

Visions of the End: Imagined and Real Apocalypses in Literature and Beyond

Arleen Ionescu

West University of Timișoara, Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, Bd. Vasile Pârvan nr. 4, Timișoara, 300223, Timiș, Romania
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5764-8612>
arleen.ionescu@e-uvv.ro

This article highlights instances of imagined and real apocalypses in twentieth-century writing and beyond. After making a short history of works of fiction dealing with the apocalypse, I establish the connection between the apocalypse and the Holocaust and refer first to Holocaust memoirs, especially those of Primo Levi, Boris Pahor, Charlotte Delbo and Miklós Nyiszli. My discussion on the horror of the Nazi camps goes through some theorists' thinking of the Holocaust as an apocalypse: Giorgio Agamben, Maurice Blanchot, Jean-François Lyotard and Theodor Adorno. Then, using as a case study the notion of "void," I illustrate it through a few examples: the apocalyptic architectural space of Daniel Libeskind's Holocaust Tower as a "Voided Void" that opens into nothingness and Samuel Beckett's play Endgame opening into a bare space. Clov mediates a vision of apocalyptic landscape that he sees out of the window yet remains entirely hidden from the audience. Speculating on what Clov may see, I present two imaginary scenarios of the apocalypse as void from the works of the Romanian-French essayist Emil Cioran and the Slovenian writer Drago Jančar, connecting their vision of the end of the world to Blanchot's and Pynchon's versions of the disaster and the last blast, respectively.

Keywords: world literature / twentieth century / apocalypse / Holocaust / Pahor, Boris / Beckett, Samuel / Cioran, Emil / Jančar, Drago

Representations of the apocalypse from Biblical revelation to modern trauma

Coming from the Greek noun *ἀποκάλυψις* (*apokálypsis*), “of action,” and verb *ἀποκαλύπτειν* (*apokályptein*), “to uncover, disclose,” “apocalypse” means, on the one hand, “the ‘Revelation’ of the future granted to St. John in the isle of Patmos” and, on the other, by extension: any revelation or disclosure (see “Apocalypse”). The corresponding adjective, “apocalyptic” (coming from *ἀποκαλυπτικός*, *apokalyptikós*), “of the nature of revelation,” or “pertaining to the Revelation of St. John,” can relate to “a disaster resulting in drastic, irreversible damage to human society or the environment, especially on a global scale; cataclysmic” (see “Apocalyptic”).

The Book of Revelation records the “apocalypse” for the first time, introducing us to a world of a revengeful God. His wrath goes against the Jews in the Second Temple Period at the end of the first century. In the cave of his exile on the Greek island of Patmos, John the Apostle has a dream vision of the cataclysmic: war, famine, disease, epidemic, plagues, earthquakes, asteroids hitting the earth, and a false prophet, the Antichrist, a dragon with horns in a lamb’s skin, a beast often designated by the symbolic 666, who controls the whole earth in the “last days” of humanity. *The Book of Revelation* shares images with the *Book of Daniel* and has correspondences in pre-Christian legends and myths from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Matsya Purana’s prophecy of the deluge from the Hindu *Dharmasatra* and other biblical stories, such as the “proto-apocalyptic” Isaiah 24–27, Ezekiel as well as the Book of Zechariah, the Book of Joel, 1 Enoch (particularly the Animal Apocalypse, chapters 85–90), the story of Noah’s Ark and that of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The concept of the apocalypse shifted from religious revelation to secular narratives that retained visions (what I call “imagined apocalypses”) evolving from the Middle Ages onwards and developing significantly since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Here we may include, among others, Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville’s epic poem in prose *The Last Man* (1805), the first retelling of the *Book of Revelation*, Mary Shelley’s novel *The Last Man* (1826), often considered the first work of modern apocalyptic fiction, and Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion” (1839), in which the two protagonists discuss in afterlife the destruction of the world brought by a comet that left only oxygen in the Earth’s atmosphere. Other works describing a worldwide inferno include Richard Jefferies’s novel *After London* (1885), a dystopia in two parts, set in a depopulated England, and H. G. Wells’s novels *The Time Machine* (1895), in which the protagonist returns to the year

802,701 A.D. and then leaps millions of years further into the future, after civilization collapsed beneath a swollen red sun, and *The War of the Worlds* (1898) dealing with a Martian invasion.¹ In the twentieth century, remaining focused on imaginative scenarios and going beyond the human towards what happens in a posthuman, “after Man” world, literary representations gave apocalypse the sense “of utter indifference ... rather than the punishment” (Stoekl 51). Even before the two World Wars, many writers associated the spirit of the age with a sense of “imminent apocalypse,” attempting to explore the “fundamental link between violence, end-of-history scenarios, and ethical possibility” (Borg 188). Ruben Borg’s examples include Antonin Artaud’s poetics, Robert Musil’s portrayal of a dying middle class and Conrad’s portrayal of European civilization (188). In an attempt to represent the end “permeated with images of decay and loss but also with a vision of the apocalypse as a cultural, global and civilizational transformation,” the Avant-garde was accompanied by a programmatic concern with “dissolution” (Pranjić and Kreft 5).² At the same time, the Avant-garde was preoccupied with the end of art. Modernism in particular was diagnosed by Theodor Adorno “as radically calling into question the very existence and pertinence of art” (Ziarek 67).

In the second half of the twentieth century, post-apocalyptic literature developed as a response to worldwide disasters causing mass death and destroying the entire society; it focused on zombie or alien invasions and slow, entropic ends of the world, for instance, Arthur C. Clarke’s *Childhood’s End* (1953), the novelette “The Screwfly Solution” (1977) published by Alice Sheldon under her pseudonym Raccoona Sheldon, Douglas Adams’s *Hitchhiker’s Guide* series (1979–2009), Gene Wolfe’s *The Urth of the New Sun* (1987), Greg Bear’s *The Forge of God* (1987), Al Sarrantonio’s *Moonbane* (1989), Charles R. Pellegrino and George Zebrowski’s novel *The Killing Star* (1995). Other imaginary apocalypses, including Brian Aldiss’s *Hothouse* (1961), J. G. Ballard’s *The Drowned World* (1962) and *The Burning World* (1964), Kurt Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle* (1963), Jerry Pournelle and Larry Niven’s *Lucifer’s Hammer* (1977), Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993) as well as K. A. Applegate’s book series *Remnants* (2001–2003), among many others, dealt with medical disasters (spreading of plagues or viruses), natural or man-made

¹ The latter was adapted into comic books, film, music, radio and television as well as video games.

² Pranjić and Kreft’s thought-provoking thematic section focuses on how various “avant-garde practices” thematized, represented and challenged “the image of the end,” whose meanings “come closer to the original meaning of apocalyptic eschatology” (Pranjić and Kreft 5).

pollution and disasters caused by the environmental doom and gloom that were given an astronomical apocalyptic proportion (solar cataclysms, comets or meteorites that destroy the earth). Finally, various failures of modern technology caused by fundamental changes in the laws of physics inspired René Barjavel's *Ravage* (1943), Fred Saberhagen's *Empire of the East* series (written in the 1960s–1970s) and Steve Boyett's *Ariel: A Book of the Change* (1983). Global climate change acquired "the aura of the slow-moving apocalypse, the vibe of total inevitability and total inconceivability" (Stoekl 46) and it was often associated to biodiversity loss and population growth.

After the Second World War, literature extended its topics from imagined to real catastrophes. The concept of "apocalypse" received a major, if ambiguous role in various domains of artistic production and critical or philosophical thinking. Postmodernist writers did not see the apocalypse as "a possible source of change and novelty" (Peruško 62). Their plots included versions dwelling "obsessively on the end, without any expectation of a new beginning," a feature close to Jacques Derrida's "apocalypse without vision," which did not envisage redemptive hope (Kumar 207). This is because in the distant wake of the horrors of the Nazi camps and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Derrida equated "the nuclear age" to "the absolute *epoché*" that contaminated literature as well (Derrida 27).

For instance, Thomas Pynchon's fiction "organized by some concatenative V-effect, from the first novel, *V.* (or 'V1'), ... to the centrality of V-2 rockets in *Gravity's Rainbow*, and, nearer us and nearer 'home' (its final word), to *Vineland* as 'V3' and a more nostalgic fresco of an allegorized proto-America" (Milesi, "Postmodern Ana-Apocalypitics" 213) offered a full picture of what apocalypse felt like. Toward the end of *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa's psychiatrist, Dr. Hilarius, a former SS officer gets mad and admits having participated as a medical intern in an experimental program on induced insanity at Buchenwald concentration camp. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Major Weissmann (Captain Blicero), the archetypal negative character, a sadomasochistic, sexually indiscriminate pederast and former SS, the source and commander of the mysterious 00000 V-2 rocket during the Second World War, describes the apocalyptic American mythos getting close to its "last stage": "American Death has come to occupy Europe. It has learned empire from its old metropolis. But now we have only the structure left us, none of the rainbow plumes, no fitting of gold, no epic marches over alkali seas" (Pynchon 722). Weissmann's words express the desire "to be something more than a functionary in this destructive apocalyptic mythos," a desire "to escape

the repeated patterns of conquest” and to embrace “a more radical apocalyptic hope for a kind of dark transcendence” (Robson 63). Weissman experiences a sense of liberation through the act of triggering the blast: “I want to break out—to leave this cycle of infection and death. I want to be taken in love: so taken that you and I, and death, and life, will be gathered inseparable, into the radiance of what we would become” (Pynchon 724). The end of the novel stages the world’s destruction: one last rocket erupts to destroy the theatre and spectators of the deferred show.

The apocalyptic genre became so important towards the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century that magazines, series, primers or readers on the apocalypse were published.³ After 9/11, a new post-apocalyptic genre developed through Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007), Claire Messud’s *The Emperor’s Children* (2006) and other responses to how a real apocalypse mediated on television forces people to re-live it daily. Writers invented “apocalyptic prophylaxis ... to impel readers to prevent an apocalypse” (Hicks 213). Writing after 9/11 became “increasingly concerned with something that seems paradoxical: the legacy of an apocalyptic moment and the constructive acts to be undertaken in the wake of our own radical destruction” (Tso and Joyce 379). With the conviction that “there is no logic in the apocalypse” (DeLillo 34), Don DeLillo is still “rummaging through the minds of the hijackers to look for it” (Gheorghiu 197).

This “apocalyptic prophylaxis” takes us close to our age, when war, destruction and terrorist attacks continue to become primary material for representing contemporary real rather than imaginary apocalypses in literature, arts, and more and more often video games.

From *apokaluptein* to *holokauston*

I nevertheless propose in this section a trip back in time, to the twentieth century, since one of its most traumatic historical events, the Holocaust, shares also a semantic meaning with “apocalypse”—*apokaluptein* derived from the Greek *holokauston*, used in the Septuagint in the sense

³ Among them, prominent ones are Mitchell G. Reddish’s *Apocalyptic Literature* (1990), *Apokalipsa Magazine* (1994), a monthly journal for philosophy and culture edited by the Slovenian cultural and artistic association Apokalipsa, Malcom Bull’s *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World* (1995), James Berger’s *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (1999), Justin Taylor’s *Apocalypse Reader* (2007), John J. Collins’s *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature* (2014) and Jenny Stümer, Michael Dunn and David Eisler’s *Worlds Ending, Ending Worlds: Understanding Apocalyptic Transformation* (2024).

of “totally consumed by fire,” and linked to the Hebrew term for sacrificial offering, *olah* (Lev. 1.3). The meaning of “holocaust” as a religious burnt offering was extended to a more general metaphor signifying sacrifice and the conflation between “apocalypse” and “Holocaust” came after the Nazis’ “Final Solution” (not only planned extermination of the Jewish race but also of the evidence of this planned extermination) and the “premonitory sign of apocalyptic mass destruction intimated by the dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan” (Milesi, “Postmodern Ana-Apocalypics” 217–218).

I designate Nazi camp memoirs as “real apocalypses” equating the end of the world with the moment when humankind decided that other human beings should be eliminated because they belonged to a different race and constructed a whole industry to support the annihilation of the Other. From Primo Levi’s *If This Is a Man* (1947) and *The Truce* (1963), Elie Wiesel’s *Night* (1956), Alexander Donat’s *The Holocaust Kingdom* (1963), Jean Amery’s *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities* (1966), Charlotte Delbo’s *Auschwitz and After* (1965), Boris Pahor’s *Necropolis* (1967),⁴ auto/biographical Holocaust narratives use recurrent rhetorical tropes of intergenerational trauma testimony, hope and redemption (Schwarz 42, 109).

Most of the survivors found it hard to explain their experiences. For instance, Levi thought that his experience remained beyond the reach of language, since the reader would not understand what “to toil the whole day in the wind, with the temperature below freezing, wearing only a shirt, underpants, cloth jacket and trousers, and in one’s body nothing but weakness, hunger and knowledge of the end drawing nearer” meant (Levi, *If* 118). Holocaust survivors had a “special kind of knowledge” expressed through phrases like “planet Auschwitz” and in such sentences as “Those who were not there cannot imagine what it was like” (Hilberg 187). Figures of speech were needed to illuminate the apocalyptic world of Holocaust survivors’ experiences (Schwarz 33), since “the failure to grasp the experience” was “usually seen to lie not so much in absence of a shared life practice per se but as a result of a break between language and reference itself” (Eaglestone 17).

Equating their experiences to “apocalypse” or “hell” was actually an efficient way that survivors found to describe the unrepresentable to their readers. For instance, Pahor, arrested for his involvement with the Slovenian liberation movement and anti-fascist resistance, uses the term “apocalypse” twice in his memoir dealing with his detention in Dachau,

⁴ The years of publication refer to the original works which were prior to their English translations.

Natzweiler-Struthof, Dora-Mittelbau, Harzungen and Bergen Belsen. He describes how prisoners evacuated from Harzungen were surrounded “with the feeling of apocalypse” (Pahor 61). Then, later on, he returns to the term when chronicling the prisoners’ personal histories: “Our apocalypse was in the domain of nothingness” (88).

Delbo prefers the term “hell” to characterize her arrival in Auschwitz, which she found so unreal that she put it in the form of blank verse in a text that is otherwise prose:

In hell
you do not see your comrades dying
in hell
death is no threat
you no longer feel hunger or thirst in hell
you no longer await anything
in hell
there is no more hope
and hope is anguish
in the heart empty of blood. (Delbo 134)

Pahor’s “absolutely realistic” or “radically realistic” narrative (Paternu 31–32) tells that some prisoners were ultimately “luckier” to die in less pain in spring than those who died in winter:

... on winter days, when snow makes the bones harder, when they lose their balance inside the skidding wooden clogs. The white stairs are even more merciless. But the block leader shrieks furiously, “Move! Move!” as he drives the striped stick figures out of the barracks with his club and they topple over one another. Rainwater splashes your bare ankles, or bare feet if the clogs have got lost. At roll call, the striped material hangs on your back like wet newspaper. But a wet death is less violent and less tyrannical than an icy one, especially if you have to run to the showers in the middle of the night as part of the battle against lice and typhus. Running downstairs doesn’t warm the body; it delivers it into the embrace of the mountain wind. (Pahor 29)

Both Delbo and Pahor use “you” to refer to “us,” the prisoners; they watch the scenes as if distancing themselves from their own status of prisoners. Then they both become part of those who feel the end of the world and revert to “we” and “I”:

Lined up five abreast, all we had to do was an about-face on the spot to be in perfect marching order, facing the gate, ready for takeoff. ... I’d been thirsty for days and days, thirsty to the point of losing my mind, to the point of being unable to eat since there was no saliva in my mouth, so thirsty I couldn’t speak. (Delbo 142)

Here, before these anonymous barracks, the bewildered herd hastily undresses to the sound of barking from the other side of the hill, beyond the barbed wire, wire that haltingly slices the night so that pieces of it fall into the bottomless pit of nothingness. "Move! Move!" the splenetic voice drives us on, and the sounds from over the hill grow more and more enraged, as though the nostrils of a many-headed beast have just picked up the scent, borne by the wind over night's shoulder, of our naked flesh. (Pahor 29)

By personifying the SS as a multi-headed beast, the "splenetic" howling transforms an abstract apocalypse into a tangible nightmare. The repetition of "Move! Move!" brings Pahor back from his reverie to reality. The focus on "scent" and "naked flesh" frames the human subjects as biological targets rather than human beings, which is a common trope in Holocaust literature. Yet Pahor's mission is to keep his humanity and help others survive. In one fragment, he depicts how one of his colleagues, Leif, performs miracles, exhibiting remarkable resourcefulness to bring back to life prisoners who were thought to be dead:

A corpse, I thought, as Leif, quiet and erect, unbuttoned the dirty striped jacket, sliced the shirt open across the chest, and placed the funnel of his stethoscope in different places on the left side. There was no sign of life, no sound in the nickel-plated tubes in his ears. Then he said, as if to himself, "*Man soll versuchen.*" He stepped back with dignity, broke off the end of an ampule of Coramine, held a hypodermic needle in his right hand while with the index and middle fingers of his left he gauged the distance between the ribs, then inserted the needle straight into the heart. For a physician in a hospital this was not so unusual, but when a body thought to be dead starts to wave its arms, catch its breath, and writhe, the layman feels as if he were witnessing the resurrection of Lazarus. The boy was alive. Later he would smile whenever Leif stopped by his bunk, but smile vacantly, as though unsure why the doctor had summoned him back into the light. (Pahor 29)

However, if Leif makes Lazarus return from the abyss, other events in the apocalyptic world of the Nazi camps demonstrate the contrary, that humanity is no longer possible. Giorgio Agamben called the *Sonderkommando* the "grey zone" of the camps. The *Sonderkommando* was called through the usual euphemistic Nazi language "special team"; it was made up of strong Jewish men who were killed after some months of working. Their mission was to accompany the naked prisoners to their death in the gas chambers, to maintain order, then, after Zyklon B killed those from the gas chamber, to evacuate their corpses from the rooms and make sure the German state did not lose any valuables: they extracted the gold teeth of the deceased, they cut the women's hair, burnt the corpses inside the crematoria and finally disposed the remaining ash. According

to Levi, the very organization of these squads represented the “National Socialism’s most demonic crime games” (Levi, *Drowned* 52–53).

One of the few survivors of this squad, a Hungarian-Jewish doctor and forensic pathologist, prisoner at Auschwitz who became a witness, Miklós Nyiszli, recounts the “privileges” that the *Sonderkommando* had. For example, during their breaks in the factory of death the members of the squad in charge of the ovens could play football games with the Nazi officers:

Number one crematorium was not working today. I glanced in the direction of numbers two, three and four: their chimneys were spewing flame and smoke. Business as usual.

It was too early for dinner. The Sonderkommando brought out a football. The teams lined up on the field. *Auschwitz* “SS versus SK.” On one side of the field the crematorium’s SS guards; on the other, the Sonderkommando. They put the ball into play. Sonorous laughter filled the courtyard. The spectators became excited and shouted encouragement at the players, as if this were the playing field of some peaceful town. Stupefied, I made that mental note as well. Without waiting for the end of the match, I returned to my room. After supper I swallowed two sleeping tablets of ten centigrams each and fell asleep. (Nyiszli 106–107)

In this scene victims are forced to socialize with their victimizers in a moment of apparent normalcy just weeks or even days before being eliminated. Giorgio Agamben equated this scene with the continuation of an uninterrupted massacre “in the middle of an infinite horror” and called the match the “true horror of the camp” (Agamben 26).

A few months later, after being taken to Crematorium 2 and waiting for his death, Nyiszli and three doctors are told to go to their barracks. The next day Nyiszli finds the members of his *Sonderkommando*, the thirteenth one, all those men who used to play football with the SS, killed:

After death by gas, on the pyre, by chloroform injections, by a bullet in the back of the neck, by phosphorous bomb, here was a sixth way of killing which I had not previously discovered.

During the night our comrades had been taken into a nearby forest and killed by flame throwers. That we four were still alive did not by any means signify that they wanted to spare us, but simply that we were still indispensable to them. In allowing us to remain alive, Dr. Mengele had merely granted us another reprieve. (Nyiszli 275)

Nyiszli uses plain language. Other memoirists believed that the horror of the Holocaust should be expressed via poetic language which “carried an enduring sense of ethical responsibility in the decades after the

Nuremberg trials” (Marin 144). The literary medium could relate history to death in a more explicit way. In *The Writing of the Disaster*, Maurice Blanchot’s maturity work engaging with issues of trauma, representation and the task of writing after Shoah in a post-apocalyptic world, disaster (*le des-astre*) is the total light when the falling of the star occurs, “the burst of light, the dispersion that resonates or vibrates dazzlingly—and in clarity clamors but does not clarify” (39).⁵ Blanchot’s apocalypse delivers its shattering truth in a silence only illuminated by history’s absolute all-burning that leaves nothing in its wake but its own ashes:

The holocaust, the absolute event of history—which is a date in history—that utter-burn where all history took fire, where the movement of Meaning was swallowed up, when the gift, which knows nothing of forgiving or of consent, shattered without giving place to anything that can be affirmed, that can be denied, gift of very passivity, gift of what cannot be given. How can thought be made the keeper of the holocaust where all was lost, including guardian thought? (47)

The only perspective from which one can speak about the Holocaust is to admit the impossibility to “know.” Kevin Hart questioned, passionately but also forensically, whether fragmentary writing responded adequately to the Shoah and analyzed Blanchot’s depictions of the apocalypse as “fragments about calm,” playing “on the root, *calma* (Old Spanish), which means heat of the day and hence, indirectly might allude to the burning of corpses in the extermination camps,” noting that when evoking the Shoah Blanchot replaced “disaster” with “apocalypse” in “Thinking the Apocalypse” (Hart 170). In “Do Not Forget,” Blanchot coined the concept “the immemorial,” revealing that once a disastrous event occurs, it is forever lost, since it “has always already happened, therefore can no longer or not yet happen but as repetition” (Milesi, “B Effects” 165).

The immemorial is the accumulation of all that cannot be measured or represented, constantly risking being reduced to silence and thus the impossibility to make it into shared memory. Lyotard’s *Heidegger and “the Jews”* presents the double bind of the immemorial: it can neither be remembered (represented), nor forgotten, since oblivion remains unthinkable. The unrepresentable “war cry” from Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* (82) can be put in parallel to Blanchot’s “voiceless cry, which breaks with all utterances, which is addressed to no one and which no one receives, the cry that lapses and decries” (Blanchot, *Writing* 51). For

⁵ For my discussion on Blanchot’s falling of the star as implying the necessity to go beyond phenomenology, the science of what appears in the light (*phos*), see Ionescu 194–195.

Lyotard, this silence before the apocalypse was continued by the forgotten and to the unrepresentable “after Auschwitz.”

Yet “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” Adorno said, not making an indictment of the whole of culture, but to what he thought was “barbaric” in it, justifying the “necessity for art to de-aestheticize itself and to justify henceforth its own existence” (Felman 33). Adorno, for whom Auschwitz was “a model, not an example”—and here we note that the “‘Auschwitz’ model would designate an ‘experience’ of language that brings speculative discourse to a halt” (Lyotard, *Differend* 88)—found the lyricism of Paul Celan’s poem “Todesfuge” corroding “even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today” (Adorno, “Cultural Criticism” 34). Celan’s experience was not only related to language but to the collapse of his whole world: he hid on the night the Jews from Czernowitz were deported to Transnistria, but his parents died there. Language remained for Celan the only thing he held on in the barbarous world of Second World War, as he emphasized in his Bremen acceptance speech: “Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language. ... In spite of everything, it remained secure against loss. ... It gave me no words for what was happening, but went through it” (Celan, “Speech” 34).

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno conceded that “perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream” (362). Hence, Celan was right to describe in a lyrical form the lives of an Aryan woman, Margarete, and a Jewish woman, Shulamith. Not belonging to master race, Shulamith has to drink the “black milk of daybreak” that transforms her into ash:

we drink you at sundown and in the morning we drink and we drink you
 death is a master from Germany his eyes are blue
 he strikes you with leaden bullets his aim is true
 a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete
 he sets his pack on to us he grants us a grave in the air
 he plays with the serpents and daydreams death is a master from Germany
 (Celan, “Death Fugue” 244)

Also, there is one more way to interpret the “whole endeavor of Celan’s poetic work,” defining it, precisely, in Adorno’s terms, “as poetry’s creative and self-critical *resistance to the verdict* that it is barbaric, henceforth, to write lyrically, poetically; a verdict which the poetry receives, however, not from the outside but from inside itself” (Felman 34).

Adorno was more inclined towards an oblique representation of Auschwitz, and found Samuel Beckett’s play *Endgame*, which transmitted the message that “there really is not so much to be feared anymore,”

the “only fitting reaction to the situation of the concentration camps—a situation he never calls by name, as if it were subject to an image ban” (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* 362, 380). Beckett’s involvement in the Resistance made him aware of wartime horrors, which are allusively invoked in *Endgame*, *Waiting for Godot* and “The Lost Ones” (Cixous 7–8).

Holocaust and apocalypse as voids

Indeed, imposing on his audience/readers an “image ban,” as Simon Critchley put it, Beckett’s works “open on the void, open on the nothing” (Critchley 206). The term “void” has been used by several creators, writers, architects and scholars as a synonym of “apocalypse.” Daniel Libeskind used it in his traumatogenic architecture “ruptured by loss” (Crowshaw 186). Among the different voids, empty spaces that Libeskind placed in his Jewish Museum in Berlin, the Holocaust Tower, a 24-meter-tall empty concrete silo, is a reconceptualization of apocalyptic space. It is an appendix that ends one of the three axes of the museum, the Axis of the Holocaust. Libeskind called this tower the “Voided Void,” the epitome of a European nightmare that started with “the pogroms and the anti-Semitic edicts which did not only begin in 1933,” after which it “became obvious, irrefutable, and unfortunately irreversible,” going on with “the burning of books and cultural artifacts” and ending with “the burning of human beings” (Altmeyden et al. 29–30). Like Critchley in his remark on Beckett, Libeskind connects the void to the feeling of “the nothingness of the nothing” (30). The space of the Holocaust Tower stays “acoustically and climatically distinct from the rest of the building” (Ellison 91). There is “no aesthetic equivalent” for the Holocaust, hence this architectural structure illustrates this lack of aestheticism: “It is as it is: huge, narrow, cut off, final, bare. ... There is nothing aesthetic about this enclosed space. It is the holocaust itself” (Schneider and Bolk 30). In the Tower, visitors feel that they reached the antechamber of death, whose sense of hopelessness is mitigated by the filtering light. They become witnesses to the apocalypse. And yet, in the place representing the end of humanity, a feeble ray of light can be perceived during daytime—through a small crack in the roof visitors can see the sky.

The architect revealed that his inspiration to build the Tower came from the story of Elaine, a survivor from Yaffa Eliach’s *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust*. The only thing that helped her to survive during two horrible years in the Stutthof concentration camp was remembering the

white line of sky that she could glimpse through the slats of the boxcar, after being transported from Auschwitz in a group of around 20,000 Jews (Libeskind, *Breaking Ground* 55). That white line was something “to hold on” for Elaine, “the mystery of survival” (Libeskind, *Space* 70).

Clov and Hamm can be regarded as two survivors in their Holocaust tower, the enclosed room that gives the audience and readers a sensation of claustrophobia. *Endgame* provides allegorical tableaux of the apocalypse where the only certainty is that there is nothing to fear anymore. Indeed, nothing is left, yet Clov’s ray of light is that sufferance is no longer possible: “I can’t be punished anymore” (Beckett 93). In one of his frequent turnings of the telescope on the auditorium, then “on the without,” Clov returns the finding that all is “zero,” “corpsed” (106). For Beckett’s characters, terminal “solitude, emptiness, nothingness, meaninglessness, silence” are more than “givens,” they become “their goal, their new heroic undertaking” (Cavell 156).

In his famous study “The Exhausted,” Gilles Deleuze detailed Beckett’s four strategies to suggest exhaustion: “forming exhaustive series of things”; “drying up the flow of voices”; “extenuating the potentialities of space”; and “dissipating the power of the image” (161). Exhaustion refers to language as well, since Beckett pushes language to its limits in both his plays and fiction to the point of depletion and “exhaustion,” positioning himself, as Borg suggested, “after the end of history, at a precise cultural moment that must take stock of the total depletion of creative possibilities, and the saturation of evolutionary potential in the present” (Borg 200). Beckett’s characters borrow the features of Pahor’s characters “complete exhaustion, fear and apathy regarding everyday events” (Koron 17). Waiting for the end is exhausting. Pahor describes the prisoners’ frailty as exhaustion: “With our weakness and sitting in one place so long, it would have been easy to nod off, but twitching exhaustion kept us awake and forced our heavy eyelids back open” (Pahor 19). In *Endgame*, Hamm barely wakes up but feels tired (Beckett 93) and repeatedly lets Clov know about his state of tiredness (109–110) until Clov exclaims: “I’m tired of our goings on, very tired” (129). This is how prisoners of camps felt in the morning: “Exhaustion yet fitful sleep broken by the shouts of morning reveille. No more sense of morning or evening, because the frenzied pace mixed beginning and end, darkness and light” (Pahor 133).

Hamm is the one who feeds Clov, yet provisions may be exhausted, too. To survive Clov, Hamm has a plan:

HAMM: I’ll give you nothing more to eat.

CLOV: Then we’ll die. (Beckett 94)

Realizing that he would die without Clov, Hamm changes his mind:

HAMM: I'll give you just enough to keep you from dying. You'll be hungry all the time.

CLOV: Then we shan't die. (95)

Being hungry all the time is exactly the daily condition of the camp survivors, sometimes using means to survive by waiting for the others to die and eat their provisions: "When the stretchers carried the corpses to the storehouse, their squares of bread stayed on our table. Yes, we ate them. I know what you're thinking. That the crime wasn't in eating them but in counting on eating them. We knew exactly whose bread would stay" (Pahor 173).

Images of the apocalypse

Beckett never reveals what Clov sees out of the window. Annoyed by Hamm's insistence, he just admits that he sees some light:

CLOV: It isn't dark.

HAMM (angrily): I'm asking you is it light?

CLOV: Yes. (Beckett 123)

Could this be the demonic light of the disaster invoked by Blanchot? The next part speculates what the apocalypse looks like, selecting two representative examples. One belongs to the Romanian-born French philosopher and essayist Emil Cioran, who lived in the same city as Beckett, yet who unlike the latter, supported the fascist movement in his youth. The other belongs to one of the best-known contemporary Slovenian writers, Drago Jančar, who has often been presented as a "seismologist of a chaotic history" (Jančar, *I Saw Her*). In his literary essay about Europe, he started from the indignation of a Jewish-born French author, Irène Némirovsky, who before the war could not believe that her book was forgotten very "quickly, just as everything becomes forgotten in Paris" (Jančar, "Just as Everything" 161). A few years later Némirovsky and her entire family perished in the Holocaust and were forgotten, hence Jančar's commitment to preserving the historical moments that signaled the end of such disasters, more precisely the year 1945, when the camps were liberated, and the year 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell: "It is exactly these years that should not be forgotten or ignored" (162).

In his short essay “Apocalypse,” Cioran imagines the last day, the day on which people, irrespective of their social or personal status, gather in the streets, in such a state of exhaustion that they refuse “to do anything anymore” (Cioran 52). The exhausted people that Pahor and Beckett invoked become in Cioran’s text people giving up their “senseless work,” who “yell with all their might, making a strange, menacing, dissonant clamor that would shake the earth” (52). Nature partakes in this apocalyptic vision, with waters flowing faster and mountains swaying threateningly, with trees showing “their roots like an eternal and hideous reproach,” birds croaking “like ravens,” and animals scattering “in fright and fall from exhaustion” (52). Cioran uses the term “void” to define this apocalyptic scene: “Let ideals be declared void; beliefs, trifles; art, a lie; and philosophy, a joke. Let everything be climax and anticlimax” (52). The void comprises everything. It is the time when all phenomena become evanescent, vanish, engraved in oblivion: “Let wildfires spread rapidly and a terrifying noise drown out everything so that even the smallest animal would know that the end is near” (52).

Light produces wildfire shimmers with vertical reflections. Through the contact of this light with death, humanity estranges itself from Affect. Held in a syncopal temporality, the apocalypse convulsively pulverizes people’s identity, disperses it into nothingness:

Let all form become formless, and chaos swallow the structure of the world in a gigantic maelstrom. Let there be tremendous commotion and noise, terror, and explosion, and then let there be eternal silence and total forgetfulness. And in those final moments, let all that humanity has felt until now, hope, regret, love, despair, and hatred, explode with such force that nothing is left behind. (Cioran 52–53)

This fragment makes us think of another imagined apocalypse, Jančar’s *Northern Lights*. Jančar’s novel, set largely in 1938, in the small Slovenian city of Maribor, captures the feverish atmosphere of a Central Europe teetering on the brink of collapse. Although still far, like the northern lights of that year, the “immense abyss” comes nearer and nearer, becoming visible through its “warning lights” flaring brightly. The specter of the future unsettles the protagonist Joseph Erdman: “It’s spinning, this world is spinning faster and faster and there’s nothing I can do about it. It’s spinning, sinking me into a deep sleep as it spins” (Jančar, *Northern Lights* 110). The omniscient narrator, the voice of Maribor, which “grows increasingly befogged and fantastic” (Levy 213), suggests that the aurora borealis is a sign that the end of the world is coming soon:

Sometimes there are instances when the jaws of one of these spouts is aimed directly at the earth. That's when compass needles on earth start to quiver and the aurora borealis's electric arcs ignite high in the atmosphere. ...

And yet the slumbering town, which the glorious and fearsome celestial phenomenon had illuminated, was restlessly tossing in its sleep this night. The magnetic needles in human cells were shuddering dangerously within the restless, unsteady beating of that gigantic, cosmic heart, of whose whereabouts scientists have no inkling. (Jančar, *Northern Lights* 192–193)

Jančar summarizes the apocalypse as “BLOODRED SKY OVER SLOVENIA” (193). The image of a magenta sky is frequently associated with catastrophic events, symbolizing environmental disasters and destruction, the same as the one that made Edvard Munch's anonymous protagonist scream. *Scream*, Munch's 1893 masterpiece, preceded the Holocaust by half a century. Yet the gaunt spectral figure in agony, with sunken eyes and hairless head, with indistinct patterns on the clothing approximating the rigid geometry of a prisoner's uniform mirror in retrospect the harrowing images of survivors from concentration camps that my article discussed.

Whether taking the form of the aurora borealis's fiery shimmer or that of Cioran's “apocalyptic dream, strange and grandiose like all crepuscular visions” (Cioran 57), this light retains the same unsettling quality of Blanchot's falling star. This light meaning both death and regeneration elicits a simultaneous feeling of apocalypse and liberation for Cioran and Erdman, and, in a world without suffering, since nobody could be punished anymore as we heard from Clov in *Endgame*.

Conclusion

The persistent scholarly and artistic preoccupation with the apocalypse suggests that “the end” is not a fixed event, but a fluid boundary between finitude and the unknown. By tracing the evolution of these scenarios—from theological visions of regeneration to the secular reality of the Holocaust—this study reveals a fundamental shift in how we conceive of imagined or real apocalyptic scenarios, some envisaging human presence beyond the end of the world, others focusing more on loss than on regeneration. Ultimately, interrupting Auschwitz does not merely signify loss; it redefines the apocalypse as a permanent state of existence where “the imagined” and “the real” collide.⁶ In this context, both writing and

⁶ I paraphrase Josh Cohen's title *Interrupting Auschwitz* that means both “the effect of the inassimilable trauma of Auschwitz on thinking (‘Auschwitz interrupts’)” and “the

architecture serve as a vital trace, capturing the tension between a world that has ended and a human presence that stubbornly, and perhaps impossibly, persists beyond it. The most extended section presented real apocalypses: what Nazi camp survivors such as Levi, Pahor, Nyizli and Delbo lived through. The integration of Agamben, Blanchot, Lyotard and Adorno into the discussion of the analyzed Holocaust memoirs provided a theoretical framework for understanding the Holocaust not merely as a historical event, but as an ontological rupture, a “void.” Libeskind’s architectural spaces and Beckett’s descriptions of a dying world converge with the survivors’ testimonies. This alignment suggests that the “void” is more than a mere metaphor; it becomes a concrete reality shared by those who survived and those who designed and wrote about the end of the world. And yet what does the light that Clov sees out of the window look like? This article provided a glimpse into what the apocalypse as demonic light looks like. Despite their differing cultural contexts, Cioran and Jančar collectively articulated a vision of the apocalypse, suggesting a shared European consciousness of an imagined end as demonic light, aurora borealis and a magenta sky.

WORKS CITED

- Adorno, Theodor W. “Cultural Criticism and Society.” *Prisms*, Theodor W. Adorno, translated by Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber, MIT Press, 1983, pp. 17–34.
- Adorno, Theodor W. *Negative Dialectics*. Translated by E. B. Ashton, Routledge, 2004.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen, Zone Books, 1999.
- Altmeppen, Sonja, et al., editors. *Highlights from the Jewish Museum Berlin*. Nicolai Verlag, 2010.
- “Apocalypse, *N.*” *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2355444502>.
- “Apocalyptic, *Adj.* and *N.*” *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6086547780>.
- Beckett, Samuel. *Endgame. The Complete Dramatic Works*, Samuel Beckett, Faber and Faber, 1986, pp. 89–134.
- Blanchot, Maurice. “Do Not Forget!” Translated by Leslie Hill. *Paragraph*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2007, pp. 34–37.
- Blanchot, Maurice. *The Writing of the Disaster*. Translated by Ann Smock, University of Nebraska Press, 1986.
- Borg, Ruben. “Ethics of the Event: The Apocalyptic Turn in Modernism.” *Partial Answers*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2011, pp. 188–201.
- Cavell, Stanley. *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cambridge University Press, 1976.

imperative of thinking and acting against the recurrence of Auschwitz (‘Auschwitz must be interrupted’)” (xvii).

- Celan, Paul. "Death Fugue." Translated by Michael Hamburger. *Writing in Witness: A Holocaust Reader*, edited by Eric J. Sundquist, SUNY Press, 2018, pp. 242–244.
- Celan, Paul. "Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen." *Collected Prose*, Paul Celan, translated by Rosmarie Waldrop, Routledge, 2003, pp. 33–35.
- Cioran, E. M. *On the Heights of Despair*. Translated by Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston, University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Cixous, Hélène. *Zero's Neighbour: Sam Beckett*. Translated by Laurent Milesi, Polity Press, 2010.
- Cohen, Josh. *Interrupting Auschwitz: Art, Religion, Philosophy*. Continuum, 2005.
- Critchley, Simon. *Very Little ... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. Routledge, 1997.
- Crownshaw, Richard. *The Afterlife of Holocaust Memory in Contemporary Literature and Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Delbo, Charlotte. *Auschwitz and After*. Translated by Rosette C. Lamont, Yale University Press, 2014.
- Deleuze, Gilles. "The Exhausted." *Essays Critical and Clinical*, Gilles Deleuze, translated by Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco, Verso, 1998, pp. 152–174.
- DeLillo, Don. "In the Ruins of the Future." *Harper's Magazine*, December 2001, pp. 33–40.
- Derrida, Jacques. "No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)." Translated by Catherine Porter and Philip Lewis. *Diacritics*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1984, pp. 20–31.
- Eaglestone, Robert. *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*. Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Ellison, David A. "The Spoiler's Art: Embarrassed Space as Memorialization." *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 110, no. 1, 2011, pp. 89–100.
- Felman, Shoshana. "Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching." *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, Routledge, 1992, pp. 1–56.
- Gheorghiu, Oana-Celia. *British and American Representations of 9/11: Literature, Politics and the Media*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
- Hart, Kevin. "'The Absolute Event of History': The Shoah and the Outside." *Word and Text*, vol. 5, no. 1–2, 2015, pp. 169–189.
- Hicks, Heather. "Disaster Response in Post-2000 American Apocalyptic Fiction." *Apocalypse in American Literature and Culture*, edited by John May, Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 212–224.
- Hilberg, Raul. *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe 1933–1945*. Harper Perennial, 1992.
- Ionescu, Arleen. "Channels of Interference': Maurice Blanchot and Emil Cioran." *Primerjalna književnost*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2022, pp. 189–208.
- Jančar, Drago. *I Saw Her That Night*. Translated by Michael Biggins, Dalkey Archive Press, 2016.
- Jančar, Drago. "'Just as Everything Becomes Forgotten in Paris': On the Topic of Literature and European Dialogue." Translated by Tamara Soban. *Phainomena*, vol. 18, no. 68–69, 2009, pp. 161–167.
- Jančar, Drago. *Northern Lights*. Translated by Michael Biggins, Northwestern University Press, 2001.
- Koron, Alenka. "Boris Pahor's *Necropolis* and World Literature." *Forum for World Literature Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2017, pp. 8–24.
- Kumar, Krishan. "Apocalypse, Millennium and Utopia Today." *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World*, edited by Malcolm Bull, Blackwell, 1995, pp. 200–224.

- Levi, Primo. *The Drowned and the Saved*. Translated by Raymond Rosenthal, Random House, 1989.
- Levi, Primo. *If This Is a Man*. Translated by Stuart Woolf. *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, vol. 1, edited by Ann Goldstein, Liveright, 2015.
- Levy, Michele. Review of *Northern Lights*, by Drago Jančar. *World Literature Today*, vol. 76, no. 1, 2002, p. 213.
- Libeskind, Daniel. *Breaking Ground: Adventures in Life and Architecture*. Riverhead Books, 2004.
- Libeskind, Daniel. *The Space of Encounter*. Thames and Hudson, 2001.
- Liotard, Jean-François. *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. Translated by Georges Van Den Abbeele, Manchester University Press, 1988.
- Liotard, Jean-François. *Heidegger and "the jews."* Translated by Andreas Michel and Mark Roberts, University of Minnesota Press, 1990.
- Liotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Manchester University Press, 1984.
- Marin, Ileana. "Artists' Books: Multimedia, Interactive Expressions of Holocaust Memory for the Post-Witness Generations." *Word and Text*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2025, pp. 143–160.
- Milesi, Laurent. "B Effects: Bonds of Form and Time in Barthes, Blanchot and Beckett." *Paragraph*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2022, pp. 157–171.
- Milesi, Laurent. "Postmodern Ana-Apocalypitics: Pynchon's V-Effect and the End (of Our Century)." *Pynchon Notes*, no. 42–43, 1998, pp. 213–243.
- Nyiszli, Miklós. *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account*. Translated by Tibère Kremer and Richard Seaver, Arcade Publishing, 1993.
- Pahor, Boris. *Necropolis*. Translated by Michael Biggins, Dalkey Archive Press, 2010.
- Paternu, Boris. "Pahorjeva *Nekropola*." *Jezik in slovnstvo*, vol. 59, no. 2–3, 2014, pp. 29–41.
- Peruško, Ivana. "The Explosive Nature and Apocalypse of the Russian Avant-Garde: Futurism vs. Bolshevism." *Primerjalna književnost*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2025, pp. 59–72.
- Pranjić, Kristina, and Lev Kref. "The Avant-Garde and the End of the World (An Introduction)." *Primerjalna književnost*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2025, pp. 5–7.
- Pynchon, Thomas. *Gravity's Rainbow*. Viking, 1973.
- Robson, David. "Frye, Derrida, Pynchon." *Postmodern Apocalypse: Theory and Cultural Practice at the End*, edited by Richard Dellamore, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995, pp. 61–78.
- Schneider, Rolf. *The Jewish Museum Berlin*. Translated by Robert Bryce, Stadtwandel Verlag, 2007.
- Schwarz, Daniel R. *Imagining the Holocaust*. St. Martin's Press, 1999.
- Stoekl, Allan. "'After the Sublime,' After the Apocalypse: Two Versions of Sustainability in Light of Climate Change." *Diacritics*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2013, pp. 40–57.
- Tso, Ann, and Stephen Joyce. "Apocalyptic Legacies: Writing the End in Fiction and Non-fiction." *Parallax*, vol. 30, no. 4, 2024, pp. 379–389.
- Ziarek, Krzysztof. "The Avant-Garde and the End of Art." *Filozofski vestnik*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2014, pp. 67–81.

Vizije konca: namišljene in resnične apokalipse v literaturi in onkraj

Ključne besede: svetovna književnost / 20. stoletje / apokalipsa / holokavst / Pahor, Boris / Beckett, Samuel / Cioran, Emil / Jančar, Drago

Članek obravnava primere namišljenih in resničnih apokalips v literaturi dvajsetega stoletja. Po kratkem pregledu zgodovine leposlovnih del, ki obravnavajo apokalipso, ugotavljam povezavo med apokalipso in holokavstom ter se najprej sklicujem na spomine na holokavst, zlasti tiste Prima Levija, Borisa Pahorja, Charlotte Delbo in Miklósa Nyiszlija. Razprava o grozotah nacističnih taborišč vključuje razmišljanja nekaterih teoretikov o holokavstu kot apokalipsi: Giorgia Agambena, Mauricea Blanchota, Jeana-Françoisa Lyotarda in Theodorja Adorna. Nato kot študijo primera uporabim pojem »praznine« in ga ponazorim z nekaj primeri: apokaliptičnim arhitekturnim prostorom »Stolpa holokavsta« Daniela Libeskinda kot »izpraznjene praznine«, ki se odpira v nič, ter Beckettovo dramo *Končna igra*, ki se odpira v goli prostor. Clov posreduje vizijo apokaliptične pokrajine, ki jo vidi skozi okno, a ostaja povsem skrita pred občinstvom. Na podlagi ugibanj o tem, kaj Clov morda vidi, predstavim dva namišljena scenarija apokalipse kot praznine iz del romunsko-francoskega esejista Emila Ciorana in slovenskega pisatelja Draga Jančarja, pri čemer njuno vizijo konca sveta povezujem z Blanchotovo in Pynchonovo različico katastrofe oziroma zadnje eksplozije.

RESEARCH DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

No new data were obtained or analyzed to support this research.

1.01 Izvirni znanstveni članek / Original scientific article

UDK 821.091:2-175

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3986/pkn.v49.i1.06>