

THE WAY THE WORLD ENDS

With the end of a millennium drawing nigh, eschatology, the study of last things, bids fair to become a major growth industry. Anticipating a chiliastic frenzy, Cullen Murphy here offers some thoughts about our timeless preoccupation with the coming end of time.

by Cullen Murphy

By fire or by ice? wondered Robert Frost. With a bang or with a whimper? wondered T. S. Eliot. In the chronicles of our mortal race there may have been one or two people, for example William ("I decline to accept the end of man") Faulkner, who did not concede that a bold *Finis* would one day be scrawled at the conclusion of the human saga. There may have been one or two who would not have been tempted—were only it possible!—to skip ahead to the final chapters of our story and discover how it all turns out. But most of us from time to time find ourselves contemplating the great question mark that seems ever to loom just beyond the horizon.

This curiosity about the ultimate destiny of our species and planet—about the end of the world—has its origins, surely, in the consideration of one's personal demise. "Lord," pleaded the author of Psalms, "make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is." But mixed with curiosity there is also a certain element of

wishfulness and anticipation—indeed, of vengeance. It is a strange but real consolation to believe that all creation will eventually suffer—perhaps in a split second, snuffed out like an insect by impersonal forces—the same fate that we as individuals must suffer. Faulkner, apparently, denied himself such consolation. Perhaps that's why he drank.

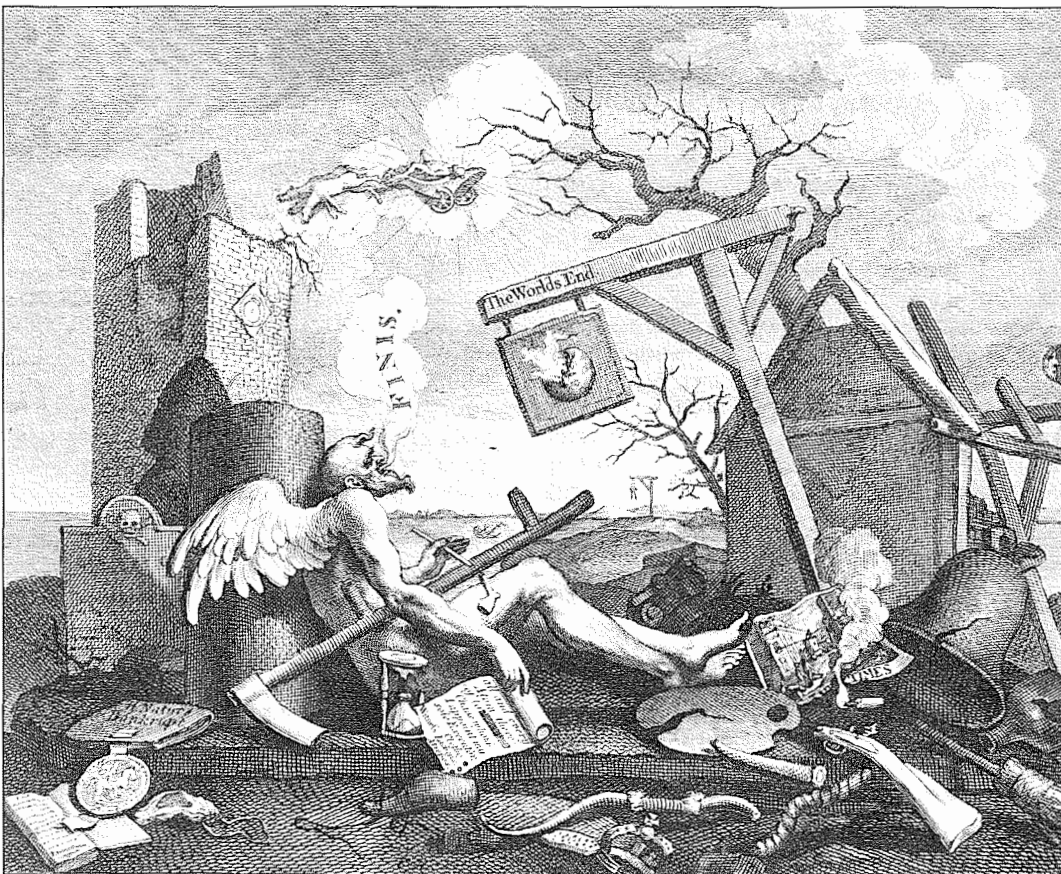
All of this comes to mind because, as some reckon it, we have embarked on the decade known as the '90s, when Western societies have traditionally been troubled by thoughts of the last things, entranced by the eschaton, possessed by the prospect of oblivion. Technically, of course, the final decade of this century doesn't begin until the first day of 1991. But this nicety is not likely to be observed in the streets. No, the '80s, though not quite dead, were embalmed months ago in the press. We are irrevocably into the '90s now. What is more, for only the second time in history we are in a '90s decade that precedes a millennium year. There has been considerable speculation by eschatologists, as specialists

on the end of the world are known, that the turn of this millennium may have an unpleasant surprise in store for us. During the waning months of the 1980s a Mr. Michael Breen, 31, made news when he punched Senator John Glenn in the jaw, muttering, "The earthquakes are starting, the earthquakes are starting." In the decade ahead other eschatologists will be seeking platforms to air similar views. The grim orgy of prognostication has begun.

And there may well be something to it this time around. To judge from the printed word—merely one among many types of evidence available—our civilization has, since mid-century, been engaged in a gradual and methodical shutdown of its constituent parts. The sociologist Daniel Bell led the way in 1960 when he pro-

claimed *The End of Ideology*. The years since then have given us, in chronological order, such books as *The End of Taboos*, *The End of Affluence*, *The End of Intelligent Writing*, *The End of Christendom*, *The End of British Politics*, *The End of Comedy*, *The End of Sex*, *The End of Libraries*, *The End of Law*, *The End of Art Theory*, *The End of Beauty*, *The End of Conversation*, *The End of Organized Capitalism*, *The End of Desire*, and several score more.

Within the past six months, as the onset of the '90s imparted a sense of special urgency, the prominent eschatologist Francis Fukuyama set Washington abuzz with an important article in the journal *National Interest* in which he asserted that we had come, in the words of his title, to "The End of History?," a development that, at the very least, could make his job on the State



"The Bathos" (1764) was William Hogarth's final work. It was intended both as a satire of doom-predictors and a pessimistic statement about the state of England in his own time.

Department's policy-planning staff obsolete. Not long afterwards an eschatologist of comparable audacity, Bill McKibben, published a book in which he heralded *The End of Nature*, arguing that the natural world, battered by the impact of man, could no longer act as an independent force on the planet. Contemporary eschatologists believe, I suspect, that if enough of the planet's operations can be neutralized in advance then significant dislocations on the Big Day will be substantially reduced. The *New York Times* is doing its part. No doubt anticipating that the number of newsworthy subjects still around to be covered will only decrease in the 1990s, the *Times* has decided to discontinue its "Saturday News Quiz."

In novels about wise old dogs or grandfathers there is always a moment in the final pages when someone scratches his head and says, "It's as if he knew he was going to die." The same might be written of our own epoch. The end draws nigh, and people have begun to behave accordingly.

Some will say: "We have heard all this before." In the opinion of skeptics, the prophets of doom have, over the years, suffered an erosion of credibility. In galactic circles, they say, Earth is derided as the planet that cried wolf.

Mainstream eschatologists concede that the skeptics have a point. The ancient Sumerians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, and Hebrews, for example, all constructed elaborate destruction myths. The Persians believed that at the end of time a Saoshyant, or savior, would raise the dead to life; then the earth would be drenched in molten metal, which on those who had been wicked would have the effect you might imagine, while purging them of sin. (Those who had been good would feel nothing more unpleasant than a bath in "warm milk.") Yet few of the sobering scenarios put forward by the ancients have come to pass. Indeed, the damage to civilization has so far been limited to an occasional doctoral thesis.

With the advent of Christianity, and of the expectation that Jesus Christ would return one day soon and establish his kingdom on earth, millennial fervor flared again. The original notion of the millennium, which of course means "a thousand years," was that Christ, whenever he reappeared, would reign on earth for that length of time, after which would come the Apocalypse, or Day of Reckoning, or Last Judgment. The failure of Christ to reappear threw theologians and laity alike into confusion. St. Augustine, whose life straddled the fourth and fifth centuries A.D., a time when Christians were no longer holding their breath for the Second Coming, tried to make the best of any lingering millennial hopes by arguing that the very birth of Christ had ushered in the millennium, and that the next time he came would therefore bring not the millennium but rather the end of the world. Augustine also warned Christians not to take the "thousand year" benchmark too seriously, citing Paul's epistle to Peter: "with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." The situation, in other words, was fluid.

Augustine's opinion carried considerable weight, but it did not prevent later savants from concluding that since the millennium had begun with the birth of Christ, the world would end a thousand years thereafter. And, predictably, there was a flurry of concern as the tenth century wound to a close that mankind might not enjoy an eleventh. According to the chronicle of a Burgundian monk named Raoul Glaber, numerous signs and portents—an unexpected meteor seen in England, a shower of blood in Aquitaine, an eclipse in Calabria—struck fear into the hearts of the devout as the year 1000 drew nigh. "On the threshold of the aforesaid thousandth year," Glaber wrote, "so innumerable a multitude began to flock from all parts of the world to the Sepulcher of our Savior at Jerusalem, as no man could before have expected; for the lower orders of men led the way, and after them came those of middle

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rank, and then all the greatest kings, counts, and bishops; and lastly many noble ladies and poor women. For many purposed and wished to die in the Holy City." In modern works of popular medieval history the re-creation of the scene in Europe on New Year's Eve, 999, has become almost standardized, like the compulsories in gymnastics. Pope Sylvester II nervously says mass at St. Peter's, the multitudes quake, the rich give away their belongings, and all await the tolling bell at midnight.

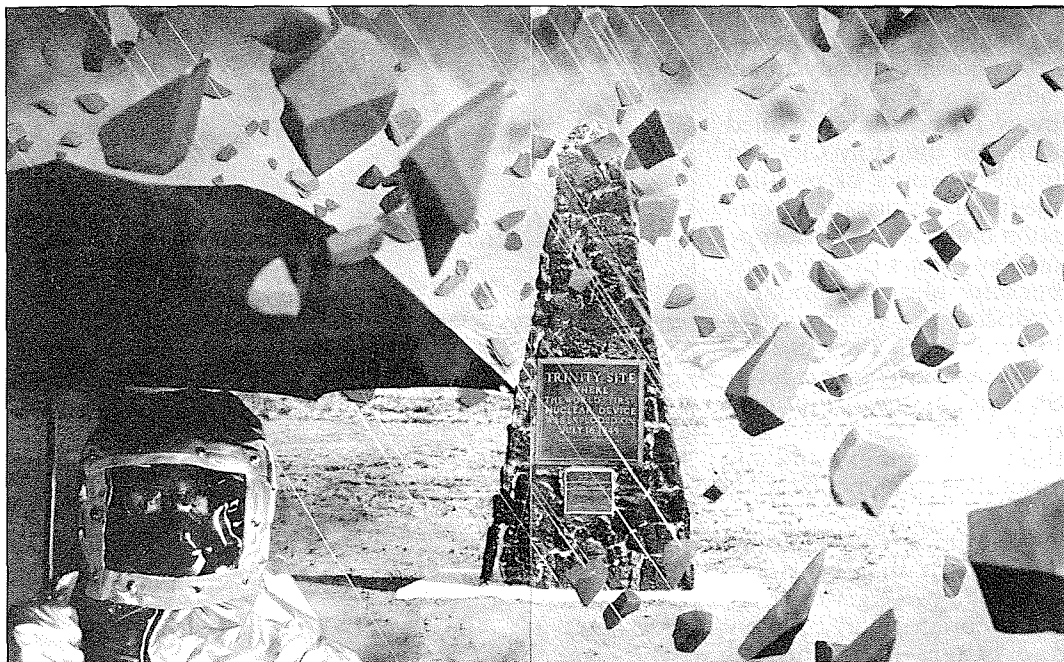
The story that has come down to us may be something of an exaggeration. As the historian Henri Focillon and others have shown, Raoul Glaber, a major source of information about the "terrors" that stalked the first millennium, is not always the most reliable of chroniclers. The famous New Year's Eve scene also rings false. In his wide-ranging and idiosyncratic new book, *Century's End*, Hillel Schwartz points out that nations and cities all over Europe celebrated New Year's on different days: on Christmas Day in Rome, for example, on Easter in France, on January 1 in Spain, on July 9 in Armenia. Moreover, there would have been no agreement on which year was in fact the millennial one. The Anno Domini calendrical system was invented by a fifth-century monk, Dionysius Exiguus, or Dennis the Little, and long after his death was adopted as standard for Church purposes. It has a major quirk. Dennis decreed that the first day of the year 1 was the day, a week after his birth, on which Christ was circumcised, or January 1. This meant that Jesus was born in the year before the year 1, but Dennis had no way to designate that year (the idea of B.C. wasn't thought of until much later). De-



The "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" (1498) is one of the 15 woodcuts Albrecht Dürer made to illustrate St. John's Revelations.

pending therefore on whether one calculates the millennium from the year 1 or the year before the year 1, the millennium is reached in the year 1000 or 1001.

Despite his reservations, Focillon concluded that Europe truly was afflicted with "an ill-defined fear" as the millennium approached. When the millennium came and went without Apocalypse or Armageddon, the people of Christendom resumed lives filled with more quotidian forms of irritation, such as forgetting in the first few weeks of the new year to write M on their checks instead of DCCCCLXXXIX. But the genie was out of the bottle and, as Hillel Schwartz makes clear, the final decade of



"Trinitrite Tempest" (1988), by Nagatani/Tracey. This work of apocalyptic art alludes to the world's first nuclear explosion at the Trinity Site near Alamogordo, N.M., on July 16, 1945.

each subsequent 100-year period has been characterized by apocalyptic bombast and giddy trepidation. In the 1290s, millenarian movements appear all over Europe; roving bands of Flagellants tour the countryside, scourging themselves with leather whips tipped by iron spikes and calling upon God to "Spare us!" In the 1390s, in the wake of yet another outbreak of bubonic plague, the danse macabre appears in drama; on stage, cadaverous figures dressed as popes, clerics, nobles, and common men mock the pridefulness of life and urge submission unto Death. In the 1490s, Savonarola preaches repentance and doom in Florence; to the north, Albrecht Dürer produces his famous series of woodcuts, *The Apocalypse*, its four horsemen cantering across the sky with a scale of justice and weapons of death. Century after century the '90s no sooner heave into view than the pamphleteers and street-corner orators whip a goodly portion of the populace into a fearful frenzy.

And yet so far as we know the world has on none of these occasions come to its conclusion. Why should the close of the

present epoch be any different?

There are plenty of reasons why. One of the prophecies of Nostradamus, the 16th-century French seer, runs like this: "The year 1999, month seven./From the sky shall come a great King of terror." There are Old Testament prophecies that speak of Armageddon as occurring a generation after the reestablishment of a Jewish state. There is a traditional Buddhist teaching that the world will end some 2,500 years after the death of Buddha—who died roughly 2,500 years ago. Psychic pyramidologists who have examined the inner galleries of the Pyramid of Cheops at Giza report that the world will end around the turn of the present century, a conclusion supported by Aztec, Hindu, and Hopi data, by certain calculations of Heraclitus of Ephesus, and by a prophecy of the medieval Irish monk St. Malachy. To all of this add the fact that we are nearing not just the end of an ordinary century but the end of a millennium—a circumstance that in itself must sorely tempt fate. The evidence suggesting an imminent date for the end of the world has been convincingly marshalled by Charles

Berlitz in *Doomsday: 1999 A.D.* It is not a book for the faint of heart.

In the minds of eschatologists the big unknown is not when but precisely *how* the world is going to end. Various theories have waxed and waned in popularity. During the 1950s and '60s nuclear annihilation was the anticipated form of demise. This was succeeded during the 1970s by an expectation that the greenhouse effect would result in the melting of the polar ice caps, drowning us all. Lately, however, several prominent eschatologists have backed off, noting that because the planet is due for another ice age—the current “interglacial” being near its end—the greenhouse effect may actually help tide us over what is expected to be a 100,000-year cold snap.

With the exception of a small working group at the London School of Economics, which still holds out the hope that Doomsday will be brought on by man-made factors such as pollution and the destruction of the rain forests, most eschatologists now look to exogenous forces. The chances that Earth will be hit sometime soon by another celestial body, for example, are not negligible. “Big Asteroid Passes Near Earth Unseen In a Rare Close Call” declared a *New York Times* headline last April. The asteroid, traveling 46,000 miles an hour, crossed our planet’s path undetected, at a distance equal to only twice that between the Earth and the moon, and astronomers say it will be back. “Sooner or later it should collide with the Earth, the Moon, or Mars,” one astronomer told the *Times*. This asteroid has company. The planetoid Toro, for example, which is five kilometers wide, now orbits between Venus and Earth, and while it currently poses no danger, a slight gravitational shift could send this speeding “death star” right into our flanks. Fortunately, there are only about 40 fast-moving bodies whose orbits regularly cross Earth’s path.

The most horrifying prospect for the planet may also be the most likely one, according to some eschatologists. In May of the year 2000, astronomers tell us, Mercury, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn will be aligned behind the sun, aimed directly at Earth on the other side. The pull of these planets could, some say, be so intense as to rupture seismic faults and even to cause devastating tsunamis in the planet’s underlying magma, the molten rock pulsing in powerful waves beneath the mantle and disturbing continental plates. The geologic disruptions could be so great that, combined with the immense and ever-growing weight of the Antarctic ice cap, they could cause a “wobble” in Earth’s rotation and possibly cause a “polar flip,” with the planet falling over on its side or turning completely upside down, like an unskilled kayaker. Scientists are unanimous in the view that the result would be a real mess.

Is there no way out? Should we stop worrying about the deficit and the integrity of the Social Security system? Science has done much to improve the lot of humanity, but it remains powerless before many of the possible catastrophes we face. We cannot deflect the path of Toro, much less that of Jupiter. And yet there is one slender thread of hope.

In early Christian times, years were counted from the beginning of the world, or Anno Mundi, and it was calculated that the year of Christ’s birth was 5199 A.M. As the dreaded millennial year 6000 A.M. came closer there was great consternation in Christendom. And then someone had an idea. Why not, it was suggested, adopt Dennis the Little’s calendar, so that when 6000 A.M. arrived it would actually be 800 A.D.? The proposed calendrical reform was approved at the Synod of Whitby, and disaster was averted.

The task ahead is plain. Let us reform, friends, for the end is nigh. And let us act before the year 7190 A.M. is out.

