The Shape of the End: Zombies and the End Times

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Introduction

On the morning after zombies have begun swarming London, Shaun, the protagonist of *Shaun of the Dead* (2004; hereafter *SOTD*) walks to his local shop. His trip exactly replicates his previous pre-apocalyptic visit, but now Shaun's oblivious attitude ensures that he misses every ominous sign of catastrophe. Aimlessly shuffling through his life, Shaun (Simon Pegg) cannot read the writing on the wall, much less the bloody handprint on the freezer case. The pairing of Shaun's two visits to the shop packs a comic punch because even if Shaun doesn't recognize the signs, we do. We have the interpretive framework that he lacks.

Apocalyptic narrative relies on such interpretive framing. The term 'apocalypse' derives from the Greek, ἀποκάλυψις, meaning to uncover or to reveal. In its ancient and medieval forms, the important and influential tradition of Christian apocalyptic narrative draws on Christian eschatology—a faith in the redemptive return of Christ. It also relies on an authoritative voice to reveal the meaning of the signs of this return. In *SOTD*, the protagonist lacks any authority, interpretive or otherwise, and he fails to encounter anyone who can guide him. Shaun lacks both knowledge and information because he lacks the attention span to absorb even a single message on television.[1]

In *SOTD*, the viewers are the interpreters, would-be prophets who can only watch (with amusement). We viewers are, however, implicated in the film's ending, which is

neither nihilistic nor redemptive, but rather reflects the cyclical nature of modern consumption: zombies are tamed for use in the very entertainment industry that has produced *SOTD*. The film thus manipulates two of apocalyptic narrative's essential elements-- voicing and ending-- for comic effect.

In this essay, I focus on these two axes of Christian apocalyptic narrative, voicing and ending, to assess how the contemporary zombie apocalypse narrative adopts and adapts these elements of earlier Christian apocalyptic forms.[2] George Romero's 1968 *Night of the Living Dead* [hereafter *NLD*] ushered in the modern zombie narrative by subverting both the authoritative voice and the redemptive ending of traditional Christian apocalypse. Since *NLD*, I will argue, works such as Max Brook's *World War Z* (2006) and Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead* comics (2003-19) experiment with the formal elements of voicing and ending in ways that initially seem to subvert, but that ultimately reaffirm the redemptive narrative arc of their Christian apocalyptic predecessors. Other works, such as Max Braillier's, *Can You Survive the Zombie Apocalypse*? (2011), I will suggest, stretch the limits of voicing and telos so far that form overshadows meaning.

However, one judges the success of their literary artistry, these creative experiments with voice and ending reflect the conditions of modern life. We can see in them a shift from apocalypse narratives that herald redemption to those that warn of extinction, with reanimation replacing resurrection, a development that began with *NLD*.[3] I will argue that Colson Whitehead's innovations with voice and ending in *Zone One* (2011) realize the radical potential of *NLD*'s subversion of the narrative elements of voice and ending. Whitehead's novel, like Romero's film, shapes voicing and ending to engage questions of racism and identity. His novel addresses injustice in a way that

adapts to modern times a political function of the apocalypse that reaches back to the Book of Revelation.[4]

To establish the importance of voice and ending in early apocalyptic forms, I begin with a discussion of a thirteenth-century author, Matthew Paris. Writing 750 years before and about twenty miles away from SOTD's fictional exploits, Paris a kind of anti-Shaun. A monk at the renowned abbey of St. Albans, Paris created his works of history as part of a community of purpose. He wrote for the moral instruction of this community and of Christendom more broadly. Paris, along with many of his contemporaries, believed that the End Times were imminent and he recorded and interpreted events and portents from England and beyond that confirmed this belief.

I choose Matthew Paris as our guide to Christian apocalyptic because his *Chronica Majora* has a global ambition that rivals recent works like *World War* Z, and this ambition is realized through a singular and distinctive authorial voice. As historian Björn Weiler, a leading expert on Paris' work, notes, it 'is the always audible voice of the author, Paris' inability or unwillingness to restrain his desire to pass comment, which has both irritated many of his modern readers, and which has made his writings enjoyable and entertaining' (Weiler 2009: 272).

Matthew Paris and the *Chronica Majora*

Matthew Paris's monumental *Chronica,* which reaches nearly one million words in length, uses the annal form to record events from Creation until 1259.[5] Despite this linear year-by-year structure, however, the *Chronica* has a great deal of temporal complexity.

Paris' recording of events in a world 'stranded in the middle' always looks back to Christian beginnings and forward to Christian ends (in Wheeler 2013: 58).[6]

Guided by this firm sense of origin and end, Matthew sought out signs to see how long the middle of things would last. Along with contemporaries such as Frederick II and Pope Gregory IX, Paris viewed the 1238 Mongol advance on Europe as a clear, terrifying sign of the End Times (Lewis 1987: 103). Paris depicts the Mongols as cannibalistic hordes and links them to the hostile nations of Gog and Magog prophesied in Revelation 20 (Blurton 84–6).

Paris augments this sense of apocalyptic dread by linking the Mongols with the Jews, who are also frequently demonized in the *Chronica*. In an entry for 1241, Paris describes an alleged Mongol-Jewish plot to overthrow Christendom using weapons smuggled in wine casks.[7] The alleged conspiracy conjoins fear of the Mongol incursions with the long-standing fantasy that the Jews pose an existential threat to Christians and Christendom. The supposed plot also invokes Christian prophecy that includes a final conversion of the Jews in the End Times. Read alongside Paris' chilling accounts of ritual murder accusation, and in the context of a tradition that links Gog and Magog to the lost tribes of Israel, the alleged Jewish-Mongol plot generates a sense of terror and dread on a scale that we will see again in works like *World War Z*.[8] That this dread is augmented by deploying a demonized Other also presages how questions of race run through modern works of horror.

Heather Blurton convincingly argues that Paris uses the Mongols to critique dissension and threat from within Christendom (85). Paris thereby wields the sudden appearance of a deadly, overwhelming cannibalistic horde as a means of self-critique.

This sounds eerily reminiscent of ways that modern zombie apocalypse narratives critique modern institutions.[9] Paris' account, is, however, firmly situated within a Christian structure of fear and hope based on prophecy. Paris strikingly combines an image of the Nativity with a verse anticipating the arrival of the Antichrist in 1250.[10] For Paris, the beginning ordains the end. The tribulations that precede this end are indeed to be feared, but they have both purpose and longed-for resolution.

Despite the fundamentally Christian shaping of this work, Suzanne Lewis, another major interpreter of Matthew Paris, has encouraged us to approach the *Chronica* as we might approach a 'Victorian novel', a work of 'narrative complexity and high moral drama' (Lewis 1987: 7). As with the narrators of the Victorian classics, Paris becomes a palpable presence throughout the *Chronica*; the reader never wanders without a guide. Paris' voice is not merely authoritative, but simultaneously omnipresent and intimate. Even as we read accounts written in the third person, we are continually aware of Paris as author, both through his occasional shifts to first person and through the illustrations he created with his own hand.[11]

Paris' narrative shifts between third and first person are nowhere so striking than in an entry for 1250, a year that he believed might usher in a new age.[12] Included in this section is a prophetic poem that links the Nativity to the End Times and two more verses that, referring to Paris in the third person, encourage him to put down his pen and await his final rest. Paris embeds these verses within descriptions of unnatural recent storms, fires, and signs in locations such as Norwich and Chiltern.

When the End did not arrive in 1250, Paris did not lose faith, but rather experienced a 'disconfirmation' of his predictions (Kermode 2000 [1966]: 9). He

continued to look for signs of the coming Judgment. Nevertheless, it is evident in these verses and commentary how closely voicing and ending can correspond in the apocalyptic mode. We have, in Paris' climactic false alarm, a blending of first-person witness and third person omniscience that is simultaneously sweeping and intimate, encompassing the reader's hoped-for redemption as well as his own.

Paris can create such a voice because his knowledge of prophecy and his certainty in God's promise provide him with meaning and hope, all 'embedded in a sacral landscape and recorded sacred time' (Weiler 2019: 330). Paris knows the path we must follow through this landscape. While the exact time when this earth will transform into a redeemed realm remains unclear, Paris remains unshaken in his faith and in his determination to use it to guide others, not only those in his monastic community, but those in the Christian community understood on a global scale.

Night of the Living Dead

From its opening sequence, *NLD* dismantles the sacral nature of apocalyptic narrative. The film opens not in a sacred or even Gothic landscape, but in a non-descript American cemetery. Barbara (Judith O'Dea) and her brother, Johnny (Russell Streiner) don't ponder the end of the world; they bicker over daylight saving time. Barbara kneels piously at her father's grave, while Johnny, who admits that he no longer regularly attends church, mimics a voice from classic 'creature features'. Pointing to a figure lurching toward them he teases, 'They're coming to get you, Barbara!' (*NLD*, 1968). Johnny, turns out, horribly, to be right. He misrecognizes a monster because neither he,

the lapsed Christian, nor Barbara, the churchgoer, have any guide to help them understand the events unfolding.[13] No prophet emerges to interpret the signs. Even basic information, to return to Gomel's distinction between knowledge and information, is unavailable. Radio and television provide no answers. It is the lack of any framework and the absence of any guide that generates the film's terror.

The Book of Revelation promises redemption in a new heaven and a new earth, a realm without night and the promise of eternal life (Revelation 21: 1; 22: 5). *NLD* is one long night of terror that ends with the senseless killing of the one character, Ben (Duane Jones) who approached the role of protagonist. That Ben is a black man killed by a pack of white men who resemble a slave patrol, or a lynch mob, anchors the film's bleak, non-redemptive ending in the events of the late 1960's. The grainy shots of the film's conclusion, resembling newspaper stills, also are offered up without interpretation. Ben's death is reduced to photographic evidence, but what this evidence means remains unknown.

The hopelessness of this lack of interpretation highlights the film's lack of any narrative guide. Even Richard Matheson's bleak *I am Legend* (1954), one of the inspirations for *NLD*, had a narrator, however flawed. The massive societal shifts depicted are explained in the novel's last line, as its mysterious title becomes its hermeneutic key. *NLD*, in contrast, takes the narrative components of traditional apocalypse and obliterates them. After presenting a story where no one perspective can make sense of events, the film does not conclude, but simply ends.

World War Z* and *The Walking Dead

World War Z and *The Walking Dead* each, at first, appear to take up the mantle of *NLD*'s radical departure from traditional apocalyptic form. Despite novel formal approaches, however, each ultimately embraces traditional elements of voicing and ending in ways that hearken back to works such as the *Chronica*.

Max Brooks models *World War Z* on Studs Terkel's 1984 *'The Good War': An Oral History of World War II*. Brooks explains that he chose Terkel's work as a 'template for describing a global crisis, because I thought an oral history is a great way to bring in so many voices, literally, from all around the world' (in Barone, National Public Radio 2012). The novel's organization as a collection of survivor testimonies, assembled in a retrospective way allows for a slow and multiple unfolding of survivor accounts (Sorenson 2014: 566). The introduction to *World War Z* is presented by a first-person narrator who desires 'to maintain as invisible a presence as possible', he describes the book as 'primarily a book of memories' (Brooks 2006: 3). But while the narrator informs the reader that he will 'reserve judgment, or commentary of any kind', the very retrospective nature of the framing creates a closure that mirrors the traditional redemptive form of Christian apocalyptic (3). The modern zombie narrative, as Roger Luckhurst has explained, is deeply influenced by the Second World War, so this use of Terkel's history has obvious resonance (Luckhurst 2015:109-14). Brook's borrowing from Terkel's oral history about World War II, instead of Terkel's work on the Great Depression or his interviews with American workers, however, has specific impact on narrative voice and on the novel's conclusion. The telos of Christian salvation is replaced with a narrative of American victory (Baldwin 2007).

Brooks attempts to mimic Terkel's authorial purpose and presence by having his unnamed narrator assert, 'This is their book, not mine, and I have tried to maintain as invisible a presence as possible' (2). The framing fiction of *World War Z* as a record of 'the human factor' of the war that goes beyond 'cold, hard data' (1) also mimics Terkel's goal of recording oral history to preserve a record of individual memory. What Brooks doesn't manage to achieve is the rich diversity of voices in *The Good War*, which Terkel creates by virtue of transcribing and editing actual interviews with subjects from around the globe and from a large range of backgrounds and experiences. Despite imagining such a wide cast of characters, the voices of the first-person subjects of the many interviews blur together, failing to realize the full potential of Brooks' novel approach to voicing.

Brooks, imagining a fictional global war in a post 9-11 context, both acknowledges and undermines Terkel's keen awareness that 'good war' is an oxymoron. Terkel acknowledges this paradox in his title, the punctuation of which is explained in a note in the front matter. '[T]he adjective "good" mated to the noun "war" is so incongruous', the note proclaims (front matter). From this note, through the Introduction and the framing and editorial comments in *The Good War*, Terkel maintains a distinctive presence as author that allows him, like Matthew Paris, to frame events through evidence that serves a particular interpretive end.

In lieu of Matthew's eschatological shaping, Terkel's muted authorial voice illustrates how the Second World War marked a loss of innocence that one interviewee believed to reveal that 'the world is unified in pain as well as opportunity' (14). By failing to convey Terkel's skepticism about the perception of World War II as a 'good'

war and, indeed, his belief that war cannot be ‘good’, Brooks inadvertently inherits the redemptive narrative closure of that popular American perception of the historical conflict, which then colors the ending of *World War Z*, framing it in a redemptive way as well.

Brooks’ use of the Second World War as reference point ultimately provides his zombie apocalypse narrative with a closure that does not duplicate, but nevertheless echoes, the redemptive closure of traditional apocalyptic forms. We can see this in the terminology Brooks develops to create his fictional world. From calling humans who want to turn into zombie ‘quislings’ after the infamous Norwegian collaborator to ‘fragmuts’ based on WWII Russian use of dogs to attack tanks, memory of the Second World War imbues the language of *World War Z*. Even the nickname for the Zombie enemy—'Zack’--echoes the slurs of ‘Fritz’ and ‘Jap’.

World War Z’s final lines, which focus on ‘VA day’, an echo of the VE and VJ days of the Second World War, also indicate that the American experience of victory in World War II shapes the novel’s ending. The use of VA day echoes with the idea that the war brought out the best in America and its citizens. The radical nihilism of the zombie narrative introduced by *NLD* is undercut and contained through a redemptive focus on Todd Wainio, a prematurely aged World War Z veteran of the U.S. Army Infantry turned family man, whose remembrance of VA day in ‘Hero City’ is the novel’s last line (92: 341–2). Todd’s journey from soldier to father provides redemptive closure.

A similar type of redemptive closure focused on family is, perhaps surprisingly, echoed in the final pages of Robert Kirkman’s *The Walking Dead* comic series. *The Walking Dead* had promised formal innovation by being the ‘zombie movie that never

ends', exploiting the fact that, as Stacy Abbott points out, the zombie apocalypse is highly suited for seriality as 'it is by its very nature a very slow apocalypse' (Abbott 106, cited in Bishop 2010: 206). *The Walking Dead* seemed to break with traditional apocalyptic voicing. For issue after issue, the series eschewed caption boxes. Readers, alone without a guiding narrative voice, wandered along as disoriented and confused as the character themselves.

In 2019, however, after sixteen years of publication, Kirkman abruptly concluded the series. The most prominent protagonist, Rick Grimes, has been killed not by a zombie, but by an angry denizen of his own community. The final issue depicts Rick memorialized by a statue. Rick's son Carl criticizes the representation for its 'fake' bravado. The page's last panel shows Carl throwing a rueful glance back at the statue of his father, but in the next page, the mood shifts. We see a panel showing Carl's quiet farm and then a loving exchange with his wife that is interrupted by their daughter, Andrea, demanding a bedtime story.

Sitting in a rocking chair with Andrea on his lap, Carl reads her a book about her own grandfather, Rick Grimes. The children's book transforms the previous hundreds of pages into a brief moral lesson that figures Rick as savior. We learn that Andrea has heard this story many times: it has become the narrative for her generation. The final image of the series—a splash page using negative space to focus and isolate the central figures—shows Carl in the rocking chair smiling as they read this story of redemption. The conclusion of hundreds of images and hundreds of pages of this sprawling, bleak narrative is compressed into a single, tranquil, domestic moment. Kirkman finally employs caption boxes to narrate this children's version of the zombie apocalypse. A

narrative that has been marked by its utter lack of any authoritative voice abruptly adopts a simplified moralizing narration.

Robert Kirkman, in a note to readers (Vol .4, back matter) writes of the series' end:

> I've been building to this for years, and it does feel good to end on such a happy note. To know that everything these characters lived through meant something […] That the world is fixed […] and at peace, that in some ways it's even better than before […] that's meaningful. (2019, back matter)

Murphy has argued that ancient apocalyptic is marked by 'hope' and argues that 'In the *Walking Dead*, the zombie apocalypse is rooted, ultimately, in the hope that *humanity* might turn to good … even in the face of evil' (2016: 491). Carl's daughter becomes, as with the figure of the child in the zombie apocalyptic more generally, a symbol of hope.[14] Kirkman, using authorial interjection in ways reminiscent of Matthew Paris' paratexts, ends the series with a redemptive vision of family. *The Walking Dead*, which had early on signalled its debt to *NLD*, ultimately rejects *NLD*'s use of voice and ending to embrace older forms.

Further Experimental Forms

The last decade has seen some zombie apocalyptic narratives stretch the formal elements of voicing and ending to new lengths. Max Brailler constructs *Can You Survive the Zombie Apocalypse*? (2011) like a 'Choose Your Adventure' book, in which the reader

must make a choice that places them on a specific narrative path. The narrative offers forty-nine different possible endings, ranging from rescue to a multitude of types of death. The book opens with 'A Brief Message on the Zombie Apocalypse and You', which tells the reader, 'You're twenty-five years old. You live in a crappy, overpriced studio apartment in Manhattan' (Introduction: x). The zombie apocalypse has begun and 'You have choices to make now—lots of them' (x). While this scenario subverts the narrative telos of Christian apocalyptic, the novel's voicing remains uniform. The reader, addressed in the second person, could be anyone, but seems from textual details to be a heterosexual man. Crucially, the reader assumes the place of the prophet and God, controlling both the narrative and the ending.

The final possible ending makes a meta-reference to the zombie genre itself. It involves an encounter with George Romero, who becomes the real-life commander of the undead hordes. This possibility hearkens back not only to the beginnings of the 'Romero zombie' but also to the earlier *zombi* from Haitian belief and earlier U.S. popular culture works, such as the 1932 film *White Zombie*. In this ending 'You' leave, along with a child, used again as a symbol of survival in zombie narrative. The zombie apocalypse genre becomes self-contained, subverting and subsuming any kind of larger redemptive narrative arc.

Zombie Apocalypse (2000), created by Stephen Jones, is an edited compilation told through multiple voices represented through a variety of media. Reminiscent of the form of Stoker's *Dracula*, *Zombie Apocalypse* includes journal entries, newspaper accounts and transcriptions of voice recordings, as well as email exchanges and bureaucratic memos. The book's two final sections use 'official' voices to subvert a

redemptive ending. The first of these is an Independence Day message from U.S. President James Moreby, who describes the zombie apocalypse as a civil war. This war is clearly over, and the zombies have won, creating what Moreby, himself a zombie, calls 'these newly United States' (Jones 2000: unnumbered). The final section is the text of Elizabeth II's annual Christmas address, in which she asks her fellow zombies:

> But what of our neighbours? What duty do they have? If we, as Christians, love them, should they not, as neighbours, return that love with some gratitude. Perhaps with the gift of a small, relatively juicy child. Or two. We may ourselves be confronted by a bewildering array of difficulties and challenges, but we must never cease to work for a better future for ourselves and for others. (Jones 2000: unnumbered)

This conclusion uses the linkage of Nativity and End Times in Matthew's *Chronica* but deploys them in the service of an *NLD*-esque nihilism, triggering fully the parodic and comic impulses lurking just beneath the surface of that film. By simultaneously evoking and undercutting early apocalyptic formal elements, *Zombie Apocalypse* provides an ending finally subsumed by its own formal innovation.[15]

Zone One

'Fuck it, he thought. You have to learn how to swim sometime. He opened the door and walked into the sea of the dead' (322).

In these final lines of Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011) the voice of the novel's protagonist, called Mark Spitz, merges with the voice of the third person limited narrator, whose perspective is tracked with Mark Spitz's throughout *Zone One*.

The novel's action takes place in New York's Lower Manhattan area over the course of three days. Mark Spitz is part of a team of 'sweepers' assigned to make the zone re-inhabitable. *Zone One* ends with Mark Spitz caught up in a breach of Zone One's tenuous defenses. Whitehead has stated that the novel's ending is 'open to interpretation' and notes that its last sentence was the first that he wrote, before he knew exactly how the work would take shape (*The Atlantic* 2011). This 'open to interpretation' conclusion contrasts sharply with a 'happy' resolution like that of Kirkman's *The Walking Dead*. In creating ambiguity, Whitehead creates a sense of 'narrative closure', but nevertheless subverts the redemptive closure of traditional Christian apocalyptic.[16]

A reading of the novel that focuses on Mark Spitz's death would affirm the nihilism that pervades much modern zombie narrative and echo *NLD*'s demolition of the hope and affirmation of ancient and medieval apocalypse. I would argue, however, that the ambiguity of *Zone One*'s ending and its merging of the voices of the narrator and the protagonist complicates such a reading. Whitehead's complex use of temporality continually imbricates Mark Spitz's past within his present and keeps his future at an ironic, troubled distance. This temporality in *Zone One* differs from the teleological flow of time that drives Matthew Paris's apocalyptic, but it nevertheless holds out the possibility not merely of reanimation, but of a form of redemption (Lauro 2012).

In *Zone One*, zombies can be either 'skels' or 'stragglers'. Skels resemble the typical Romero zombie: 'They came to eat you-not all of you, but a nice chomp here or there, enough to pass on the plague' (60). Stragglers are different. They do not pursue humans, but instead, for reasons unknown, remain rooted in place, 'watching their movies' (61). The Lieutenant, who commands Mark Spitz's group of sweepers, reckons

of the straggler that 'It's always inhabiting its perfect moment. They've found it—where they belong' (196). Stragglers seem to have frozen time itself, making the past into an endless present.

Mark Spitz has a fascination with the stragglers, wondering about their past lives. Indeed, he seems to identity with stragglers and is described as one: 'a ghost. A straggler' (192). The novel's temporal form, which tells Spitz's stories through intricate flashbacks, creates a protagonist continually haunted by the past. The sense that the survivors of what the novel calls 'Last Night' are haunted by the past is satirically emphasized through the acronym developed by the new government: PASD, or Post-Apocalyptic Stress Disorder (54). Pronounced in a way that is virtually indistinguishable from the word 'past', the reigning disorder of the survivors is both the trauma of their individual and collective pasts and 'an abstract of existence itself' (55).[17] This generalized disorder links the survivors and the stragglers.

The skels, who form hordes, contrast with the individualized stragglers and as the novel progresses, they are increasingly characterized as a flood. Water imagery permeates the novel and, through the final unstoppable swell of skels, it inundates the final chapter. Mark Spitz hears that a settlement, Happy Acres, previously deemed safe, has fallen 'out of contact' with Zone One. He recognizes this lack of contact a sign that the settlement has likely been flooded by skels, that: 'this dark tsunami swallowed the entire star-crossed seaboard, camp by camp, maybe this was what was happening everywhere, all over the world' (309). 'Last Night', Mark Spitz realizes, may be neither in the past nor final.

This intuition turns out to be correct and it soon becomes clear that Zone One

has ‘lost contact because the black tide had rolled in everywhere, no place was spared this deluge, everyone was drowning’ (312). Mark Spitz’s response to this crisis is ambiguous: ‘Of course he was smiling. This was where he belonged’ (312). Why is Mark Spitz smiling? Perhaps because, after a relatively dull interlude as a sweeper of stragglers, he is once again back in his element, ready to do real battle. After all, Mark Spitz earned his nickname—after an Olympic swimming champion--because he would rather battle skels single-handedly than jump into a viaduct to escape them.

Now as zombies overrun Zone One, Mark Spitz is swimming again. But as the ‘grisly tide’ of skels rolls in (313) and he sees ‘the garrison […] submerged’, the meaning of ‘to swim’ transforms from a means of escape to a means of union. The final chapter’s epigraph, ‘Move as a team, never move alone: Welcome to the Terrordome’, transforms from advice into prophecy (273). As the novel concludes Whitehead merges the voice of Mark Spitz with that of the third person narrator. The protagonist becomes prophet of the apocalypse even as he is consumed by it. Just before Mark Spitz wades into this sea of the dead, he realizes that the swarming skels are now the true New Yorkers:

> In the stream of the street the dead bobbed in their invisible current. These were not the Lieutenant’s stragglers, transfixed in their perfect moments, clawing through some lost-gone version of themselves that existed only as a ghost. These were the angry dead, the ruthless chaos of existence made flesh. These were the ones who would resettle the broken city. No one else. (321)

Given this description, the novel’s final sentence can be read as an acceptance of a new age in which ‘learning to swim’ means willingly accepting a new world order in

which skels reign supreme. ‘Learning to swim’, in this context, means embracing transformation into a skel. This isn’t the optimism epitomized by the Buffalo government’s slogans (We Make Tomorrow! (30)), epithets (The American Phoenix 75) and songs, ‘Stop, Can you Hear the Eagle Roar?’ (240), but an acceptance that ‘this savage new reality’ is the only reality and that the old culture will never pick up ‘where it left off’ (22; 99).

This acceptance can be compared to one of Matthew Paris’s verses for 1250, which urges reflection upon and acceptance of a new age. In *Zone One*, however, this redemptive transformation lacks the security of a promise of salvation. The novel provides, then, a kind of redemption and fulfilment through destruction. We know from the novel’s first line (‘He always wanted to live in New York’) that Mark Spitz has always aspired to be a New Yorker (1). In joining the dead flooding the streets, he fulfils this goal. The ambiguity of what it means for him to plunge into the mass of undead further complicates the ending’s ambiguity. Will Mark Spitz become a zombie and, if so, what type—skel or straggler?

This ending achieves what Gerry Canavan, writing about temporality and race in *The Walking Dead* comics, suggests would have opened up narrow reinforcement of racial hierarchy in that series: ‘to throw open the gates: to erase the subject-object division altogether and abandon the zombie gaze. The really radical move, that is, would be to refuse the demarcation between life and anti-life altogether’ (449-5). Canavan reads the racial politics of *The Walking Dead* against how fear of the poor and of people of color, especially of African Americans, led to horrific acts of mismanagement, neglect, and violence in the aftermaths of Hurricane Katrina and the 2010 Haitian earthquake.

Canavan then shows how zombie narrative can replicate, reinforce, and arguably even generate expressions of systemic racism (446–7).

Whitehead's novel responds to the role of race in zombie narrative through his exposition of Mark Spitz's racial identity. One early elegiac reference to Mark Spitz as 'the boy' in a photograph with his parents aside, he is always referred to by this nickname. We never learn his real name. In this way, it is identity rather than the signs of the apocalypse themselves that are revealed by the narrator, who, in the end, merges in voice with Mark Spitz. Mark Spitz's racial identity as an African American is only referenced near the novel's end as he explains the back story for his nickname to his dying fellow sweeper, Gary, adding, 'Plus the black-people-can't-swim-thing' (287). In contrast to many of Whitehead's other works, such as *Sag Harbor* and *Underground Railroad*, which announce their focus on African American lives early on, this novel makes the racial identity of the protagonist explicit only at its conclusion.

The late reference challenges the reader's assumptions about race and the relationship between the protagonist, the narrator, the author, and the reader. What identity had the reader assumed for Mark Spitz until this point? Does the racial identity of the author himself play a role in reader assumptions? Does Mark Spitz's embrace of the zombie flood and realization of his ambition to be a New Yorker achieve the radical move that Canavan argues zombie narrative has heretofore failed to achieve?

I would argue that *Zone One* does manage to 'refuse the demarcation between life and anti-life altogether' (Canavan 449–50). It is not incidental that this ending is achieved through an equally radical manipulation of that other critical element of apocalyptic narrative—voice. Whitehead's use of third person throughout the narrative shifts to first

person near its end. This manipulation of voicing, which I would suggest echoes shifts made by Matthew Paris in his 1250 verses, allows for a new kind of prophet. Stephen O'Leary argues that 'the apocalyptic tradition is one of community building' (6). Here we see Whitehead imagining a new type of community for zombie apocalypse narrative, built through a new method of narrative voicing that breaks down the barriers between 'life and anti-life' (Canavan 450).

Rather than deploying a demonized horde attacking from without to shape this community vision, as Paris did with his depictions of Mongols and Jews, Whitehead links redemption to the demolition of difference. As he becomes the voice, at once intimate and distant, that narrates the redemption of the Zone One community, Mark Spitz, and through him Whitehead, challenges the reader to imagine an ending that is innovative, ambiguous, and radical, but nonetheless redemptive.

Frank Kermode has asserted that 'Apocalypse depends on a concord of imaginatively recorded past and imaginatively predicted future, achieved on behalf of us, who remain "in the middest"' (2000 [1967]: 8). Kermode formulated this analysis two years before the appearance of *NLD*. I would suggest that what *NLD* contributed to apocalyptic form was the creation of a new imaginative past. In zombie apocalypse our key to 'revelation' is not a sacred allegory conceived in a time of crisis in the ancient world, but rather the key is a body of narrative conceived in the face of modern crises: genocide, the threat of nuclear annihilation and the brutality of opposition to struggles for civil and human rights. Zombie apocalypse narrative itself is the key that unlocks the comic potential of both *SOTD* and the redemptive potential of *Zone One*.

Kermode meditates on the necessity of formal elements for human understanding

of the ‘shape of life' and we have seen here how contemporary zombie narrative has both expanded formal limits and embraced the most traditional forms of closure (3). I have suggested here that these experiments with form need to be understood in relation to questions of narrative voice. The power of *Zone One* derives, to my mind, in large part because of the development of Mark Spitz’s distinctive narrative voice, one that blends with the third person narrator to achieve, like Matthew Paris’s voice, a simultaneous intimacy and omnipresence. This intimate and omnipresent voice reveals not just an end times; it permits glimpses of both Mark Spitz’s place within it and perhaps our own. The voicing of *Zone One* achieves a quality of authority that is, I believe, essential for closure within apocalyptic form. We do, as Kermode wisely observed, urgently seek to understand the life’s patterns, both large and small. In embracing an end that is radically ambiguous, yet still redemptive, *Zone One* realizes the potential of zombie apocalypse narrative for creating meaning in the contemporary world.

Conclusion

Ancient, biblical, and medieval forms of apocalyptic narrative demonstrate how fundamental the elements of form and voice are to how apocalyptic creates meaning. By taking a longer view and considering these earlier works in some detail we can see how John’s redemptive vision can be seen as a response to Roman imperialism and how Matthew’s violent fantasies of threatening non-Christians serve his eschatological vision. Their works respond to human fear and desire and consideration of them can provide not only insights into the formal intricacies of contemporary apocalyptic, but also into why

this type of narrative, with and without theological scaffolding, continues to appeal. *Night of the Living Dead* terrifies us by annihilating voice and ending and we can't help but laugh as *Shaun of the Dead* makes us supply our own. Events like the 2020 pandemic forcefully remind us just how lost in the middle each of us is. We not only long for knowledge of an ending, but also for the guidance, or even the companionship, of a narrative voice. Zombie apocalyptic, like the apocalyptic tradition of centuries before, draws power from that need.

Notes

[1] On the distinction between knowledge and information, Gomel argues, "If traditional apocalypse is about knowledge, the zombie apocalypse is about information" (34). My thanks to Gregory Loui, Hannah Doermann, and Alberto Garcia Jr. for their research assistance and reading suggestions and to Rob Barrett for sharing his expertise on comics.

[2] In addition to works cited in the notes, for an introduction to Christian and medieval apocalypse see Cohn, Emmerson, and McGinn.

[3] On resurrection/reanimation see Lauro 164.

[4] On the *Book of Revelation* as a political text see Pagels.

[5] For a good introduction to the *Chronica* and its scholarship, see Weiler 2018. In addition to the print edition and English translations listed in the bibliography, interested readers can now view without charge a digitization of the *Chronica* that includes Matthew's rich illustrations, maps, and other features at https://parker.stanford.edu/parker/

[6] "Stranded in the middle" is Kermode's phrasing, 190. Cited in Wheeler 58.

[7] See *CM*, vol. 4, pp. 131-3. English translation in Paris and Giles, I, 357–8. See discussion in Menache 338–341.

[8] For discussion of Matthew's demonization of the Jews in the *Chronica* in the context of broader messianic concerns, see Nisse.

[9] See Lauro, 2012: 164.

[10] See discussion in Lewis 102–3.

[11] On Matthew's role in the production of the *Chronica*, see Vaughan, 1, 19–20.

[12] See *Chronica* 5: 197-8. For English translation see Giles, I, 410–11.

[13] Paffenroth glosses this scene through the lens of theology but not in terms of eschatology, 40–1.

[14] On the child in zombie apocalypse narrative, see Sorenson 581.

[15] For a different reading of the ending to Jones' *Zombie Apocalypse!* see Wheeler 63.

[16] The novel's conclusion has been read as an assertion of radical narrative closure in keeping with the narrator's observation that 'The plague had a knack for narrative closure' (Sorensen 560; *Zone One* 160).

[17] See Hoberek 412.

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