fact it is an idea less than 170 years old, popularized barely more than a century ago by a one-time St. Louis jailbird.

THE BOMB WILL BRING US TOGETHER

During our own Apocalyptic Decade, all Americans over the age of thirty have shared, deep in the unspoken recesses of our collective unconscious, the terrifying understanding that the world could end at any moment in a nuclear firestorm. Even before most of us had been disabused of our belief in Santa Claus, those of us over a certain age had learned—whether through duck-and-cover drills in the 1950s or classroom discussions of the made-for-TV movie *The Day After* in the 1980s—that above our heads hung a nuclear sword of Damocles far beyond all reasoning or control. This nuclear fear is what has distinguished the apocalyptic imagination in the modern era from all of history, pushing the apocalypse from the realm of religion into the secular mainstream—a visceral shadow that has lingered at the edges of the modern imagination. It is not incidental that the postapocalyptic world envisioned in Cormac McCarthy's 2006 Pulitzer Prize–winning novel *The Road* is easily identifiable, though never explicitly confirmed, as a world beset by nuclear winter, with ashen-gray snow falling continuously from a sky so darkened by soot that no photosynthesis—no life—can exist beneath it. The gray world depicted in *The Road* has always been anticipated in the twilight of the modern era. To a degree that the generations who passed before 1945 could never understand, the nuclear age has made our expectation of apocalypse more visceral and universal than ever before.

Yet if Christian fundamentalists were able to weave the arrival

of the nuclear age into their visions of apocalypse, the threat of nuclear annihilation presented those Americans who had long since dismissed the apocalypse as a primitive superstition—who had, like Charles Darwin, placed their faith in human or evolutionary progress, and "look[ed] with some confidence to a secure future of great length"[31]—with a deeper, more existential crisis. The dream of progress—of science, reason, and industry providing humanity with the means toward achieving a more perfect union on earth—exploded with the detonation of the first atomic bomb near Alamogordo, New Mexico. That dream of progress, which had been born in reaction to the apocalypse, was now forced to confront the apocalypse.

Of course, the belief in progress as an unadulterated good had already, decades earlier, collided with the realities of the twentieth century. Prior to 1914, as cultural historian Paul Fussell and others have argued, the belief in material and technological progress served as a substitute for religious belief in the secular mind;[32] the slaughter in the trenches during World War I, however, revealed the great chasm of spiritual emptiness that had widened beneath humanity as we marched so optimistically toward the future. If material and scientific progress could produce such horrors—and those horrors would increase as the twentieth century progressed—then what was the meaning of history, or of life itself? One could argue that the final answer rationalism would arrive at, now that god and myth had been displaced from creation (by Darwinism) and from history (by secular progress), was given to us by the existentialists: nothing. Life and history meant nothing.[33]

Thus, a sense of meaninglessness and cynicism had already crept into the American psyche between the world wars—"I'm pretty cynical about everything," Daisy declares in *The Great*

Gatsby, "I think everything's terrible anyhow. Everybody thinks so—the most advanced people."[34]—and even before the bomb had gone off, that sense of meaninglessness had begun to pervade and pervert the secular view of history. With neither a belief in progress nor a belief in an eschatological goal for history, the secular worldview by the early twentieth century raised the question: What was the point of it all?

That question was primarily an intellectual countercurrent, a literary theme confined to the intelligentsia and expatriate writers prior to 1945. But the atom bomb brought existential angst to the masses. Progress had emerged as an alternative to the apocalypse as a means of providing purpose to history; now, progress itself had led directly to an apocalypse on a scale that was previously unimaginable. The great detour away from the apocalyptic view of history through the secular faith in progress, which had begun with the rationalist thinkers after the Reformation and continued through the political revolutions of the eighteenth century and the industrial triumphs of the nineteenth century, had come to an end with the scientific achievements of the twentieth century. The bright promises of modernity and Darwin had been hollow. Science, which at the beginning of the Age of Enlightenment had promised to dispel the ghosts and demons of the medieval world, has instead become a propellant of the apocalyptic imagination. Man may have replaced God as the conductor of history in the secular mind, but the value and meaning of what he is conducting is, here at the beginning of the twenty-first century, very much in doubt.

The seeds of that doubt in progress were planted long before the atomic bomb, of course, and even before the horrors of the First World War. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Romanticism had arisen as a form of literary and intellectual revolt against the

excesses of reason and the industrialization of the natural and human world. A sense that something spiritually important to humankind was being lost in the rush toward a secular golden future preoccupied the Victorian and Romantic poets in England. Matthew Arnold wrote mournfully of the "retreating sea of faith";[35] Tennyson feared "the secular abyss to come";[36] Thomas Hardy, in "God's Funeral," pondered "our myth's oblivion" and wondered "who or what shall fill his place?"[37] In America, the Transcendentalists claimed as the landscape of their own the vast territory between the church and the factory, rhapsodizing about nature while railing against both organized religion and the cost exacted by industry on the human soul. Who can forget Thoreau walking along the railroad tracks (to bring his laundry to be washed by his mother, as it turns out), imagining the railroad ties beneath the track as individual human lives, laid down for the expedience of progress? "Each one is a man, an Irishman, or a Yankee man. The rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them. . . . And every few years a new lot is laid down and run over; so that, if some have the pleasure of riding on a rail, others have the misfortune to be ridden upon."[38]

The momentum of science would continue to propel us toward considerations of the end. In the twentieth century, science unveiled with startling rapidity new theories to describe the universe—from entropy to the big bang to mapping the great extinctions of past ages of life on earth—that consistently undermined the Enlightenment belief in a history progressing toward a more perfect state, with man as the conductor of the grand symphony. Consider, for example, the discovery in the late 1970s of the Chicxulub Crater in the Yucatán Peninsula, and the now commonly accepted understanding that a giant meteor strike some

xty-five million years ago caused the extinction of 90 percent of fe on earth and the end of the Jurassic period.[39] Consider, too, ıat our understanding that such things as dinosaurs had ever even xisted is barely more than a century and a half old. It was only round the time that Darwin was beginning to write *On the Origin f Species* that humanity first began to articulate the theory that the dragon bones" that had been found throughout human history ere in fact the fossilized remnants of dinosaurs and other creaıres that lived millions of years ago. It took the rise of geology as science, guided by the principle of uniformity, and the subseuent study of the fossil record—combined with the discovery of adiation in 1896, which later would allow scientists to begin accuately dating the ages of rocks and geologic formations—for umanity to formulate our present understanding that the earth's istory can be divided into different eras and epochs, and that ıose eras and epochs had been punctuated by mass-extinction vents. This understanding that the history of the earth has been ıarked by differing epochs of life—each of which were radically ifferent from our present earth, and all of which ended rather bruptly and inconveniently for the dominant species of each ra—is commonplace to us now; yet the notion would have eemed fantastical to even the most enlightened thinker just two undred years ago. So, too, would our scientific understanding ıat all species—including humans—will eventually go extinct ave sounded depressingly pessimistic and unthinkable. Yet this nderstanding that the history of the earth has been marked by ıass-extinction events has been an important contributor to the ecular apocalyptic impulse. Can humankind truly, in the space of orty years, or even one hundred and fifty, process what it means ıat the world has been radically different before and has changed

Anthropocene

drastically without warning or purpose? The geologic discoveries of the past century have upended our cosmology as radically as Copernicus's placement of the sun—rather than the earth—at the center of the solar system; the metaphysical implications of both discoveries have yet to be synthesized in our cosmology.

Indeed, rather than killing off apocalyptic beliefs with reason, the advances of science and technology have exacerbated apocalyptic anxiety by giving birth to more scenarios that could produce the end times, from meteor strikes and epidemic disease to global warming.[40] Here, at last, is the modern apocalypse, the secular apocalypse, an anticipation of the end that touches believer and nonbeliever alike. For many, the arrival of the world wars and then the atomic bomb—and, now, global warming, overpopulation, and resource depletion—has permanently shattered humanity's faith in secular and scientific progress as a substitute for religious and mythical meaning.

Or, put another way, the twenty-first century has arrived.

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