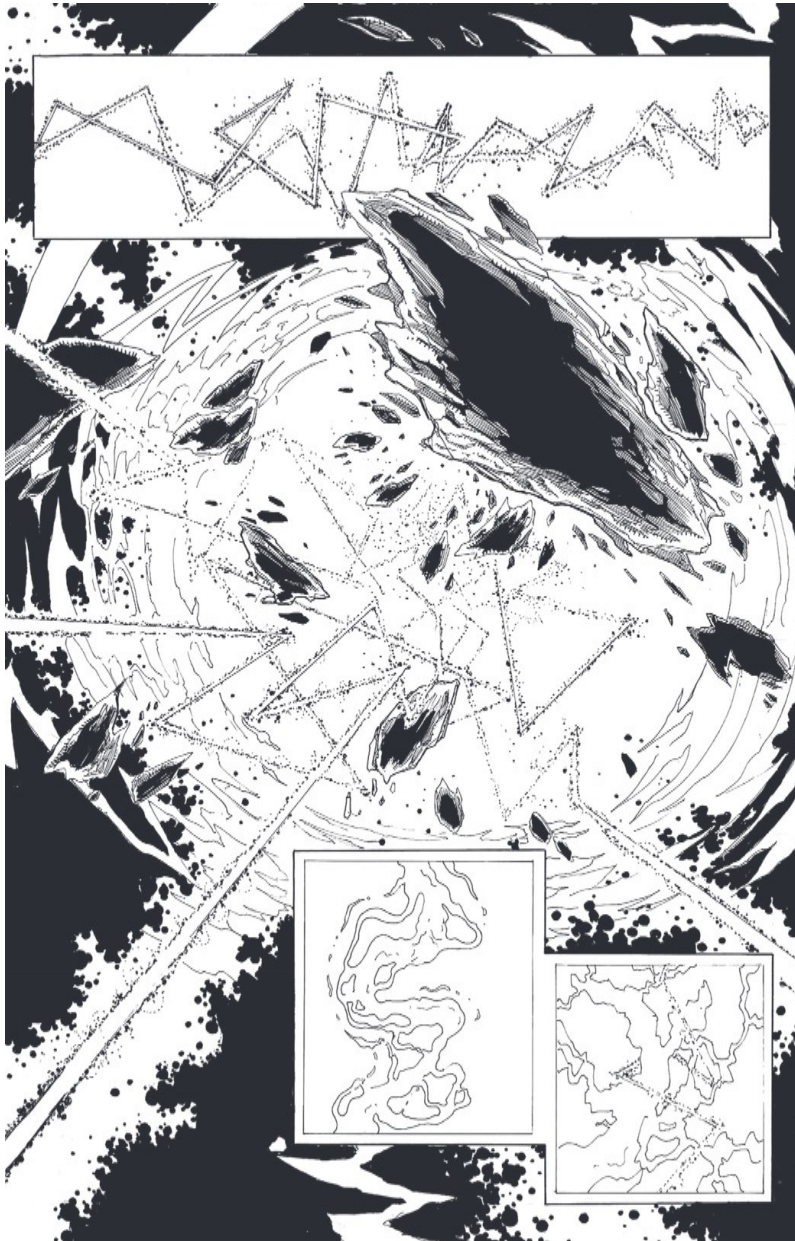


Part One

Concept



Untitled (acrylic on duralar 9" x 12") by Keith Tilford © 2010.

A Doxa of the American Weird

Dan O'Hara

The word “weird” had long fallen into disuse in England, barring in some of the northernmost dialects, when in the first decades of the seventeenth century Shakespeare reintroduced it from the Scots into the English language. It carried, at that time, a very definite sense of a destiny imminently manifest: it described both the foretelling and the *poesis* of a future.

Probably first performed in 1606, and certainly first printed in 1623, *Macbeth* planted a word of power and movement into the vocabulary of the generation that boarded the *Mayflower*. Shakespeare had borrowed the word and its context from his habitual source, Holinshed's 1587 *Chronicles*:

[C]ommon opinion was, that these women were either *the weird sisters*, that is (as ye would say) the goddesses of destinie, or else some nymphs or feiries, indued with knowledge of prophesie by their necromanticall science, because euerie thing came to passe as they had spoken. (Holinshed 1587: 171; emphasis added)

And in his turn, Holinshed had taken the idea of “the weird sisters” from the Scottish historian Boece's 1527 *Historia Gentis Scotorum*:

[B]e caus al thingis succedit as thir wemen devinit, the pepill traistit and jugit thame to be weird sisteris. (Boece 1821: 259)

The Americans-yet-to-be of the seventeenth century therefore had a very different concept of “weirdness” from that which is taken for granted in the twenty-first century. The current vernacular use of “weird,” associating the word with abnormality or strangeness, is a nineteenth-century British English misunderstanding: it is purely nominative, a noun or adjective describing a thing or a fixed state of affairs, and is often merely a synonym for a characteristically British ambiguity: the word “funny” (the British often have to ask each other “do you mean funny-haha or funny-peculiar?” and also often find a peculiar comedy

in the weird collapse of one into the other). Fourteenth-century Scots, Jacobean English, and American English on the other hand all share a more dynamic, shifting, revelatory sense of the weird that has little to do with the strange or uncanny, and that is easily misunderstood if read through the superimposition of more recent reductive definitions.

The American concept of the weird bore an unhumorous earnestness with it ab initio: an apocalyptic sense of predestination and imminent revelation, and an apparently unrelated relation to wealth. Only in Scots English is there the concept of the “weirdless,” meaning those who are idle and unprosperous.¹ In the reign of James I, the Scottish King of England and author of the treatise upon witchcraft *Daemonologie*, the “werd” or “weird”² was also, as in *Macbeth*, to do with the practice of witchcraft: the ordaining and prophesy of futures, and this witchcraft was no small part of the European godlessness that the Puritan colonists of America were keen to leave behind (see Stuart 1597).

Puritan Belief and Destiny

The first colonists in the seventeenth century were Puritans schooled in a tradition of millennial thinking that didn’t initially have anything intrinsically to do with America. St. John of Patmos’s Book of Revelation or St. Augustine’s notion of the City of God were not the particular properties of these colonists; they were only an influence upon them because they were a major influence upon English religious thinking at the time the colonists left Europe. They were leaving a country which had recently undergone upheaval, in the shape of the Elizabethan reformation of the church, which founded a new, Protestant English church in the place of the Catholic church, which rejected Rome and the pope as corrupt, and which tried to create a Christian religion not dependent upon Rome and purified of some of its more corrupt practices. The most appalling excesses of Rome made it seem not ridiculous to believe that the papacy was in fact going through an apocalyptic phase itself. The protestants believed that the papacy might very well be the anti-Christ, so extreme were some of the corruptions, and much of the English literature of the time, such as John Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments* specifically described Rome as the apocalyptic beast, to be destroyed by the English church. It was a time of holy war.

Puritans believed that the reformation hadn’t gone far enough, that there were still corruptions in the English church, and that a new church was needed, in a new land. Their mission, therefore, was a religious one: they saw themselves

leaving on an errand into the wilderness, going like Moses toward a promised land, and considering themselves God's chosen people. So is it that the small number of Puritans who left England and colonized "New England" took with them a vision of themselves as the people chosen to build a new Israel.

The idea of such a mission is a much older one than this. The Puritans were taking an ancient Judaeo-Christian mythology and applying it to themselves. But if we can understand that, first of all, they were escaping a situation in which they believed chaos and corruption had taken over Rome and then England, then perhaps we can understand why they might see themselves as having an important religious role. And if we consider that their explanation for the chaos and corruption of Rome would have to be a religious explanation itself, what would be more likely than the biblical narrative of apocalypse—that encoded in St. John's Book of Revelation—in which the anti-Christ had taken over the functions of the church and was leading people astray?

Almost by accident of the Puritans' beliefs, the land they colonized, America, became invested with the value of the new Jerusalem, the place where the true worshippers of the true Christ will prepare the ground for his return, when he will banish the false Christ who sits in Rome. The Puritans explicitly saw themselves in this light, giving themselves Old Testament names in an echo of Moses's people heading off into the wilderness: an identification reinforced by the simple fact that this New World was a long way away from Europe, and was in fact a wilderness, and furthermore was in the West, which traditionally had been held to be the location not of Eden (the place of beginnings, and therefore in the East, where the sun rises) but of destiny (paradise is usually sought, in literature, in the West; from the *Odyssey*, where heaven is reached via Hades, located in the West, to the *Lord of the Rings*, in which the Grey Havens are located over the western seas) (see Tolkien 1954/5). This new land, so separate, emphasized a sense of messianic destiny in its very geographical separateness. This separateness becomes most interesting in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when technologies such as the telegraph, the steam boat, the aeroplane, and the internet start to close distances. For, at the beginning, the belief that earthly paradise will be created in America through the millennium is a literal one founded on scripture, and much of the religious drive of the Puritans derives from this belief: that they should remain faithful so that millennium will come in America, because scripture prophesies the saints reigning with Christ on earth—therefore, they should try to be as holy as possible, so that they will become these saints. But later, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as America starts to obtain its modern shape, as Romanticism starts to encourage the notion of nature

as a visionary heaven on earth, as Enlightenment ideas and modern science start to transform both society and the landscape, the American dream of the millennium starts to become less religiously literal, and more secular. It's from these roots that utopian thinking emerges: the idea that America can be a heaven on earth through prosperity, technology, and science, rather than through Puritan saintliness.

Millennialism and Technology

But there are also things lost, when America's idea of its own destiny as the promised land starts to become secularized. If you were a Puritan in the seventeenth century in America, you weren't just positively trying to be as saintly as possible in order to make sure that, when the millennium happened, you'd be sitting with Christ. You were also terrified that if you weren't holy enough, if you didn't obey God's commandments, the apocalypse would be your doom. Hence the great revivalist movements of the eighteenth century, with their frequent tone of hellfire and damnation preaching, which were intended to scare people into virtue because the stakes were so high, millennium being just around the corner. Ideas of a technological, secular utopia lack the element of fear that drives millennialism: utopian narratives are myths that dispense with the stick, leaving only the carrot. But these narratives are relatively recent, and as such they do not form the principal tradition of apocalyptic thought in America; they only emerge from and are influenced by it.

'Tis probable that the world shall be more like Heaven in the millennium in this respect: that contemplation and spiritual employments, and those things that more directly concern the mind and religion, will be more the saint's ordinary business than now. There will be so many contrivances and inventions to facilitate and expedite their necessary secular business that they shall have more time for more noble exercise, and that they will have better contrivances of assisting one another through the whole earth by more expedite, easy, and safe communication between distant regions than now. The invention of the mariner's compass is a thing discovered by God to the world to that end. And how exceedingly has that one thing enlarged and facilitated communication. And who can doubt but that yet God will make it more perfect, so that there need not be such a tedious voyage in order to hear from the other hemisphere? And so the country about the poles need no longer be hid to us, but the whole earth may be as one community, one body in Christ. (Edwards 1955: 207–8)

Jonathan Edwards is here in the early eighteenth century talking about America as the origin and missionary of the millennium. And Edwards is enthusiastic and positive about the millennium; his approach is not that of hellfire and damnation preaching, but more a kind of visionary ideal. Yet his vision is also starting to be tainted by a certain utopianism—for example, his enthusiasm for the mariner's compass, an article of technology, man-made, a product of scientific progress, a material thing which makes material life better. This is not a vision of a luminous and numinous heaven, but of a heaven on earth made by man for man with the help of science. And the “world” is to benefit from this new utopianism—how? It's telling again that he stresses communications technologies—already, it seems Edwards is beginning to see America's God-given role as an imperial power.

This kind of techno-millennialist vision emerges again during the time of the Civil War, which itself was seen as a kind of holy war: the North, the victorious Union armies, comprising in religious terms of the four main Protestant groups during the nineteenth century—the Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists—really held the conviction that they were playing a part in bringing the millennium forward, fighting a part of the great war against Satan, creating a Redeemer Nation out of the divided North and South. It was at this time that the telegraph started to be used widely, and the way it is described by Joseph Brady in 1850 recalls Edwards directly:

This noble invention is to be the means of extending civilization, republicanism, and Christianity over the earth. It must and will be extended to nations half-civilized, and thence to those now savage and barbarous. Our government will be the grand center of this mighty influence. . . . The beneficial and harmonious operation of our institutions will be seen, and similar ones adopted. Christianity must speedily follow them; and we shall behold the grand spectacle of a whole world, civilized, republican, and Christian. Then will wrong and injustice be forever banished. Every yoke shall be broken, and the oppressed go free. Wars will cease from the earth. Men “shall beat their swords into plough shares, and their spears into pruning-hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more”; for each man shall feel that every other man is his neighbor—his brother. Then shall come to pass the millennium, when “they shall teach no more every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying Know ye the Lord; for all shall know him, from the least of them unto the greatest.” (Brady 1850: 61–2)

Edwards and by extension Brady, whose rhetoric is directly apocalyptic, both appear to see the millennium as actually happening in their own time. They regard America as already having started the process of millennium;

something is already under way. They see America as promising a different kind of millennium, one which is a process; not a realized utopia, or a sudden transformation of the earth into heaven, but a kind of slow political and social transformation. Their idea that millennium is a process suggests that America's development and the process of the millennium are one and the same thing; so, in America, material, political, social progress, and religious virtue are one and the same thing.

But how can Edwards or Brady regard the millennium as already having started if Christ hasn't shown up on earth yet? There are in fact two doctrines, called postmillennialism and premillennialism. Edwards and Brady are clearly postmillennialists: they believed that Jesus would return to earth after the millennium; hence, they can continue to believe in America's material progress as an instrument of God. Premillennialists insisted that Jesus had to return to earth before the millennium could begin, which latter belief somewhat reduces the incentives for trying to make material, scientific progress—why bother, if it's all going to be redundant when Christ arrives? The weakness of this position strengthened the postmillennialists, and, in doing so, strengthened the connection made widely in America between material value and Godly virtue.

This is only one of a number of paradoxes that inheres to millennialist thinking. For example, if you're hoping for the millennium to come, no matter which doctrine you follow, you still have to support the idea that before Christ's thousand-year reign on earth can happen, there will be a period when the anti-Christ rules the earth, the saints are persecuted, and there is a violent holy war preceding a day of judgment. In other words, there has to be darkness before there can be light, and in hoping for the light you must inevitably also hope for the darkness which precedes it. This paradoxical attitude toward the millennium grounds a contemporary strange attraction to apocalyptic narratives and films and images such as ruin-porn: we relish the apocalypse only with a little ambivalence of emotion, because we have the promise of a subsequent utopia.

A second paradox is that the millennium was conceived both as a promise, but also as a threat. America might have been seen as the promised land and the Puritans as God's chosen people, the elect; but they were also wary of failing to fulfill God's mission for them; and the hellfire vision of their punishment was derived from the Old Testament. However much, over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the stick was replaced by the carrot, this vision of hellfire persisted, and meant that millennium signified not just hope to America, but also a certain anxiety.

Most peculiar of all millennial paradoxes is the idea that the apocalyptic battle against Satan will not be one of the spirit, but a material, real battle. In America, God and guns go together. One of the battle-songs during the Civil War was a hymn written by George Duffield Jr. in 1858:

Stand up, stand up for Jesus,
The trumpet call obey;
Forth to the mighty conflict
In this His glorious day.

Stand up, stand up for Jesus,
The strife will not be long
This day the noise of battle;
The next the victor's song. (Christiansen 2007)

This sense of militancy persists in such movements as the Jesus Army, and infects mainstream American religious thinking. It's not only radical Islam that has a concept of Jihad, or holy war, but American Christianity too. In this, America's millennialists and Islam are almost long-lost twins; no other religion has this kind of militant self-image but these two. It's interesting to "read" apocalyptic Hollywood films in this light: How often do we have an avenging angel figure wielding a gun, fighting a righteous war, in films with no overt religious content? One can certainly read *Terminator 2* in this way, for example; but occasionally the eschatology of American culture manifests itself in less direct and more cryptic fashion.

Eschatology and Comic Apocalypse

In the film version of Thomas Harris's novel *Red Dragon*, the dragon of the title is the guiding obsession of a serial killer called the Tooth Fairy, whose real name is Francis Dolarhyde, who has the Blake painting *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed in Sun* tattooed on his back. The image of this tattoo is derived from William Blake's illustrations for his mythopoeic work of 1793 "America a Prophecy," which tells of seven warlike men who confront "Albions fiery prince" or "Albions angel," symbolized as the red dragon, "a dragon form clashing his scales" (Blake 2014: 199).

Blake is reworking mythic aspects of the Book of Revelations, the final book of the New Testament, a part of the New Testament added later, and written not by one of the four gospel writers but by another John, John of

Patmos. The place of this book in the Bible and indeed in Christian theology has always been dubious; but it has also been perhaps even more influential on ordinary people's religious thinking, especially in America, than even the Gospels. The red dragon appears in the Book of Revelations—or apocalypse—as a manifestation of Lucifer or Satan: it is the red dragon that St. Michael and the angels fight and cast out of heaven. On earth the great whore of Babylon arises, clothed in the red and gold of the sun, seated upon the red dragon. In John of Patmos' book, the red dragon is Satan, presiding over earth. He has to be cast out in an apocalypse before millennium is possible. But as D. H. Lawrence tells us, the symbol is much more ancient than the Bible, and stems from a different, probably Chaldean symbolism. Dragons appear in all old mythologies: in the Chinese certainly; and in the Norse, where it is a serpent eating its own tail, Ourobouros, curled around the roots of the tree of life, Yggdrasil, upon which lie the three realms of reality, Asgard, Midgard and Niflheim or Hel. Lawrence allies the fear of the red dragon in mythology with a fear of the unpredictable life spirit: "the dragon is the symbol of the fluid, rapid, startling movement of life within us. That startled life which runs through us like a serpent, or coils within us potent and waiting, like a serpent, this is the dragon" (Lawrence 1980: 123). And man has, as Lawrence says, always been aware of something potent within him but not entirely under his control, whether it be his sexual desires, his anger, his unconscious—all of the things which can appear to man to happen to him, as a part of the external world within him. It is libido or *élan vital*, the life spirit, though Lawrence prefers the more apocalyptic symbol.

Blake takes up the symbol of the red dragon of the Apocalypse, with its seven crowned heads. In the book of John of Patmos, these seven heads must be cut off by man before the dragon is cast out, and man can be free of Satan. But Blake unifies the dragons; he has a more nuanced concept of the natural power of the red dragon. In "America a Prophecy," Blake makes the red dragon symbolize Albion: that is, the ancient England, and the seven warlike men who must cast the red dragon down are all Americans including George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, and various historical defenders of American independence. Blake uses the symbolism found in the Book of Revelations to justify the American Revolution. England is the Satan, the red dragon which must be cast down. And once this has happened, then the millennium—the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth—can come to pass *in America*.

All of this literary history forms merely a tapestry in front of which Hannibal Lecter, the central character of *Red Dragon*, may play his part. Lecter is a

Lithuanian immigrant to the United States and a Europhile who loves the classical music and architecture of renaissance Europe, and who is very un-American in the sense of being in thrall to the old world. Set against him is the tooth fairy, Francis Dolarhyde—whose “hyde” or skin is not made of dollars, but a tattoo of the red dragon, and whose personality is itself split into two—the Dolarhyde who strives to love and the Dolarhyde who is convinced he is becoming the red dragon.

Such allusions explicitly invoke millennialist eschatology, speaking to an American filmgoing audience who won't know Blake but who certainly know the Book of Revelation. Blake was depicting the dragon as Albion against which America had to fight for its independence. Dolarhyde is allied with this evil, with the ancient Satan—or, in other words, the England which lost its colonies in the war of independence. What can it mean, then, that Dolarhyde is here allied with the symbol of Satanic English influence? The serpent symbolism isn't solely to do with Dolarhyde's distorted sexuality, nor to do with the red dragon within him, the split personality he cannot control.

There is a strange set of apocalyptic resonances being set up here, as in so much recent and more explicitly apocalyptic Hollywood film. America is figured as the city on a hill, the new Jerusalem, fighting the ancient dragon, or serpent, or Satan—which is sometimes England. America is an ex-colony, fighting not only for its independence but also for its holy or “manifest destiny” as the realm of the new thousand-year reign of Christ on earth.

In the nineteenth century, Herman Melville, James Fenimore Cooper, and Nathaniel Hawthorne all drew on the apocalyptic tradition to criticize the New England Puritan vision and its excessive idealism, and to satirize and undermine a corrosive overconfidence in America, her manifest destiny, and her material progress. In the twentieth century, a kind of comic apocalypse became the norm in American literature. Whereas apocalyptic films have been by and large realist in method, novels that are realist tended to be utopian or dystopian rather than apocalyptic: witness the delay in critical recognition for the richness of the tradition to which, for example, Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) belong. Apocalypse, on the other hand, tends toward comedy, perhaps because the effect of the surreal in comedy lends an edge of doomy immediacy that utopian and dystopian novels often lack. Chuck Palahniuk presents us with comic apocalypses in most of his fiction: *Survivor* (1999) and *Fight Club* (1996) are two such novels. Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* (1939), or *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), like Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man* (1857), presents a surrealist comedy

about the devil deceiving humanity in order to pervert it. The protagonist of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) finds that America in the millennium is not actually a place of millennium for everyone—only for the whites—and so has to disguise himself, but in so doing keeps getting mistaken for a con man called Rinehart. Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), part of the subtitle of which is as faux-antique as *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*—it reads *Slaughterhouse-Five, or the Children's Crusade*—is an apocalyptic comedy about the bombing of Dresden. Saul Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970) is about the devil's cities being those of the northern United States. Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961); Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962); Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973); Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987); Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997)—all of these novels are comic apocalypses; they all employ a kind of humor-in-horror as their principal tone and are all satirical in intent. They use the tropes of classical satiric comedies, which present situations in which everyone is fooled, or a fool: Ben Jonson's renaissance plays present situations in which the greed of devious swindlers (or “con-men”) is matched only by the greed of their stupid victims.

These novels also all use one particular trope found in *The Confidence-Man*: metamorphosis. The mutation of one character into another, or the changing of form, is a common comic device: think, for example, of Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, who is transformed into an ass. Only slightly different is the comic aspect of disguise (think of Viola in *Twelfth Night*, disguised as a boy), or the comic tale of mistaken identity (think of, perhaps, the 1979 movie *The Life of Brian*, where Brian is mistaken, much to his own distress and to our amusement, for the Son of God) (see Shakespeare 1632; Jones 1979). In such comedies we derive amusement from our knowledge of what the characters themselves do not realize. Clearly comedy, because it permits a distance from the real, also permits farcical, sometimes preposterous mutations, which mutations allow the author to present the characters' bemusement in the face of their own gullibility or naiveté. It permits a double level of humor in that we can laugh at the characters' ignorance of their own ignorance, and insofar as we may also laugh at a metalevel of humor, which they cannot appreciate (e.g., the visual and linguistic pun in Bottom being turned into an Ass).

The metamorphoses of the devil in *The Confidence-Man* therefore belong to a long tradition of low satirical comedy that hinges on reversals and questionings of identity. Apocalyptic comedies are full of doubles, masks, disguises, impostors, impersonations, deceit: where truth is manipulated for low ends, the characters' plausible simulation of the truth is enacted in their dissimulations.

The American Wyrđ

This logic of humor-in-horror of the mutated, displaced, tainted, broken, deformed, or “different” body leads in two directions in American culture. One is toward the augmented future: the techno-millennialist future of Silicon Valley, of grinding and body hacking, of surgery and perfectability, but also of Arnold Schwarzenegger as Governor of California—or of the character Solomon in Harmony Korine’s 1997 film *Gummo*, a white-trash hydrocephalic child working out with tied-together kitchen utensils. It is an excision of the taint the earliest Puritans feared they had brought with them to America from Europe—the deformity of the body, being via maternal impression the outward sign of spiritual corruption, the belief in which Anne Bradstreet documented in her poem “The Author To Her Book.” The other is toward the totalizing linear millennialist vision of apocalypse, of a planet without humans—that is to say, without Americans. Only the first of these visions is currently being realized, which is why the American Weird is a millennial process—a verb or gerund—a weirding. It is a process of becoming. As a verb it cannot be; it can only do.

Whether such recent definitions of the weird as conform to its late-nineteenth-century British vernacular usage are adequate as general descriptive categories for British cultural expressions in the twentieth century remains a moot point. The notion of seeing the inside from the perspective of the outside was the explicit *raison d'être* of late-1970s literary Martianism, whose chief proponents were Craig Raine and Martin Amis: it rapidly became clichéd as a practice, as critics recognized that what presented itself as outside the British literary canon was very much a product of the inside.

But there is no question that the binary categories of inside/outside so essential to current formulations of the weird are both semantically inadequate and ahistorical for any concept of an American Weird, in ignoring the extent to which Puritan thinking in America from the time of the colonies onward already incorporated a conception of “weirding.” The *wyrđ*—OS *wurd*, OHG *wurt*, ON *urðr* (Timmer 1941: 24), all of which are roots of the modern German *werden*—as a concept of fate in Anglo-Saxon poetry and onward relates to the Puritan focus upon the invisible world, and to its US English association with witchcraft. It leads from early American millennialist doxa to the nineteenth-century concept of America’s manifest destiny and, in its relentless orientation toward a utopian future, embeds ideas of American technology as a means of transcendence into American culture throughout its history. It cannot work if it is a stable concept: if it signals that previous concepts and frameworks are

obsolete, and we recognize that signal, then it has already rendered itself obsolete. The American Weird must change to be: it has to be dynamic, nonessential, a nonconcept, a moving shadow.

Notes

- 1 “WEIRD I. *n.* 5. (2) (iii) *weirdless, wa(i)rd-, weard-*, unfortunate, unprosperous, esp. as implying one’s own incompetence, hence inept, incapable, shiftless, improvident, managing one’s affairs badly, thriftless, gen. of persons” (SND 1931–75).
- 2 “We(i)rd, *n.* 1. *c.* A person or entity viewed as the instrument of destiny; one of the Fates. *d. pl.*= We(i)rd *sisteris n. pl.*” (DOST 1937–2002).

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