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CHAPTER 23

Apocalyptic Trauma and the Politics of Mourning a World

Irene Visser

The fearful notion of apocalypse, of an impending ending of the world as we know it, has been particularly strong in American culture. Ideas of an end to the current order, whether social, political, national, or global, have exercised a powerful influence in American society "from the age of discovery and colonization . . . to the present," as Stephen Stein states, and scholarly publications on apocalypticism are increasingly numerous.[1] While it is evident that the notion of an inevitable total annihilation of the known world strikes deep fears into the human psyche, literary trauma theory has not yet incorporated apocalypticism, staying within the parameters of its initial theorization of past traumatization. This essay expands the notion of trauma as resulting from unassimilable, life-threatening, *past* events by conceptualizing trauma as resulting from the *envisaged* imminent annihilation of the known world. This apocalyptic trauma is firmly embedded in American literature. Reference will be made to William Faulkner's fiction on the loss of the culture of the Old South; to the trauma of dispossession and the politics of mourning in Chicano/a literature, in particular to the work of Gloria Anzaldúa and Ana Castillo; and to the trauma of envisaged global annihilation in American eco-poetry. In all three areas, cultural trauma ensues from the apocalyptic vision of the inevitable destruction of what is precious and irreplaceable in the current order.

* * *

Trauma theory in literary and cultural studies is part of trauma studies, an extensive and interdisciplinary area with a considerably longer history, predating literary trauma studies by over a hundred years. Because of its

[1] Stephen J. Stein, "American Millennial Visions: Towards Construction of a New Architectonic of American Apocalypticism," *Imagining the End: Visions of Apocalypse from the Ancient Middle East to Modern America*, ed. Abbas Amanat and Magnus T. Bernhardsson (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), 187, 190.

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inherent multidisciplinarity and conceptual flexibility, literary trauma theory has been open to ongoing revisions and redefinitions from its beginnings in the 1990s. Resignification of its basic tenets has been necessitated by adverse criticism regarding its too-narrow and limiting psychoanalytic and deconstructionist foundation, first laid by Cathy Caruth in her influential publications in the 1990s. In an essay published in 2008, Michael Rothberg called on scholars to rethink trauma as "collective, spatial, and material (instead of individual, temporal, and linguistic)" in order to break "the hold of the category of trauma as it had been developed by Caruth, Felman, Laub, and others."[2] Today, literary trauma theory is indeed reconfigured along those lines: it is more pluralistic and more inclusive; it is seen as "multiply configured with diverse representations in literature and far reaching effects in culture."[3] Trauma is now recognized as a very complex and even contradictory phenomenon: "It is not only understood as acute, individual, and event-based, but also as collective and chronic; trauma can weaken individuals and communities, but it can also lead to a stronger sense of identity and a renewed social cohesion."[4] In *Trauma and Literature*, J. Roger Kurtz, surveying the many influences that trauma theory has undergone, responding to recent events such as terrorism and sexual-abuse scandals, and intersecting with postcolonial, psychological, feminist, and Holocaust and memory studies, concludes that today the theory is flexible and well able to "extend beyond itself to connect with some of the most pressing issues of the day."[5]

If literary trauma theory has been marked by debates, contention, and extension, the same holds true for the definition of *trauma* by the American Psychiatric Association (APA), which has changed considerably in the APA's successive influential publications. Their *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* of 1980 (*DSM-III*) was foundational to the trauma theory of the 1990s. However, later editions (the *DSM-IV*, *DSM-IV-Text Revision* of 2000, and *DSM-V* of 2013) have broadened the definition of trauma by removing the earlier emphasis on the sudden, individual, and precursory nature of traumatization. In the *DSM-V* trauma is now defined as exposure to actual or *threatened* death, injury, or violence. In keeping with these

[2] Michael Rothberg, "Decolonizing Trauma Studies: A Response," *Studies in the Novel* 40.1/2 (2008): 228.

[3] Michelle Balaev, "Literary Trauma Theory Reconsidered," *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, ed. Michelle Balaev (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1–14; 10.

[4] Irene Visser, "Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospects," *Humanities* 4 (2015): 263.

[5] J. Roger Kurtz, introduction to *Trauma and Literature*, ed. J. Roger Kurtz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1–17; 7.

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changes, literary trauma theory can, and should, now also accommodate expressions of traumatization caused by the threat of future disasters, continuing its movement ever further away from the too-narrow Freudian and deconstructionist framework of its beginnings. Roger Luckhurst, in an essay on trauma and science fiction of 2014, is to my knowledge the first, and perhaps only, scholar to suggest that the time has come to rethink trauma theory to include apocalyptic trauma, since "imagined futures outgrow the psychodynamic frameworks that dominate [present] conceptions of cultural trauma."[6] Expanding the language of trauma theory to include the traumas caused by future catastrophes is particularly relevant to the study of trauma in American literature. Apocalyptic fears instilled by the threat of the ultimate destruction of the status quo are embedded in the American cultural mind and come to the fore in many genres, including culturally specific subgenres, of American literature.

Apocalypticism is a prominent element in the literature and culture of the American South. Its history, as Lisa Hinrichsen states, "is one undeniably littered with traumatic acts, laws, and legitimized behaviors" such as the "brutal, repetitive acts of violence that include lynching, incest, rape and murder."[7] The post-Civil War era was a fraught and tumultuous period with "apocalyptic visions too numerous to itemize."[8] In the early twentieth century, the inevitable changes toward the emergence of a New South instilled strong fears of the catastrophic demise of all that was deemed integral to Southern identity and culture. Mourning its defeat in the Civil War, and dreading any changes to its cultural uniqueness, the Old South resisted the acceleration of modernity. William Faulkner, from his childhood familiar with stories about the triumphs and disasters of Southern history, experienced at close range how the "cut-off, inward-turning, backward-looking" South "came into collision with the new order."[9] The apocalyptic trauma ensuing from the realization of the inevitable ending of the Old South, its values, traditions, and cultural identity, is dramatized poignantly in Faulkner's major work *The Sound and the*

[6] Roger Luckhurst, "Future Shock and the Trauma Paradigm," *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, ed. Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant, and Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2014), 161.

[7] Lisa Hinrichsen, "Trauma Studies and the Literature of the U.S. South," *Literature Compass* 10.8 (2013): 605.

[8] Stein, "American Millennial Visions," 207.

[9] Robert Penn Warren, "William Faulkner," *Selected Essays* (New York: Random House, 1958), 244.

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Fury (1929).[10] This novel presents the story of the decline of the Compsons, a family whose outlook exemplifies the Southern traumatic worldview. Locked in stasis and melancholia, the Compsons mourn what they see as the glorious days of the plantation South, thus resisting any notions of a different, modern New South.

A paralyzing sense of apocalyptic doom permeates *The Sound and the Fury*. To Mrs. Compson, whose characteristic saying is "I'll be gone soon," the future is an "incontrovertible disaster" (186). Jason Compson's cruel acts are driven by apocalyptic fears: he "saw clear and unshadowed the disaster toward which he rushed"; expecting only defeat, he tells himself, "So this is how it'll end," feeling "his invisible life raveled out about him like a wornout sock" (275, 277). The Compsons' once-grand mansion is "a decaying house"; even the rain on the house does not dissolve naturally but "disintegrates" (236). The embodiment of the apocalyptic trauma of loss and lack of hope in the novel is Benjy, the thirty-three-year-old, mentally challenged, youngest of the four Compson children. Benjy's anguished cries and "bellowing" resound throughout the narrative as expressions of traumatization that can find no resolution or consolation, in alignment with Caruth's notion of trauma as "not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on."[11] Unable to express his trauma, to integrate his wounding and move beyond mourning, Benjy exemplifies the notion that trauma involves a crisis of representation expressed by tropes of rupture and aporia.

Mourning and melancholia predominate throughout the narrative. In the novel's second section, we follow Quentin on the day of his suicide, experiencing his despair and his fears of a future of loss and further suffering. Compulsively repeated, the phrase "Father said" dominates his thinking, evidence of the strong influence of Mr. Compson's cynical statements, such as: life "only reveals to man his own folly and despair" (73); time is "the mausoleum of all hope and desire" (73); and humankind is "a problem in impure properties carried tediously to an unvarying nil" (114). Jeffrey Alexander argues that events that have not actually occurred but are only imaginary can be "deeply traumatizing" when constructed as "harmful or overwhelming

[10] William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929; New York: Penguin, 1982); henceforth cited parenthetically.

[11] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4.

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phenomena."[12] Quentin's fears, fueled by his father's repeated predictions of the end of all that he holds dear and valuable, are profoundly traumatizing, culminating in his suicidal act. Ironically, Quentin's suicide proves his father right: time has indeed careened toward an ultimate and devastating conclusion.

Apocalyptic trauma, pervasive in all sections of the novel, emerges most vividly in Reverend Shegog's Easter sermon in the novel's fourth section, commonly named after the Compsons' servant Dilsey, through whom the section is focalized. Old, tired, but still the mainstay of the Compson household, Dilsey has witnessed the decline of the Compsons. Her loyalty and integrity stand in sharp contrast to Mr. and Mrs. Compson's malice and greed. In this last chapter, Dilsey takes Benjy with her to church on Easter Sunday, disregarding the color bar, and hoping for some "unburdening" of her worries. In the rhetoric of Rev. Shegog's mesmerizing sermon, Faulkner brings together trauma, testimony, violence, and ethics. Shegog's passionate words reconstitute the novel's secular apocalypticism of the ending of the house of Compson ("de generations passed away" . . . "I sees de darkness en de death everlastin upon de generations") into the religious apocalypticism of the Day of Judgment: "I sees de doom crack en hears de golden horns shoutin down de glory, en de arisen dead whut got de blood en de ricklickshun fo de Lamb!" (262, 263). In its theological certainty of salvation, the sermon's ending presents a cathartic moment to the congregation, who then leave to celebrate Easter, but it has no such "unburdening" effect on Dilsey, who is too painfully certain of the ending of the Compsons and of the life and culture that the family represents: "I've seed de first en de last . . . I seed the beginnin, and now I sees de endin" (264).

Symbolizing the ending of an era, the memorial of the Confederate Soldier on the square in Jefferson is the central image of the novel's closing episode, drawing into the narrative the traumatic memories of the Civil War and its aftermath of defeat and submission, reconstruction and occupation. Dominated by Benjy's meaningless bellowing, as the Shakespearian sound and the fury that signify nothing, the last pages of the novel are grotesquely disturbing, holding out no hope for a better future for a South that remains shackled to its past identity, "each in its ordered place" (284). Narrating the story of "remnants of a decaying civilization, a family in decline . . . near to disintegration and ultimate

[12] Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma," *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 8–10.

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extinction,"[13] this novel best exemplifies what Faulkner's first biographer, Joseph Blotner, describes as Faulkner's world: it "reaches backward in time to the origins of Southern culture and forward to the horrid prophecies of its extinction."[14]

In the later short story cycle *The Unvanquished* (1938), Faulkner reconfigures the theme of Southern apocalyptic trauma, modulating to a different tonality toward the end of the book, one in which regeneration and renewal are envisaged.[15] At the end of the book, young Bayard Sartoris, raised to be a typical Southern gentleman, breaks with the traditional vendetta code despite strong social pressure. By discontinuing the cycle of retributive killing, and by also facing death courageously, Bayard initiates a new, life-affirming social code while remaining true to the paramount notions of Southern honor and courage. Unlike *The Sound and the Fury*, then, *The Unvanquished* expresses a sense of hope and optimism, suggesting that the traumas of past and future ills may be remedied through a new ethical perspective, transmissible and capable of transforming the future. If it can be argued that *The Sound and the Fury* fictionally represents early trauma theory's notions of passive victimization and crippling melancholia, then *The Unvanquished* is aligned with the more recent model of literary trauma theory, which includes the language of reparative and therapeutic actions, resilience and flexibility. This new emphasis on strengthening and invigorating elements, even in the context of apocalyptic trauma, is a striking feature of central works in contemporary Chicana literature.

* * *

Chicano/a history, like the history of Faulkner's South, is one of conquest and the ensuing fears of the inevitable disappearance of a unique cultural identity. Following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, at the end of the Mexican–American War, Mexican inhabitants of the borderlands acquired American citizenship at the cost of their traditional culture and values, a process of loss and marginalization that intensified under the rise of industrialized, consumer American society in the twentieth century. Mexican-American culture became "increasingly devalued, marginalized" and its future "distorted and disfigured."[16] The threat of the annihilation of Chicano/a cultural

[13] Irene Visser, *Compassion in Faulkner's Fiction* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen University Press, 1996), 240.
[14] Joseph Blotner, *William Faulkner: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1974), 1304.
[15] William Faulkner, *The Unvanquished* (1938; New York: Penguin, 1982).
[16] Ramón Saldívar, *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 23.

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traditions, language, and identity, with no prospect of its reversal, induced apocalyptic trauma and left its mark on much of Chicano/a literature. It is movingly expressed in Jimmy Santiago Baca's oft-anthologized poem "So Mexicans Are Taking Jobs from Americans" (1979), whose central lines are "The rifles I hear sound in the night / are white farmers shooting blacks and browns / whose ribs I see jutting out / and starving children." The children, symbolic of the future, have no prospects of a livable future: "The children are dead already. We are killing them, / that is what America should be saying; . . . / We aren't giving the children a chance to live."[17] The poem addresses the traumatogenic nature of ongoing, chronic oppression and interethnic violence, topics that have long dominated Chicano/a literature.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the civil rights and women's movements became catalysts for the growing sociohistorical and political activism of the Chicano/a movement. A new Chicano/a literature emerged: a protest literature with a strong feminist center. Among the pioneering writers in that newly ascendant Chicana literature were Gloria Anzaldúa and Ana Castillo. Their essays, poetry, and novels are testimony to a long history of dislocation, discrimination, and deprivation of civil rights, but they also pose a new valuation and, indeed, celebration of feminine bicultural identity. A landmark publication is Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). Combining memoir, poetry, and essay, the book presents the borderlands between the United States and Mexico as a geographical as well as a metaphorical site of migrant, gendered, and bicultural identity. In this troubled space of in-betweenness, Anzaldúa's "borderland syndrome" marks a condition of shame, low self-esteem, and mourning – all elements of the traumatic worldview inherent in her term *una herida abierta*, an open wound. A much-cited poem from *Borderlands/La Frontera* opens with the following lines:

> To live in the Borderlands means you
> Are neither *hispana india negra española*
> *Ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata*, half-breed
> Caught in the crossfire between camps
> While carrying all five races on your back
> Not knowing which side to turn to, run from . . .[18]

[17] Jimmy Santiago Baca, "So Mexicans Are Taking Jobs from Americans," *New Worlds of Literature: Writings from America's Many Cultures*, ed. Jerome Beaty and J. Paul Hunter (New York: Norton, 1994), 774–775.

[18] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 194.

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The sense of hopelessness and of threatened existence of the borderland dweller depicted in these lines, which is similar to the trauma expressed in Baca's poem, is a prominent theme in Chicano/a writing of the twentieth century. However, while Anzaldúa exposes American history as one of injustice toward minorities, she also expresses hope for a future of Chicana empowerment: "Here we are weaponless without arms, with only our magic. Let's try it our way, the mestiza way, the Chicana way, the woman way" (88). Anzaldúa's work demonstrates a way in which the apocalyptic trauma of the impending loss of cultural identity, language, and values may be transfigured and translated into social activism, in a movement toward redress and regeneration.

The notion that successful navigation of traumatic harm can prompt psychological and spiritual growth has since the late 1990s given rise to the term *post-traumatic growth*. In contemporary Chicana literature, post-traumatic growth is a central concept, dramatized as a particularly strong motivating and connective force in people's lives. It is a central notion in the writings of Ana Castillo. Like Anzaldúa, Castillo has consistently spoken out in interviews, essays, poems, and novels against racism, imperialist capitalism, and economic exploitation. She, too, gives voice to the profound apocalyptic trauma of cultural erosion, alienation, and fears of annihilation, but, like Anzaldúa, she also celebrates Chicana resilience and solidarity. In Castillo's novel *So Far from God* (1993), which tells the story of Sofia and her four daughters, the apocalyptic trauma of the destruction of Mexican-American culture and traditions is a central aspect, symbolized by the deaths of all four daughters – through war, sexual assault, chemical poisoning, and AIDS. These deaths expose the inherent violence, racism, exploitation, and injustice of mainstream American culture, a culture that destroys even those who, like Sofia's daughter Fe, strive to become fully Americanized. While the American myth of successful assimilation is severely critiqued in this novel, Castillo posits an alternative or opposite ideal by foregrounding the rejuvenating power of Chicano/a community effort. In a crucial episode of the novel, the community's Good Friday procession connects mourning and political activism: in the religious procession, the people sing protest songs and carry photos of loved ones, "dead of toxic exposure," like "scapulars."[19] The procession constitutes a combination of religious and secular apocalypticism that is reminiscent of Shegog's invigorating sermon in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. Stein regards such combinations as

[19] Ana Castillo, *So Far from God* (New York: Norton, 1993), 242.

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"apocalyptic expressions of a positive nature,"[20] and while in Faulkner's novel such a positive dimension is beyond Dilsey's reach, in Castillo's novel the people's procession is undoubtedly a positive force. The scene enacts what trauma theorist Shoshana Felman describes as bearing witness, an act of testimony that combines the political and the ethical: "the political dimension of oppression and the ethical dimension of resistance" to that oppression.[21] This resistance, crucially, is nonviolent, and as such it is a defining feature of Anzaldúa and Castillo's writings. They expand the language of trauma to include the curative effects of communal rituals and political activism, in this way demonstrating what Judith Butler sees as the transformative effects of a politics of mourning that takes a stance and unites instead of separates. As Butler tentatively suggests, such politics of mourning might even lead to a "normative reorientation for politics."[22]

Trauma, whether experienced as the aftermath of a precursory event or as fears of impending catastrophe, impacts memory through mourning: past traumas impose themselves on thinking in the present time, as part of individual as well as collective experiences, but also manifest as fears of future threats and envisioned violence. Mourning, thus, is integral to the traumatic impact of apocalyptic thinking. In her article "Violence, Mourning, Politics" (2008) Butler explains that she has reconsidered her earlier Freudian orientation toward mourning as stasis, weakness, and subjugation, and now instead proposes the transformative and curative aspects of mourning. This new politics of mourning – which I have argued is central to the works of Anzaldúa and Castillo, and which encapsulates post-traumatic growth – takes us beyond the memory of past hurt and acquires prescriptive significance, calling for action, collectivity, and collaboration to redress injustice and ongoing inequality.

While clearly different from early trauma theory, these new conceptualizations of the trauma process are not incompatible with Caruth's more recent theorization. In *Literature in the Ashes of History* (2013), she subscribes to the new language of trauma, postulating that trauma is bound up with an "imperative to live."[23] Literary trauma theory today, then, is

[20] Stein, "American Millennial Visions," 209.

[21] Shoshana Felman, "Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching," *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, ed. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992), 1–56; 12.

[22] Judith Butler, "Violence, Mourning, Politics," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 4.1 (2003): 17.

[23] Cathy Caruth, *Literature in the Ashes of History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), xi.

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significantly different from early trauma theory by the inclusion of the notion that trauma is a bearing witness not merely by stasis and melancholia but by creatively envisioning ways toward a new future. Contemporary trauma theory is poised for further broadening by the inclusion of apocalyptic trauma. This trauma, and its attending emotions, is a defining characteristic of eco-poetry.

* * *

In eco-poetry, a genre in American literature that came to prominence in the 1990s, apocalyptic trauma takes on a global dimension: eco-poetry imaginatively gives shape and meaning to profound anxieties caused by the current worldwide ecosystem degradation. The community that is addressed in American eco-poetry encompasses all of humanity and international politics because what is at risk is all life on the planet. Extinction of species, increasing amounts of toxic chemical waste, the rise of the sea levels, and extreme atmospheric conditions are all factors contributing to an environmental crisis that is current, global, and, unless averted, catastrophic to all life.

Although it was not until the 1990s that eco-poetry became a force majeure, themes relevant to environmental apocalypticism have been longstanding in American poetry. In Robert Lowell's "Fall 1961," for instance, the Cuban Missile Crisis underlies its ominous metaphor of time running out like a clock (or time bomb) whose ticking brings the world closer to nuclear war and thus annihilation:

> Back and forth, back and forth
> goes the tock, tock, tock
> of the orange, bland, ambassadorial
> face of the moon
> on the grandfather clock.
> All autumn, the chafe and jar of nuclear war;
> we have talked our extinction to death.
> . . .
> our end drifts nearer
> the moon lifts
> radiant with terror.[24]

The work of Robinson Jeffers is prominent in twentieth-century environmentalist poetry. Jeffers expresses fears of nature's ending in an inevitable

[24] Robert Lowell, "Fall 1961," *For the Union Dead* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964), 11–12. The Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 was the culmination of a period of extreme tension between the Soviet Union and the United States.

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disaster and the resultant blotting out of human life in well-known poems such as "Shine, Perishing Republic" and "The Purse-Seine." In the latter poem, the metaphor of a seine-net conveys the notion that we have neglected the natural world so that now "there is no escape . . . the circle is closed, and the net / Is being hauled in." The catastrophe appears inevitable, and the poem ends on a tone of resignation that echoes the despair of apocalyptic trauma: "There is no reason for amazement: surely one always knew that cultures / decay, and life's end is death."[25] This elegiac tone, expressive of mourning and of the defining recognition in eco-poetry that "nature has been deeply and irreversibly wounded," also marks the environmentalist poetry of W. S. Merwin, one of America's foremost poets.[26] His poem "The Asians Dying" expresses the warning that the exploitation of the natural world will inevitably impact human life with dire consequences:

> The nights disappear like bruises but nothing is healed
> The dead go away like bruises
> The blood vanishes into the poisoned farmlands
> Pain the horizon
> Remains
> Overhead the seasons rock
> They are paper bells
> Calling to nothing living.

Equally disturbing in its apocalyptic vision is Merwin's poem "For a Coming Extinction," which invites us to consider the near extinction of whales, leaving no doubt that what that dark disaster will bring is "the future / Dead / and ours."[27]

While concerns about the environment have been present in American poetry since its beginnings, eco-poetry, defined by its concerns with contemporary ecological threats, first became a recognized subgenre in American poetry in the 1960s. A strong inspirational factor was Rachel Carson's landmark publication *Silent Spring* (1962), an emotionally charged evocation of a world destroyed through pesticides, captured in her apocalyptic vision of a springtime without birdsong. Its publication raised public awareness of ecological issues and eventually led to legislation regarding the use of pesticides in agriculture. *Silent Spring* made effective

[25] Robinson Jeffers, *The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers* (New York: Random House, 1937), 589.
[26] Frederick Buell, *From Apocalypse to Way of Life: Environmental Crisis in the American Century* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 265.
[27] W. S. Merwin, *The Second Four Books of Poems: The Moving Target, The Lice, The Carrier of Ladders, Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon, 1993), 118, 123.

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use of apocalyptic rhetoric. As eco-critic Greg Garrard observes, Carson's warning "is presented in terms of absolute authority . . . [T]he consequences of failure to heed the warning are catastrophic."[28] In the new millennium, ever-evolving fears of species extinction and global warming have provided further stimuli to apocalyptic thinking in American poetry. Frederick Buell speaks of "eco-apocalypse" in this regard, emphasizing that Rachel Carson's "small-town American 'silent spring' has become the much more diverse and comprehensive set of problems currently known, ominously, as the global environmental crisis."[29]

In his 2010 poetry collection *To See the Earth Before the End of the World*, Ed Roberson, one of today's eminent eco-poets, depicts the dangers that threaten not only the United States but the entire world. The book opens with the eponymous poem's apocalyptic vision:

> People are grabbing at the chance to see
> the earth before the end of the world,
> the world's death piece by piece each longer than we.

The traumatic confrontation with the visible evidence of global annihilation is made concrete in the threatening imagery of the melting glaciers, the result of global warming with inevitably harmful effects for nations worldwide. Roberson's metaphor of "hunting the glacier" emphasizes the shrinking of the glaciers: "watched ice was speed made invisible, / now – it's days, and a few feet further away." The poem's persona draws a parallel with bear hunting to contemplate the contemporary situation in which humans are a threat to the glaciers, just as human hunters were previously a threat to bears. However, while once humans and bears were equally and mutually threatening, each chasing the other – "all that once chased us and we / chased to a balance chasing back, tooth for spear, / knife for claw" – such a balance is now overturned by unilateral human acts of destruction, captured in the image of our "chasing the glacier," with a catastrophic result: "our lives are taken by / taking them out."[30] Roberson, who researched environmental damage when he worked in Alaska, here gives poetic expression to personal and collective apocalyptic fears, prompting our emotional and cognitive realization of the ever-increasing threat of an irreversible natural catastrophe.

[28] Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 103.
[29] Buell, *From Apocalypse to Way of Life*, ix.
[30] Ed Roberson, *To See the Earth Before the End of the World* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 3.

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Eco-poetry mediates an apocalyptic trauma that increasingly finds resonance throughout American literature and culture, but which so far has not been included in trauma theory, despite the fact that in recent years critics such as Michael Rothberg have called for the inclusion of an eco-critical perspective. Employing Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence," Rothberg posits that the disastrous repercussions of human-induced climate change are a slow violence that, although not theorized in Caruth's trauma theory, is certainly traumatic.[31] It seems evident, I would argue, that the language of trauma will become more astute and more socially relevant by including eco-critical concerns. The literary expressions of apocalyptic trauma that I have discussed in this chapter are characterized by calls for communal bonding and political change to aid redress and rejuvenation. In Faulkner's work, representative of the literature of the American South, and in Chicana literature, apocalyptic trauma is characterized by the cultural memory of past wounding (in histories of defeat), mourning (of cultural erosion), and deep-seated fears of further loss of identifying traditions, values, and social cohesion. Ecological activism, as a motor of innovation and change, is a new but distinct sound in American apocalypticism, expressing personal and communal fears as well as the urgent need to reverse ecological damage. While, in the well-known words of W. H. Auden, "poetry makes nothing happen," eco-poetry, I would claim, makes much matter in raising our awareness of the vulnerability and the precarious natural balance of the world's ecology. While the precise nature and impact of trauma cannot be fully grasped, as trauma theory states, evocations of traumatic and apocalyptic experiences in American literature are vitally important in giving shape to culturally relevant fears, often calling for public and political action, and by envisaging resilience, redress, and renewal as perspectives toward a healthy and livable future world.

[31] Michael Rothberg, "Preface: Beyond Tancred and Clorinda—Trauma Studies for Implicated Subjects," *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, ed. Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant, and Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2014), xv.

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