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“Signing off on the right side of History?” Relating in Louise Welsh’s apocalyptic trilogy

Marie-Odile PITTIN-HEDON

- 1 Post-apocalypticism – or “Caledoniageddon” in its Scottish version – is one of the hallmarks of the twenty first century, a period which has witnessed a global *engouement* with the genre, led by Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), both in fiction and in film and TV Series. The genre is by no means a recent phenomenon, just as the theme of the end of the world is not new in modern history— it has only been secularized after the horrors of the 20th century, which include but are not limited to those committed in the second World War. In modern Scotland, apocaliterature can boast a tradition stretching back to Edwin Morgan’s 1952 poem “Stanzas of the jeopardy”, a poem inspired by the fear of a nuclear catastrophe after the second World War, or Edwin Muir’s 1956 “The Horses,” which depicts the arrival of horses sent to the survivors of the Apocalypse to help them recover speech and invent a new community based on socialism. Later in the twentieth century, Alasdair Gray’s now canonical masterpiece, *Lanark* conjures up a dark post-apocalyptic world built on the ruins of Glasgow, a “postmodern apocalypse” (Manfredi 282), which places the collapse of civilisation under erasure. In so doing, it attempts to creatively avert its dire consequences, by urging people to return to basic values of interpersonal relations understood as “[a] little more faith, and hope, and charity” (Gray 81)¹.
- 2 In the twenty-first century, many novels such as John Burnside’s *Glister* (2009) and more recently *Havergey* (2017) and Jeni Fagan’s *The Sunlight Pilgrims* (2016), place Scottish fiction firmly within ecofiction, tying the post-apocalyptic to an environmental concern with the way we seem to be killing off our planet in the midst of, at best, indifference from societies and governments alike². Helen Sedgwick’s *The Growing Season* (2017) places her characters in a techno-biological catastrophe when the invention of a technologically-enhanced means of bearing babies, a pouch that enables mother or father to carry their embryo around with them, proves to be self-destructive

and therefore ultimately to threaten the survival of the human race. Louise Welsh's plague times trilogy, consisting of *A Lovely Way to Burn* (2014), *Death Is a Welcome Guest* (2015) and *No Dominion* (2017), but also crime writer Val McDermid's radio play, *Resistance* (2017), in which Great Britain and then Europe are under threat from a super resistant bacteria called "Zips", rely on the presence of a deadly virus which wreaks havoc in the world and leaves our civilisation shattered and in need of redefinition. In this sense, the trilogy participates in one of the dominant motifs of Western culture according to Bertrand Gervais, which he calls "l'imaginaire de la fin", a kind of writing which favours "l'interprétation et la recherche de sens, vers la lecture des signes d'un monde sur le point de s'effondrer" (Gervais 14-15). Looking for meaning is therefore a condition of survival. In an article about the father of cybernetics, American mathematician Norbert Wiener, Sara Touiza-Ambrogiani shows how the scientific, the personal and the political are connected in our relation to the apocalypse. Wiener's theory was that the end being inevitable, humans have to find a way to inhabit it in a decent manner, adding to the reading of signs the notion that there is an ethics to the end of the world, as Touiza-Ambrogiani points out, which is what gives it a political dimension. Louise Welsh's trilogy focuses on the ethics of the apocalypse, by exploring the various ways that relating, or not relating, can impinge upon the way we cope with the end. This article proposes to follow the various strategies illustrated in the novels.

Living dead, psychos and the human

- 3 "... The dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion". This quote from St Paul's Epistle to the Romans is the epigraph to *No Dominion*, the third volume of Louise Welsh's trilogy, anticipating a Christ-like but also a phoenix-like resurrection. And indeed, the trilogy about a viral pandemic is the first of Welsh's works to adopt seriality. It is also part of a wider concern on her part with the End Times, Stevie Flint, the heroine of the first and third volume, claiming in *No Dominion* that "the Sweats [have] killed the world" (41). The novel, which imagines the world *after* the much-feared cataclysm has occurred and looks back rather than looking forward to its consequences, addresses this concern by borrowing a major *topos* of postapocalyptic fiction, which Michael Foessel, taking up Jean Pierre Dupuy's concept, describes as an "actualisation of the future" to reflect the fact that once it becomes a certainty, the future weighs upon the present (Foessel 18)³.
- 4 One of the epigraphs to the second volume, *Death is a Welcome Guest* also helps situate the trilogy within the genre. It is a line from the first part of Edwin Muir's apocalyptic poem "The Horses"⁴, depicting the world laid waste to atomic ruin. This line - "On the second day/the radios failed; we turned up the knobs; no answer"— records the world's descent into silence, a severing of connection between humans, which is one of the main concerns expressed by Welsh. The three novels can be seen as ghost voices, which reach out to us from beyond the apocalypse; they are the sound to make sense of and to cover silence, seemingly trying to enforce relation over separation. The series as a whole, unrelentingly pessimistic in its description of a world where "[d]ecent folk were left reeling and in the meantime the psychopaths took over' (*No Dominion* 222), shares the characteristics of what Elisabeth Rosen describes as "neo-apocalyptic literature", "a literature of pessimism . . . positing potential means of extinction and predicting the gloomy probabilities of such ends"(xv).

- 5 And indeed, ironically, when the characters in *No Dominion* manage to get into radio contact with Glasgow – when they manage to “turn up the knobs”— what they hear is not silence, but mechanically-repeated promises of a return to a society identical to the one destroyed by the apocalypse. The broken fragments are encouraging –“Come to Glasgow . . . the Sweats are over and we are rebuilding the city” (*No Dominion* 274) – but the promises are false; they lead the characters to a city in the throes of a paroxysm of violence. For Michael Foessel, with the advent of the H bomb, the end of the world became not a religious or fictitious concept, but a rational reality. This change of paradigm which philosopher Gustav Anders has described as “the Last Age” has, according to Foessel, induced in humans an incapacity to connect to the real in any significant way, an incapacity to what he calls “faire monde”. To characterize it, Foessel coined the phrase “naked apocalypse”:

Les pensées catastrophistes soulignent en chœur la nécessité de renoncer aux philosophies modernes de l’histoire. Celles-ci promettaient des « royaumes sans apocalypses » parce qu’elles n’envisageaient pas la fin du monde (entendons du monde existant et de ses injustices) autrement que comme une étape nécessaire sur le chemin de la liberté. Le présent nucléaire, lui, ne promet rien car son horizon est celui d’une « apocalypse nue », sans royaume et sans avenir. (Foessel 29-30)

- 6 The sheer violence and counter-violence of postapocalyptic fiction, which are signs of a concentration on life rather than on the construction of a world, is for Foessel an indication of the lack of perspective the end of the world initiated. There is little in Welsh’s trilogy to be hopeful about: not much regeneration and no promise of a New Jerusalem despite the story taking its characters north to Orkney, an isolated, protected place from which the Sweats have been eradicated, and in which a form of democratic government and a survival economy based on nature and a return to the past initially take pride of place. There is no simple way back to a world that has been destroyed. The inability to connect with the meaning of the world and with any meaningful future is taken up by Engélibert who, in his book *Apocalypses sans royaume*, describes the violence of the apocalypse as an order-destroying event. In that sense, Engélibert claims, apocalyptic fiction presents not revolutions, but a crumbling of order (*Apocalypses* 18). This is captured at the beginning of *No Dominion* by the idea of the “wrong kind of order” that is filling in the space left by the collapse:

We’ve heard tales of tribes forming, territories being claimed. I’d hoped some kind of order was reasserting itself.’ Belle’s expression was grave. ‘There is some kind of order, but not the kind I’m guessing you were hoping for.’ (*No Dominion* 64)

- 7 The wrong kind of order refers to the ultimate silence that is induced by violence and death and that seems to hover around the protagonists of the trilogy. The chaotic violence as well as the silence of the catastrophe are captured by the prologue to *Death Is a Welcome Guest*, a description of a quarantined cruise-ship which has taken the full force of the virus:

Magnus McFall imagined the *Oleander* often in the months ahead. The giant liner becalmed on sunny waters, looking from a distance like a picture postcard of luxury; the rescue launch hurtling towards it throwing plumes of white foam in its wake; the stench of decay awaiting the medics in the lower decks; the impossibility of salvation. (2)

- 8 As the first sentence indicates, this introductory description places Magnus, a Scottish comedian, in a position where he can look retroactively on the spreading of the disease. The description also makes an important point, that the crumbling of order takes the shape of a closing down of space on the individual, the opposite of relating, of sharing

space. And indeed, the first part of *Death* almost entirely takes place in Pentonville prison, from which Magnus desperately needs to escape when it turns into a deathtrap, and much of its second part takes place in another closed-off space, the mansion he has taken refuge in after breaking out from Pentonville. In the first two novels, which are set during the apocalypse, the emphasis is placed on how the world's end is brought to the characters in a way that seems to shrink space around them, including from below. In *A Lovely Way to Burn*, Stevie fleetingly becomes aware of this closing down of space:

suddenly she felt as if the wakening streets around her were an illusion that might be peeled back any time, to reveal another, shadow world that could suddenly drag you under without a by-your-leave. (127)

- 9 In addition to the horrible sense that death has been there all along, but also that the apocalypse can be described as an assault on the characters by the familiar space around them, the quotation also points to a trope of fictions of the end – the apocalypse as transition, here between reassuring, familiar space and the chasm opened up by the apocalypse. The trilogy as a whole uses the *topos* of transition, in that sense but also in the conventional temporal sense of a period of transition between our world and another. H  l  ne Machinal, writing on the current trend for apocalyptic writing and TV series, sees this return to a present of transition as a way to inquire into what it means to be human (Machinal 85-86). According to her, and to the co-editors of the volume *Formes d(e l)'Apocalypse*, contemporary apocalyptic fiction engages with the way history increasingly comes across as the End Time, a destructive force that endangers the very concept of humanity. She claims that fiction explores "what might happen if 'progress' were to be a sudden return to the past, or even the disappearance of the very notion of humanity" (*Formes* 9, my translation). Illustrating this line of enquiry, Welsh conjures up types drawn from popular fiction, types that index the way humanity is ebbing away from the human – the pure victim (Belle in *Death is a Welcome Guest*, a fairly innocent rich kid stranded in a dangerous world); the textbook villain (Belle again, who turns up in *No Dominion* as the "rock-chick Valkyrie" (60), a child trafficker and gang member, with a milky-white eye and a scar running down the length of her cheek); the anonymous figures teeming on the streets of a looted London in *A Lovely Way to Burn*, metonymically reduced to peals of horror-movie howls and crazy laughter; and of course, the two classic figures of the cannibal and the zombie: Willow's means of survival, when a child and the only survivor of the Sweats on Orkney, seems to have been to feed on human corpses, possibly her parents'. Magnus, in his hectic prison break, ends up in the Underground, where he is met with a scene of utter chaos with a jumble of corpses, or zombie figures, littering the trains and platforms:

[H]is skin crawled with the certainty that the lady who had pulled the folds of her orange sari over her face before she died was about to draw the gauzy material back, blink her dead eyes and come towards him. Or that the youth, whose yellow headphones were still coiled around his neck, might straighten his spine and get to his feet. (*Death* 104)

- 10 Such living-dead look-alikes abound, particularly in *A Lovely Way to Burn* and *Death is a Welcome Guest*, in fact saturating enclosed public spaces like hospital wards and corridors, the underground or petrol stations, participating in the tightening of space around the characters. Kim Newman claims that lurking behind the appeal of end-of-the-world scenarios is "a half-wished-for descent into dog-eat-dog barbarity and the extermination of all the boring people in the world" (Newman 19). And indeed, it seems that Welsh includes the zombies and villains of Apocalit themselves in the boring-

people-of-the-world category, lending their episodic, yet sustained appearance in her trilogy a parodic overtone. They don’t seem to bear any real weight on the plot, other than indicating the descent of the world into a subhuman level, as they strut onto the stage while the actual plot focuses on solving murder mysteries. The author claims in the afterword to *No Dominion* that her “apocalyptic vision had been honed by horror movies, thrift store paperbacks and genuine political discord” (373), and she manages to include all those in her fiction: the cheap thrill of the usual suspects from popular horror stories who walk into her novels is both a joke and a signpost to the very serious inquiry into how we can cope with the eschatological drive as humans. The book discards the allegory found in popular TV series such as *The Walking Dead*⁵ without dismissing the more fundamental inquiry into what has become of the values, the meaning attached to our conception of the human, of our capacity to relate to one another, in short the opposite of the separation and lack of communication of post-apocalyptic monster-types running parallel courses of mutual destruction. What Louise Welsh shows her reader is a figure of the human as a shapeshifter, a composite creature made up of sometimes irreconcilable opposites: Belle (a victim and perpetrator), Stevie (TV sales show presenter, president of Orkney and adventurer), Magnus (comedian, convict and saviour of children). Humanity has no definite nor definitive definition, no dominion. Severed ties have to be reinvented; new combinations need to be found; new forms of interrelatedness created if we are to understand what it means to be human.

No history, presentism vs messianic time

- 11 Davy, a border guard in *No Dominion*, ties the narrative of the apocalypse to the concept of history, claiming, “I’d like to sign off on the right side of history” (276), introducing temporality in a narrative that is mostly concerned with space, and with the very basic need to find a place of safety. But in the third volume, the wish seems to occur a little late in the day, as it comes at a point when history has all but disappeared, when children are taught things about their immediate past because events like the two World Wars have become unfathomable, making the point that they can no longer relate to the past. They live in a world where phone chargers, Sim Cards, routers or CDs have become tokens of the past, archeological artefacts, which “might tell future civilisations something about how we used to live” (*No Dominion* 145), tying the narrative to the motif of the trace, which is typical of the genre. Denis Mellier speaks of the way series such as *The Walking Dead* show a “point zero” which cancels all the categories of our world, and which implies the necessity for humans to think the world anew, by collecting vestiges from the past. For Mellier, “l’apocalypse a eu lieu et la culture de l’Après est constituée de restes devenus muets en raison d’un savoir perdu” (Mellier 385). He compares the collectors of these fictions to “neo-antiquarians”:

Dans les temps de l’Après, les *néo-antiquarians* ne cartographient rien, ils ne sont pas non plus les défenseurs ou les promoteurs d’une culture passée. Ils sont plutôt ceux qui conservent la mémoire des usages et des formes et la transmettent sous formes lacunaires et incomplètes au moyen d’un savoir qu’ils partagent avec les survivants, en collectant ce qu’ils distinguent d’entre l’essentiel, l’utile ou l’insignifiant : ils sont souvent dans ces fictions en position de narrateur des temps anciens, et en cela, dans les temps du *post*, leur fonction nécessite le suffixe : méta-narrateurs, ils le sont car ils racontent le temps du passé, non pas pour ce qu’il fut, mais pour le sens qu’il peut prendre dans le temps du présent. Ils sont producteurs en ce sens d’une trace du passé comme *allégorie de la culture*. (Mellier 393)

- 12 The prologue to *No Dominion* introduces neo-antiquarians, with a view to exploiting the capacity of the vestige precisely to create a link with a past that seems to have been engulfed in the crisis of the first two volumes:

In the end they had agreed to burn down the capital of the island, Kirkwall. They had given themselves two weeks to strip the place of useful goods. Stevie had assigned herself to a team clearing the library. They had loaded the books willy-nilly onto vans, not bothering to distinguish by title. Who could say what would prove useful? A detective novel might spark a thought process that inspired the invention of a new form of fuel; a cookery book might spawn a cure for bronchitis. (*No Dominion* 35)

- 13 The fragments collected, in this case a miscellany of books from the past, not only take on a new meaning, as Mellier points out, but they also potentially guarantee the survival of the collectors, and therefore the possibility of a future. What the haphazard loading of books onto a cart points to is an impossibility for the characters to relate to their past. The side of history that the collectors are on is characterised by what François Hartog calls "presentism"⁶, i.e. the collapse of the idea of history as a process tending towards the future and operated by the idea of progress. Presentism places us in an eternal present that has absorbed past and future. Talking about the new "contemporary" in a conference entitled "is it now?", Bertrand Gervais describes it also as made up of fragments:

Le présent n'est pas un temps homogène ; il est fait de temporalités différentes, de tensions multiples et de vecteurs pluriels. On le désigne maintenant comme « contemporain ». Ce terme est une non-catégorie, une notion de faible intensité qui a pourtant réussi à s'imposer. Cette non catégorie renvoie souvent à une logique de l'émiettement, du ponctuel, voire de l'équivoque. Michel Mafesoli : "il n'y a pas d'arrière-scène, tout est mis sur le devant de la scène, mais dès lors, tout est ponctuel, factuel." (*Is it Now ?*)

- 14 By collecting fragments/vestiges of the past, but also by presenting what can be seen as political fragments in the sense of miniature versions of political regimes of the past (or the present), the trilogy therefore insists on the necessity to repair the broken link between past, present and future, to escape the presentist predicament and to find an answer to the logic of dissemination which Gervais associates with the contemporary. But also by using the genre of crime fiction, the structure of which relies on an investigation of events of the past, it insists on its primary function to inquire, to look into the past to explain the present, or, as expressed metaphorically by the use of a heavily codified genre, to search the past in order to solve a crime – here the end of the world. The novel therefore uses its generic hybridity to indicate its status as an investigation, a trip into the root-causes of the apocalypse, as a way to offset, or at least to characterise the presentist predicament. The past, or rather the transition between past and present, is summoned in the trilogy to indict the present's capacity to ignore the future consequences of our actions. Jean-Paul Engélibert indicates that the crumbling of order restores the possibility for political invention⁷. Fiction does that by favouring the re-emergence of what Giorgio Agamben calls messianic time, a present penetrated by its own end, which re-injects time, as a dynamic process, into the endless present:

La hantise de la catastrophe apparaît comme le pendant du présentisme : le passé n'est garant de rien, le futur ne promet rien, ne reste que la pression du présent, dont la catastrophe, indéfiniment répétable, est une figure. Les fictions

apocalyptiques, en s'installant après la fin, restaurent du temps et l'idée d'une praxis, c'est-à-dire d'une pratique politique du temps. (Engélibert, *Otrante* 250-51).

- 15 So when Davy's associate claims that "the world's over. All the rest is just marking time" (*No Dominion* 268), the goal is not as hopeless as he makes out, because it consists in a renewed capacity for the *novel* to mark time in such a way as to make use of the kind of cognitive estrangement that defines science fiction⁸, in order to engage with our world, to restore the crucial act of relating to our past, and therefore to our existence. In other words, the past, or rather the transition between past and present, is summoned in the trilogy to indict the present's capacity to ignore the future consequences of our actions. For Stevie in *A Lovely Way to Burn*, the dead bodies "slumped on waiting-room chairs" are "like a Tory indictment of NHS inefficiency" (*Lovely* 315-16); in *No Dominion*, Col, whose job it is to guard the precious petrol stocks in the "new world", reflects upon the possibility at least suggested by the apocalypse to do more than mark time, insisting on the political notion of responsibility:

Before the Sweats I worked for the Postal Workers' Union. I'd given up hope of the crisis of capitalism ever precipitating a revolution. Big corporations could screw up as many times as they wanted. They'd always get bailed out. [...] When the Sweats came I'll admit there was a part of me thought we had a chance to forge a new way. Millions of deaths were a high price to pay. But I wasn't responsible for that. (*No Dominion* 219)

- 16 What the trilogy does, therefore, is both to insist on taking responsibility for our actions and to examine the possibility of "forging a new way". The third volume, which was eagerly awaited by readers left hanging at the end of *A Lovely Way to Burn*, is conclusive in more senses than one: looking back at history from a point after its cataclysmic ending, it reinstates the possibility of making sense of the world before the cataclysm, and maybe also of the cataclysm itself, which both Stevie in the first volume and Magnus in the second, are at pains to do. It endeavours to recapture the severed link, or maybe forge a new one, to create a new concept of relating. *No Dominion*, the title of which departs from the oxymoronic construction of the first two titles, a construction suggestive of chaos, to instead quote a line from the Bible about resurrection, fulfils the part played by apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic works of fiction. That part, according to Engélibert, is to "start from the end of history in order to recount it from a terminal point of view from which it can make sense as a whole."⁹ In that sense, they live up to, and even enhance, the meaning of the Greek word *Apocalyptein*, to uncover or reveal.

- 17 But history examined from its endpoint is not uncovered easily in the trilogy. Tied to people's capacity to remember, it, like the structure of the narrative, comes with gaps and missing links:

Survivor children claimed to know the very atoms of the old world. But their memories only truly came alive when they were asleep, surfacing in dreams that woke their households and vanished upon waking. (*No Dominion* 1)

- 18 The metaphor in this quotation brings the old world back to its basic components: atoms. Post apocalypse, the children, who conventionally represent the future and who certainly are presented as the future of the island, a future divorced from their own past cannot seem to see beyond atomic fragmentation. The connecting of atoms as it were, the connecting of the elemental fragments of the world, to rephrase the metaphor slightly, is a difficult, elusive process doubly remote, as it takes place in dreams of memories. It also has to do with the children's capacity to relate to the old

world. This quotation therefore creates both hope that the dots can be connected and a gap between the metaphorical fragments of the old world. The novel, with its analeptic structure, stretches over a temporal gap of seven years in order to extricate the past from the "mental" zone (the space of dreams) it is confined in, and restore a more meaningful connection with the present. It refers to the apocalypse itself by placing it in another mental space, an ellipsis, the space between the first two novels and the last one, by a careful use of the pluperfect: "The rest of the survivors had dosed themselves with antibiotics, built a firewall around the cathedral and set the capital ablaze. It had burned for days" (*No Dominion* 35). But the plot makes the connection with the world before catastrophe unavoidable, by having the children run away from the enclosed and artificial safety of the new world (an island) and seek an actual connection with the past they can only access in dreams. Willow dismisses artificial safety which, ultimately, is confinement. She shatters the closing in of space that has been carefully constructed in the first two volumes when she confronts Stevie, asking "Why do you think Shug and me ran? To get away from you and your petty, fucking rules" (*No Dominion* 352).

A New World Order?

- 19 The teenagers escaping the comparative safety of Orkney in *No Dominion* do so not only out of a sense of rebellion against what they see as the constrictions of the democratic heterotopia created by their parents, but also because they are lured back to the old world, in this case to Glasgow, by a broadcast, a version of the pied piper stratagem, that promises them a new world order:

Come to Glasgow . . . help us make a new society . . . Come to Glasgow . . . together we can make a new and better world . . . Come to Glasgow . . . if you are old, lend us your experience . . . if you are young give us your strength . . . Come to Glasgow . . . the Sweats are over and we are rebuilding the city . . . Come to Glasgow . . . there is work to be done . . . Come to Glasgow . . . help us rebuild the city . . . (*No Dominion* 274)

- 20 The narrative in that respect leads us back to one of the fundamental goals of post-apocalyptic fiction, which, according to Machinal, is to question the mode of reconstruction of a collective sense of ourselves and the political impact this sense can have (*Otrante* 127-28). In Machinal's own words, those novels help "problematise the political implications of a reconstruction that is often articulated around the complexity of "faire monde"¹⁰. And indeed, the three novels conjure up a world where the political question of what meaning can be ascribed to our relation to the world – again, the fundamental question of relating – comes to a head. In the first two volumes, the severing of all ties with meaning is foregrounded through the depiction of the world as empty – the major characteristic of both *Lovely* and *Death* being that chaotic violence has transformed the world into a void. Stevie's London has turned into a desert because of curfew and martial law and in *Death*, after the suffocating overpopulation of the prison, the sense that the world is silent and empty prevails, in effect suggesting a loss of meaning.
- 21 So that in the third instalment, when, lured by Belle's promise of a future that can at last be linked to the past, the teenagers run away from the island, they do so not just to escape the "fucking rules", but also symbolically as a way to reconnect with long-lost meaning, to reconnect in short with their sense of themselves in the world. They are

looking for a political sense of connection to others. But with her relish for the gothic and for dark end tales, Louise Welsh exposes the human race's capacity to "reconstitute the mechanisms of domination" (Engélibert, *Apocalypses sans royaume* 179). The new world, the new political and social order to emerge, is a classic *topos* of postapocalyptic fiction: a return to a pre-industrial and pre-civilised world. In the case of *No Dominion*, feudalism, tribalism, plutocracy and autocracy have replaced the flawed political and social pre-Sweats order¹¹. Stevie and Magnus's trip to Glasgow to recover their teenage runaways therefore turns into a series of encounters with the various forms of political regimes¹² that rely on domination and oppression: the medievalist, isolationist religious community which functions in complete self-reliance in the hope of deflecting the wrath of God brought onto them by the pandemic – another classic motif of the genre – and whose adepts summarily hang all "trespassers"; the "new regime" fleetingly envisioned by a member of a gang of apocalypse profiteers, the not very brotherly petrol brothers, who finally sum it up as "feudalism combined with a good dose of tyranny" (*No Dominion* 219); and of course, the "new and better world" that lures people to Glasgow with the promise that there will be a return to a pre-Sweats level of technology and comfort, and that turns out to be an autocratic slave state lead by a psychopath by the name of Bream, founder of a self-styled "New Corporation" which recycles a not so new system of human exploitation. Even the Republic of Orkney is under threat of being taken over by a violent dishonest thug called Bjarne, whose campaign for presidency rests on empty promises of pre-Sweats comfort:

BJARNE for PRESIDENT! VOTE BJARNE for ELECTRICITY VOTE BJARNE for FUEL
VOTE BJARNE for PROGRESS VOTE BJARNE for NORMALITY. (*No Dominion* 22)

- 22 The novel therefore is a reflection on political power, and the mechanisms of its abuse, and on political legitimacy: Bjarne, but also other leader figures in the trilogy – father Wingate, Bream, Lord Ramsay – are all starting points for this reflection, which is put in very crude terms by one of Stevie's companions on Orkney:

'A lot can happen in seven years. None of us are the same people we were.' 'No,' Bold said and stuffed his hands into his pockets. 'Some of us went from zero to hero.' Stevie knew he meant her, but she did not bother to contradict him. He was right. The plague had been the making of her. (*No Dominion* 26)

- 23 The trilogy, by its conjuring of political leaders and political systems that emphasise division and exploitation over cooperation and relating, urges the readers to examine the present, and their own relation to the world while they still can. It is an invitation to exploit messianic time, not by accepting the fast route of those who can travel "from zero to hero", but by reflecting instead on the kind of future we want if we are going to avoid the plight depicted in apocalyptic fiction. When history has ceased to make an impact and has been absorbed into the presentist continuum, when memory is disconnected from the past, then the vital notion of relating is lost, and so is our humanity. The plague times trilogy, as well as the many post-apocalyptic works of fiction to come out of the 21st century, have this advantage of enabling us to deal with the consequences of the apocalypse before it happens. As Engélibert points out:

Si la littérature peut nous aider, c'est sans doute en imaginant des fictions qui restituent à notre temps, dans la confusion des discours et des imaginaires de la fin, la part politique que la pensée politique elle-même est peut-être incapable de formuler. (*Apocalypses sans royaume* 13)

- 24 Margaret Atwood, speaking on a BBC Radio 4 programme in 2018, made this point in an even more straightforward way, saying that "fiction allows you to try out, without

actually having to do it"¹³. Trying out. It is, among many other things, what Welsh does in the trilogy. Maybe her works, alongside Margaret Atwood's and many others', are what will enable us, not just her characters, to sign off on the right side of history. But the "right side of history" may not be the Manichean idea the phrase suggests. The whole phrase, "I want to sign off on the right side of history", is suggestive of what Engélibert calls "la petite puissance de l'agir humain" (*Apocalypses sans royaume* 182), and which he sees as the "antidote", or "la seule ressource à opposer au chaos" (182) in the fictions of the apocalypse. As the three novels emphasise, this involves not letting go of our fundamentally human capacity to relate, to our past, our present and our future, but also to ourselves and, crucially, each other.

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NOTES

1. On this, and on the post-apocalyptic in a Scottish context, see Manfredi “Doom and Boom: Politiques de l’Apocalypse en Ecosse Contemporaine” in Machinal, Hélène, Monica Michlin and Arnaud Regnaud (eds) *Otrante* 47-48, *Apocalypses*, printemps 2020, pp. 281-294.
2. On these novels, see Marie-Odile Pittin-Hedon “Ghosts from the future: postapocalyptic narratives in Scotland and the displacement of memory” in Linda Pillière and Karine Bigand (eds) *Ghosts, Memory and Identity*, Routledge, à paraître.
3. It is also a concern which has given rise to cross-artistic projects on Welsh’s part, in particular her collaboration with composer Stuart MacRaeon on several operas: *The Devil Inside* in 2016, a gleefully macabre morality tale and most recently *Anthropocene*, the highlight of the 2018-19 Scottish Opera season, about a mysterious encounter by scientists trapped in the frozen Arctic. There is also music to the end of the world.
4. This poem serves as hypotext not for this volume, but for the third one, *No Dominion*. Like Muir’s poem, it depicts the aftermath of the cataclysm (an unspecified war in Muir’s case) in which the dumb radios and obsolete planes and tractors force the survivors to return to an older way of life.
5. *The Walking Dead*, AMC, 2010-present, 10 seasons. *The Walking Dead*, Robert Kirkman, Tony Moore and Charlie Adlard, Image Comics, 2003-2019.
6. “[U]n présent massif, envahissant, omniprésent qui n’a d’autre horizon que lui-même, fabriquant quotidiennement le passé et le futur dont il a, jour après jour, besoin” (Hartog 200).
7. See Engélibert, *Apocalypses sans royaume*, p. 19.
8. Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, New Haven, 1979, p. 61.
9. “se placent à la fin de l’histoire pour la raconter depuis le point de vue terminal d’où toute entière elle peut faire sens” (« Messianisme et apocalypse » 244, my translation).
10. “[Ces fiction permettent de] problématiser les enjeux politiques d’une reconstruction qui s’articule souvent à la complexité de “faire monde”” (Machinal 128, my translation).
11. The cyclical dimension of the regimes described in this volume also reflects on the notion of time as progress, the Newtonian perception of time as opposed to that of time as cyclical.
12. As noted by Machinal, this aspect is also present in *The Walking Dead*.
13. Margaret Atwood on James Naughtie’s *Book Club*, BBC Radio 4, June 2018.

ABSTRACTS

This article examines the way the Scottish writer Louise Welsh contributes to the trend of postapocalyptic fiction in the 21st century, with her plague times trilogy. Relying on the critical and theoretical writing of Michael Foessel, Jean-Paul Engélibert, Bertrand Gervais, Denis Mellier, Hélène Machinal and François Hartog, it shows that Welsh's trilogy, which spans the whole catastrophe from the outbreak of the virus to the aftermath of the apocalypse, borrows from the essential tropes of the genre to reflect upon the necessity for humans to relate to their past and their future, but also to relate to themselves and to each other. Welsh depicts a presentist world, where the chaos of the pandemic has severed all connection to people's past, which precludes any meaningful projection into the future. The temporal closure is given spatial treatment, and the characters in the last volume are turned into collectors of fragments from the material past and from the political past. Welsh also uses the generic codes of crime to recapture the severed link, or create a new one, and to question the new world order that her novels depict.

Cet article examine la contribution apportée par la trilogie apocalyptique de l'auteure écossaise Louise Welsh à la production de ce genre au XXI^e siècle. Il s'appuie sur le travail critique et théorique de Michael Foessel, Jean-Paul Engélibert, Bertrand Gervais, Denis Mellier, Hélène Machinal et François Hartog pour montrer que la trilogie, qui couvre toute la catastrophe, de l'apparition du virus au premier volume à la période postapocalyptique dans le dernier, emprunte les tropes principaux du genre pour souligner l'importance de la relation, entre humains, leur passé et leur avenir, et entre l'humain et lui-même. Les romans montrent un monde dominé par le présentisme, où le chaos de la pandémie a rompu le lien avec le passé, et où domine l'impossibilité d'une projection vers l'avenir. La fin du temps est traitée de manière spatiale, les romans privilégiant une esthétique de l'enfermement, et les personnages dans le dernier volume apparaissent comme des collectionneurs de fragments matériels du passé mais aussi de fragments politiques. Welsh utilise les codes du thriller pour caractériser, voire recréer, le lien rompu, et pour mettre en cause le nouvel ordre du monde dépeint dans les trois romans.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Post-apocalypse, présentisme, le contemporain, faire monde, Neo antiquarians, roman policier, temps messianique, hétérotopie, cognitive estrangement

Keywords: Post-apocalypticism, presentism, the contemporary, faire monde, Neo antiquarians, Michael Foessel, crime fiction, messianic time, heterotopia, cognitive estrangement

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