

Apocalyptic as a New Mental Paradigm of the Middle Ages

László Hubbes

5.1 Introduction

I wish to premise that I am no medievalist. My principal research field is apocalyptic studies. Some twenty years ago I started investigating apocalyptic art to demonstrate the terminological necessity of apocalyptic as a “new” distinct category for classical aesthetics. After having written two theses while at the university, one focusing on the historical aspects and one on symbolism, for my doctoral studies I turned to the art-historical and generic analyses proper, revealing at the same time the specific nature of apocalyptic catharsis.¹ Later investigations led me from early Christian and contemporary adaptations of apocalyptic iconography, through on-line media representations, to rituals and characteristics of apocalypticism.² This present chapter is meant to be a preliminary study, probing the field for a larger project of a future investigation on the nature of the apocalyptic paradigm.³ Although not specialized in medieval studies, I still feel somewhat accustomed to the Middle Ages due to my inquiries in the artistic-, literary- and cultural history of apocalyptic imagination of those centuries spanning roughly the fifth-century fall of Rome and the fifteenth-century fall of Byzantium. At the same time, being acquainted with not only the historical but also with other (archetypal, metaphysical, psychological, socio-political, rhetorical) approaches of apocalyptic and apocalypticism, I will try in this essay to compare and contrast some of the major views to form a comprehensive synthesis that might help provide a better understanding of apocalyptic beliefs and behavior.

The aim of this essay will be an experimental synthesis, in which I argue that apocalyptic, beyond being a scriptural genre and a religious social function, is

1 Hubbes (2008) [*Visions under the Spell of Things Last. Apocalypse from the Religious Literary Genre to a Way of Expression of Art*] – adaptation of my doctoral thesis, completed with other essays written in this same topic.

2 Hubbes (2010a); or Hubbes (2011, 55–78).

3 In the sense Frank Kermode has used it in his milestone book *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (London: 1966).

primarily a distinct basic mindset, a fundamental approach and adjustment to reality describable as a mental paradigm. Our focus turns to the question of whether and how this *apocalyptic paradigm* came to determine an entire culture, namely the Christian West, and why the Middle Ages might be considered as the ripening and consolidation of this mentality. My hypothesis proposed here is that apocalyptic thought would be a generalized constituent or determinant (that is: paradigmatic) mentality for the European civilization only from the Middle Ages. I base this presumption on quantitative as well as qualitative aspects of phenomena pertaining to various forms of apocalypticism – which in Antiquity are in their incipient phase and occur sporadically, on the fringes of societies and empires, whereas (after a relatively calm period) the medieval centuries witness a gradual rallying and spreading of end-times awaiting spirituality, leading to moments when apocalypse(s) directly formed history in East and West alike.

There should be nothing extraordinary in such a development for medieval Europe and the Near East, given the fact that these Jewish and Christian cultures grew out of a worldview with strong apocalyptic roots, to which Islam later added a new fervor. Still, the question remains: why? I would not boast as much to propose a brand new explanation; moreover, this is not the aim of this essay. There are shelf-loads of excellent monographs, commentaries and analyses concerning the evolution of the apocalypse genre, of doom-prophecies and millenarian movements, of inquiring the social and historical causes of eschatological radicalism and messianic upheavals, of documenting and disputing theological apocalyptic heresies and doomsday-calculations, of debating over the terrors versus the calm *de l'an mil*. However, the great majority of this vast literature accumulated mostly in the second half of the past century rarely ventures beyond the limits of one or another discipline. From another aspect, when apocalyptic is dealt with not in an historical context but rather as a contemporary phenomenon via psychological, sociological, or anthropological approaches, the testimonies of the past are often overlooked.

A comprehensive, synthetic evaluation, grasping all available approaches in order to elucidate the nature of apocalyptic in its possible manifestations would be highly opportune. This nature of apocalyptic might be most simply described as a hypothetical paradigmatic thinking that determines world views, attitudes, and behaviors with large scale historical and social consequences. For such a comprehensive investigation it is necessary, on the one hand, to discuss a more general revision of the basic terms related to apocalyptic in both synchronic and diachronic aspects, as well as discussion of the notion itself in opposition to other mindsets; while on the other hand – for the closer purposes of this Companion focusing on medieval apocalyptic – an interpretation-reinterpretation of the literature concerning premodern apocalyptic and religiosity in light of