf Keller, “The Breast, the Apocalypse, and the Colonial Journey,” in *The Year 2000* ed. By Charles B. Strozier and Michael Flynn (New York: NYU Press, 1997, 42-58.

hope would be to break the apocalypse habit without breaking with that which it has yielded as hope for justice.

Toward this end, the pointed humor, with which my colleagues in engendering the millennium read the apocalypse and present apocalyptic culture, works toward such disarmament (and prevents their own antiapocalypse from becoming too evidently a victim of its own apocalypse; that is, from self-deconstructing.) Even the rude satiric feminism of Susan Smith Nash's *Channel Surfing the Apocalypse*, inspired by the little endtime in her own neighborhood, Oklahoma City.

The bombing. A warning sign that something is wrong. Which myth do you prefer in the quest to explain it? Apocalyptic? Utopian? Evolutionary? Historical? Chaos theory?¹³

In a later vignette, "Signs that the End Is Near (If Anyone Still Cares...)" she fantasizes shopping in the mall, where she sees a mannequin dressed in what appears to be a gypsy costume.

You do not realize that it is a statue of 'The Great Harlot' who sits on a seven-headed scarlet-colored beast, and you do not see what is tattooed on her forehead: MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. You like the ensemble, so you try it on. It's a purple and scarlet dress, bedecked with gold and precious stones...As you try on the dress you feel a strange transformation.

I'll leave to the reader's imagination what happens to the man on the escalator who comes on to her. By growing her own fangs in a parody of fundamentalism, Nash, who lives in a context in which the text of Revelation is never silent, temporarily defangs the grim misogynist fervor of the text. Her apocalypse thus enacts Judith Butler's "parodic performative."

Even with a less rambunctious imagination, we may still break and enter the biblical personae: in the name of a counterapocalypse I had also befriended the great whore--found in her a wonderfully fleshly powerflirt, Babs, who by the end of this millennium has entered into a conspiracy ('breathing together') with Jeri (alias New Jerusalem), and Sophia (the long suffering sun-woman of Rev 12). (I refer the interested reader to the parables that inhabit the spaces between the chapters of ANT.)

v

I opened with a mysterious Irigarayan allusion to a style of prophecy that seems at once indebted to and liberated from the calculative or calculable effects of apocalypse. Just short of "when we abandon all calculation," I have tried to suggest a vantage point that stands within the subject matter of the Center for Millennial Studies. But I really mean *within*. Such a perspective does not (in contrast, though not in opposition, to most contributions to these studies so far) mark itself as external to apocalypse. Such a hermeneutic will be useless--obscurantist-- to any scholars who ply a positivist historicism. It may irritate those feminisms content to damn and mirror

¹³Susan Smith Nash, *Channel Surfing the Apocalypse: A Day In the Life of the Fin-de-Millennium Mind*, (Penn Grove, Ca: Avec Books, 1996), 29.

millennialism. For all of us enmeshed in a study of the apocalyptic “other” in its strange and dangerous alterity, salvation will not lie in identification. But we may wish to listen to “these prophets,” herself among them, who lure us.

After all feminist theory has learned from her (intensified through Butler) the very strategy of a mimetic parody, of the assertion of gender difference in the face of the sexist One, the Same, invisibly masculine Truth. It has enshrined itself originally as God, He. Irigaray, unlike the normal run of antitheistic theory, enters in to the symbolism to unhinge its hegemony: “Why do we assume that God must always remain in inaccessible transcendence rather than a realization--here and now--in and through the body? Like a transfiguration that would not be reduced to a moment, or like a resurrection that would not involve the disappearance of this world.”¹⁴ Her theological deconstruction turns into a reconstruction, on feminist ground. Rather than the simplistic essentializing of the biblical mythos one has grown to expect in almost all scholarship outside of the fields of religion, she performs a graceful, if swift, critique of the world-destructive animus of apocalypse, while repristinating the tropes of incarnation and resurrection as bodily events of “this world.”

Stunning to me (as I had not found much insider companionship when I began this counterapocalyptic feminist work) she actually grasps hold (with no commentary, no historical framework) of the Joachite myth of the third aeon, giving it a new feminist face: she announces the opening of “the third era” of “the couple”--“of the Spirit and the Bride.” This is straightforward citation of Rev 21.17: “The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’” Of course John when he coupled the Spirit and the Bride seemed to be working at crosspurposes to his primary final couple, the Lamb and the Bride (the New Jerusalem). So she shifts into gender ambiguity, leaving open as the language of spirit must, the sex of the partner for the bride. The gender of the bride of course is manifest; Irigaray’s feminism will continue to be subject to accusations of essentialism. But the feminist literature which defends her from this charge, which indeed charges anti-essentialism with a certain (apocalyptic?) indignant hysteria, will continue to claim that indeed, in the ongoing reconstruction of the category “woman” works a radically transforming impulse that we cannot afford to level; that inviting the prolific ambiguation of the sex/gender imaginary does not necessarily entail disintegration of “the ethic of sexual difference.”¹⁵ Even within the differences of feminists (multiplied by womanists, and by *mujeristas*) and the sexual tensions of biologicistic and cultural essentialisms worthy of the name, on the one hand, and an antiessentialist collapse of radical difference into disembodied indifference, on the other: the steady immensity of the millennial gender-project is underway. Or in the anonymous revelation of an ancient song, a wisdom text in which some prophet gathered the shards of woman in the wake of apocalypse:

I am the first and the last.
I am the honored one and the scorned one.

¹⁴Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, tr. C. Burke and G. Gill, (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1984), 148

¹⁵Cf. *The Essential Difference*, op cit. Also, *Engaging with Irigaray, Feminist Philosophy and Modern European Thought*, ed. C. Burke, N. Schor and M. Whitford (New York: Columbia University Press), 1994.

I am the whore and the holy one. I am the wife and the virgin.
I am the mother and the daughter....
I am the voice whose sound is manifold
and the word whose appearance is multiple.¹⁶

¹⁶A wisdom text, probably Gnostic Christian, from the first 3 centuries ACE, “The Thunder, Perfect Mind” (6:2) in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, (ed James Robinson (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977),