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# The Last Man: The Birth of Modern Apocalypse in Jean Paul, John Martin, and Lord Byron

**Abstract:** The vision of the “Last Man” has haunted the modern age ever since Romanticism. The last man is the tragic hero of an apocalypse that is deprived of any theological framework, no Last Judgement, no New Jerusalem. He is a figure of an entirely secular, catastrophic futurity. The article analyzes the birth of the “Last Man” in poetry and painting around 1800 as a figure who is both the victim and the observer of an ultimate, yet entirely secular disaster, marking the onset of a genuinely modern thought on catastrophe. What is at stake in the imaginations of an end of mankind, is a reflection on the nature of man. The future serves as a thought-experiment and as an anthropological testing ground designed to reveal man’s moral, biological and social essence— and to explore the limitations of the “human”.

The end of the world is one of mankind’s most ancient fantasies. It marks a moment of ultimate futurity, an end of history and of human existence, often depicted in strident, highly symbolic imagery. For the Christian version of this end, the Revelation of St. John has provided what one could call the “classic” model of Occidental apocalypse: a cosmic catastrophe looming at the end of history, a violent struggle between the forces of good and evil, the destruction of the earth, a moment of universal judgment for the living and the dead, and, ultimately, the transition to a new eternal order, the New Jerusalem. This classic model is marked by a concept of futurity that is best expressed in the Latin word *adventus*—“that which comes toward us,” “that which arrives.” In the old, eschatological understanding of history the future always already exists and comes toward the present, transforms itself into the present. The future is what is being “revealed” in the Revelation, not in a straightforward way but in the form of enigmatic figures, lurid imagery, and complicated allegories. The revelation lies not just in St. John’s visions, however. The catastrophe itself has revelatory power, as in the Greek word ἀποκάλυψις (uncovering, lifting the veil, revealing). What is revealed by the apocalypse is the true value and the true power of everything and everyone. The end of the world is the *unmasking of all things*, the manifestation of their true essence.

The modern age, as we know, has left behind this “classic” eschatological model of history. At the same time, it has dismissed the concept of a future that is

always already given and known by God, the future as *adventus*. Now the future can be planned, shaped by human decisions, or prevented by human foresight. It is contingent and subject to chance, albeit essentially obscure and unforeseeable. This is precisely why the modern age started developing a whole range of foresight techniques, from statistics to scenario planning and computer simulation. Of course, these prognostic or imaginative ways of envisioning futurity can only conceive of *possible* futures, potential outcomes that have no certainty. In modernity the future is never anything but a hypothesis—yet it opens a whole space of imaginations, extrapolations, experiments, and projections on what the world and humankind could be and will be. As human actors cease to conceive of themselves as the recipients of events coming toward them but see themselves as authors of their own future, a contingent future opens before them, a future that is both a possibility and a hypothesis. The “openness” of this modern concept of the future, however, is prone not just to utopian hopes and plans, but also to what one could call a “catastrophic imaginary”—the expectation of an abrupt change, a sudden disruption of all extant things. “The future is not a question of distance in time. The future is what radically differs from the present,” as the global reinsurer Swiss Re puts it philosophically.<sup>1</sup> For better and for worse, modernity conceptualizes futurity along the literal meaning of the Greek word *καταστροφή* (a sudden turn downward), or, rather, in an entirely unpredictable direction. The future will come as a rupture in time and in history—and this is why catastrophe seems to be a more plausible vision than all utopian hopes and dreams of futurity as an open road to progress. And with this modern catastrophic imaginary, the vision of apocalypse—of the end of the world—changes profoundly: it ceases to be imagined as an ultimate judgment and a new beginning; rather, as Günter Anders and others have pointed out, it turns into a “naked” or “truncated” apocalypse, an end without any hope for a new beginning.<sup>2</sup>

What links modern imaginations of the future, especially the catastrophic ones, to the “classical” model of apocalypse is the latter’s “epistemological” quality—its revelatory nature. Modern apocalypses, like those of earlier eras, are modes of revelation, scenarios that bring forth a specific form of knowledge. Thinking about the future, and even more so about the *future as catastrophe*, is

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1 Swiss Re, *The Risk Landscape of the Future* (2004), 11, available at [http://media.cgd.swissre.com/documents/pub\\_risk\\_landscape\\_en.pdf](http://media.cgd.swissre.com/documents/pub_risk_landscape_en.pdf) (accessed July 30, 2013).

2 See Günther Anders, *Die atomare Drohung: Radikale Überlegungen* (München: Beck, 1981), 207 and passim; Klaus Vondung, *Die Apokalypse in Deutschland* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1988), 12, 106, and passim; Morton D. Paley, *Apocalypse and Millennium in English Romantic Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon / Oxford University Press, 1999).

epistemologically productive as a heuristic fiction.<sup>3</sup> This fiction operates in the temporal form of *futurum perfectum*, the accomplished future. Mankind *will have been*, the world *will have been*. As we look “backward” from a future finitude onto everything existing, the essence of things is uncovered. The end of the world and of mankind as thought experiment, as a work of imagination, casts a cold and revealing light on all things human, a light that brings out not only the quality and worth of individuals, but also the stability of political institutions and social bonds, and even objects’ usefulness or uselessness.

This article will investigate this catastrophic futurity as a mode of cognition, or, as it were, an anthropological thought experiment. The end of the world is a test site revealing a truth hidden in history: a truth about God and about humankind. My argument will focus on two Romantic texts that can be understood as turning points toward a modern catastrophic imaginary that leaves behind the “classic” model of apocalypse to take a specifically modern view on disaster. Jean Paul’s visionary *Rede des toten Christus* (1796) and Lord Byron’s poem *Darkness* (1816) both envision an end of the world without referring to an instance of divine judgment or a new beginning. They imagine catastrophe as mere secular disaster brought forth not by the will of God but by nature or chance, a “naked apocalypse” that will not lead to redemption and a new type of life. With this perspective on the end of the world, man as a being subject to the forces of nature, a creature with a biopolitical existence, enters center stage. The ultimate catastrophe is not the path toward a divine form of justice; rather, it puts humankind to a test that reveals our innermost nature and value. The “Last Man” is the protagonist on the uncomfortable stage of this catastrophic future. My suggestion is to understand him as the hypothetical figure who—from the perspective of the very end—elucidates *what humankind will have been*. What will the end reveal about man, both as individual and as species? How will human beings react and behave under the stress of their looming extinction? How will they cope with the nearing end? What will be left of human society, of our moral values and reasoning capacities? Only at the end of human history, in the face of total destruction—such is the assumption of the catastrophe-based thought experiment—will we see our entire evolution, the totality of human historical and cultural development, the full range of our potentialities.

The figure of the Last Man emerges in Romanticism—both in literature and in painting. European Romanticism from France to Germany and England abounds with apocalyptic imagery and Last Men, from Grainville’s *Le dernier homme* (1805)

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<sup>3</sup> For a modern concept of the future as catastrophe, see my forthcoming book: Eva Horn, *Zukunft als Katastrophe* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 2014). This article is a much shorter version of a chapter on Romantic apocalypse in that book.

and Byron's poem *Darkness* (1816) and its many followers and imitators to Mary Shelley's roman à clef *The Last Man* (1826) and John Martin's paintings of lonely men contemplating an ultimately depopulated earth.<sup>4</sup> But the Romantic apocalyptic imagination can be seen as both grappling with and ultimately dismissing the classical apocalyptic model. It is, in a Freudian way, a form of "working through" the classical apocalypse. For unlike the narrator of St. John's visions, who only envisions the apocalyptic disaster without being directly involved, the Romantic Last Man is both witness to and victim of the catastrophe that is to end the history of mankind. While the book of Revelation does not mention any individual victim, the Romantic Last Man is an individual both subject to the catastrophic events and in a position to reflect on them. Hence his highly symbolic role for a modern catastrophic imaginary that originates in the Romantic engagement with both the Christian eschatological tradition and Enlightenment philosophy and anthropology. However, it is not by chance that the Last Man has a history far beyond the Romantic period. Born around 1800 and employed by some artists throughout the nineteenth century,<sup>5</sup> the figure still keeps haunting twentieth- and twenty-first-century postapocalyptic fiction and film, from George Steward's *Earth Abides* (1949), Richard Matheson's *I am Legend* (1954) and its many movie adaptations,<sup>6</sup> and Arno Schmidt's *Schwarze Spiegel* (1951) to Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Road* (2006). Beyond his role in the Romantic undoing of the classical model of apocalypse, the Last Man is the emblematic incarnation of a modern form of subjectivity facing disaster. If the end of the world is no longer a demonstration of God's might, the Last Man represents the human not as a creature of God but as a natural living being. In the figure of the Last Man, two positions are inextricably intertwined: subjection and contemplation. What starts with this figure is the genuinely modern tradition of thinking the end of the world as a radically secular event, an event in which we are involved yet which we try to contemplate, imagine, represent, and, if possi-

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4 See Morton D. Paley, *Apocalypse and Millennium in English Romantic Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon / Oxford University Press, 1999); Eva Horn, "Die romantische Verdunklung: Weltuntergänge und die Geburt des letzten Menschen um 1800," in *Abendländische Apokalyptik*, ed. Christian Zolles et al. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2013), 101–124. This text is a shorter and modified version of that article.

5 For the literary history of the Last Man in Romanticism see Morton Paley, "Envisioning Lastness: Byron's 'Darkness,' Campbell's 'The Last Man,' and the Critical Aftermath," *Romanticism: The Journal of Romantic Culture and Criticism*, no. 1 (1995): 1–14, and Werner von Koppenfels, "Le coucher du soleil romantique: Die Imagination des Weltendes aus dem Geist der visionären Romantik," *Poetica* 17 (1985): 255–298.

6 Matheson's novel was adapted as *The Last Man on Earth* in 1964, *The Omega Man* in 1971, and *I Am Legend* in 2007.

ble, prevent. In the ultimate disaster the human being is in a position of both victimhood and reflection, a living body that both suffers and beholds its own extinction.

One of the earliest yet also most radical examples of the Romantic confrontation with the classical model of apocalypse is a short text by the German author Jean Paul with the somewhat blasphemous title *Rede des toten Christus vom Weltgebäude herab, daß kein Gott sei* (*Speech of the Dead Christ down from the Universe That There Is No God*, 1796).<sup>7</sup> The text, a parenthesis (*Blumenstück*) inserted in Jean Paul's novel *Siebenkäs*, quickly became popular throughout Europe through a French translation by Madame de Staël. The short text is framed in a way that emphasizes its hypothetical and fictional character. In the opening paragraphs, the narrator presents his following vision as a thought experiment revolving around the intellectual world of an atheist. He puts himself in the mind of a person who does not believe in God, then dreams that he awakes in a churchyard at the very moment the Last Judgment is about to start. The sun has disappeared, the graves have opened, and the dead have risen to await their judgment and eternal life. But nothing happens. Suddenly Jesus Christ speaks to them and explains that God does not exist and that they all—he and they—are orphans. In the visionary tone established by St. John of Patmos in the book of Revelation, Jean Paul lets Jesus Christ speak to the dead, describing his desperate path throughout the universe in search of his Father:

Ich ging durch die Welten, ich stieg in die Sonnen und flog mit den Milchstraßen durch die Wüsten des Himmels, aber es ist kein Gott. Ich stieg herab, so weit das Sein seine Schatten warf, und schauete in den Abgrund und rief: Vater wo bist du? Aber ich hörte nur den ewigen Sturm, den niemand regiert und der schimmernde Regenbogen aus Wesen stand ohne eine Sonne, die ihn schuf, über dem Abgrunde und tropfte hinunter.<sup>8</sup>

I traversed the worlds, I ascended into the suns, and soared with the Milky Ways through the wastes of heaven; but there is no God. I descended to the last reaches of the shadows of Being, and I looked into the chasm and cried: "Father, where art thou?" But I heard only the eternal storm ruled by none, and the shimmering rainbow of all living beings stood without sun to create it, trickling above the abyss.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Jean Paul, "Rede des toten Christus vom Weltgebäude herab, daß kein Gott sei," in *Siebenkäs, Sämtliche Werke*, Abteilung 1, vol. 2 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1987), 270–275. The text was initially a "speech by the dead Shakespeare"; in its final version it was integrated as "Erstes Blumenstück" into the novel *Siebenkäs*.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Paul, "Rede des toten Christus vom Weltgebäude herab, daß kein Gott sei," 273.

<sup>9</sup> Jean Paul, "Speech of the Dead Christ," in *Jean Paul: A Reader*, ed. Timothy Casey, transl. Erika Casey (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 182, translation amended.

In his atheistic thought experiment, Jean Paul converts apocalypse from a moment that reveals God's power into one that reveals his absence. In atheism, he contends, the dead are deprived exactly of the promise apocalypse still held: the ultimate judgment and eternal life. Seen from here, the end of the world is nothing but an end, mere destruction with no new beginning. For the first time in the history of an Occidental imagination of world's end, this end is definite—a “truncated” or “naked” apocalypse with no judgment, no salvation, no New Jerusalem, just death and destruction. Like Jesus Christ himself, every human is an orphan, abandoned by God the Father. The dead ask again:

“Jesus! Haben wir keinen Vater?”—Und er antwortete mit strömenden Tränen: “Wir alle sind Waisen, ihr und ich, wir sind ohne Vater.”<sup>10</sup>

“Jesus! have we no father?”—And he replied with streaming tears: “We are all orphans, I and you, we are without a father.”<sup>11</sup>

Man's metaphysical and eschatological abandonment—his godforsakenness, as it were—not only cancels out the possibility of salvation but also calls into question human nature. Man is no longer a creature or “child” of God, only a natural living being, subject to nothing but the natural laws. Jesus desperately decries the void, the “cold nothingness,” produced by the absence of God. What rules the universe after the death of God is not divine providence but the blind necessity and “insanity” of natural forces:

“Starres, stummes Nichts! Kalte ewige Notwendigkeit! Wahnsinniger Zufall! Kennt ihr das unter euch? Wann zerschlagt ihr das Gebäude und mich? ... Ist das neben mir noch ein Mensch? Du Armer! Euer kleines Leben ist der Seufzer der Natur oder nur sein Echo.”<sup>12</sup>

“Mute inanimate Nothing! Chill eternal Necessity! Insane Chance! Know ye that which lieth beneath ye? When will you destroy the edifice and me? (...) Is that beside me a human being still? Thou poor man! Thy little life is Nature's sigh, or but its echo.”<sup>13</sup>

God having abandoned them, humans are reduced to nothing but a secular existence; they are just “Nature's sigh.” Even if Jean Paul's fictional atheism is intent on demonstrating the desperation an atheist's worldview entails, this is where his thought experiment touches on a modern anthropological conception of humankind. The merely “natural” definition of man (“Nature's sigh”) calls into

<sup>10</sup> Jean Paul, “Rede des toten Christus vom Weltgebäude herab, daß kein Gott sei,” 273.

<sup>11</sup> Jean Paul, “Speech of the Dead Christ,” 182.

<sup>12</sup> Jean Paul, “Rede des toten Christus vom Weltgebäude herab, daß kein Gott sei,” 274.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Paul, “Speech of the Dead Christ,” 182–3.

question his very humanity: “Is that beside me a human being still?” Each human now is nothing but a living being, subject to “chill eternal necessity” and “insane chance.” Jean Paul’s disconcerting thought experiment about an apocalypse without God shows the Last Man as a figure of radical loneliness and abandonment—but it is exactly in this abandonment that humanity’s nature is redefined. What is revealed at the end of times is a view of the human race as just one more object of nature, a form of life that has no metaphysical dimension but is just “bare” material life: a living body, and a soul with no Divine being to address.

Jean Paul takes great pains to frame his somewhat horrid vision of a radically modern apocalypse with strong markers of hypothetical thought. He explains that Christ’s speech is nothing but a warning exercise, a thought experiment designed to elucidate the atheistic mind-set. To further emphasize the hypothetical and fictional nature of this speech, in the introduction he declares the entire vision a dream—or rather a nightmare. Echoing the intense visuality of the book of Revelation, Jean Paul’s dream is full of visual elements: somber depictions of the sinking sun, black midnight, a fingerless clock, and the dead rising from their graves. The strongest visual element in the text, however, is darkness—the eclipse of the sun. Jesus travels through the eternal night in search of God as the light of the universe. The sun symbolizes God, and the absence of God leaves humankind orphaned in a darkness that is both physical and metaphysical.



**Fig. 1:** John Martin: *The Last Man* (1849) , oil on canvas, 214 x 138 cm.

Darkness is thus the visual scenery that surrounds the Last Man, a darkness that in Jean Paul's vision is the darkness of a world devoid of God, a world that is nothing but nature, the "chill necessity" and "insane chance" of natural laws. This apocalyptic blackout not only tinges Romantic poetry but also marks Romantic paintings that envision the end of the world and the Last Man. The British painter John Martin, famous for his "blockbuster" paintings with spectacular subjects and stark chiaroscuro effects, focused much of his work on biblical disasters such as the Flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the Last Judgment. Martin dedicated several paintings to the Last Man.<sup>14</sup>

Martin condenses the symbolism of the Romantic apocalypse into an image that recurs throughout his oeuvre: the destruction of a city, a landscape, or a palace—and a terrified beholder watching the disaster. His oil painting *The Last Man* (1849) is characteristic. The painting shows a figure lost in a vast, desolate landscape. His loneliness is emphasized by the emptiness of the landscape, covered with rocks and ruins. Clearly, this scenery brings together the topics invoked in the modern aesthetics of the sublime: an immense vastness that seems to exceed the grasp by the human mind. However, Martin tries to bring together the modern idea of an end of the world with the classical model of the apocalypse. In a reference to the New Testament, Martin's *Last Man* wears a kind of biblical garment rather than modern clothes. Dead bodies lie around him, and he raises his hands toward the sky, as in a futile gesture of imploration or rage directed toward (an invisible, perhaps absent?) God.

What is most striking about Martin's painting is the darkness that overshadows the entire scene. The sun is sinking spectacularly, but it seems to shed not light but darkness, scarcely illuminating the ruins and the female corpse lying beside the last man. Martin aims at a visual paradox: he paints darkness using color and light, as if darkness, like light, were an active force. Paradoxically, darkness seems to "shine" on the scene in which the Last Man is set. He stands under the obscure sky of destruction, both involved in the disaster (though the last one to die) and at the same time beholding and contemplating it. The Last Man is the ultimate witness to mankind's final extinction. He is the incarnation of a human reflection on our own end as a species, the incarnation of a human victim and witness to the catastrophe. As such, I would like to argue, he is also the figuration of the beholder's gaze on the painting—set into the painting. He sees what theoretically only the beholder (or God) is able to see: the destruction of the very instance of observation. The picture thus shows an impossible, paradoxical viewpoint emblematic for the modern catastrophic imaginary: the gaze of

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<sup>14</sup> See the excellent catalogue with Martin's most important paintings: Martin Myrone, ed., *John Martin: Apocalypse* (London: Tate Publishing, 2011).



a human witnessing the extinction of humanity. In this paradox lies the marker of the picture's fictional or hypothetical character. Like Jean Paul's vision, which is framed as a thought experiment, Martin's pictorial vision can only be regarded as a possibility or hypothesis that openly displays its imaginary character.

When Martin painted his *Last Man* paintings (in 1826 (now lost), 1833 and 1849), the topic was more than fashionable, and Last Man poems and novels abounded. But what is at stake in this topic goes beyond the Romantic attempt to both revive and overcome the biblical model of apocalypse. As we saw in Jean Paul and John Martin, it offers a perspective on the future that is both involved in and distanced from the events to happen. But the Romantic Last Man is more than a figure of modern subjectivity and reflection on the finitude of human existence. The Last Man, I would argue, is an anthropological test figure, a subject in an experiment on the nature and potential of humankind—of humans seen precisely as biological beings, the “bare life” already addressed in Jean Paul. A dramatic poem by Lord Byron takes Jean Paul's experiment on mankind reduced to an existence as a natural living being one step further. Not surprisingly, Byron's poem is titled *Darkness*.

Byron's poem envisions a particularly dramatic setting: the sun has gone dark, and the world lies in coldness and gloom. The scenario in Byron's poem, unlike the one in Jean Paul's vision, is devoid of any reference to the biblical apocalyptic model, but it also lacks an individual protagonist to suffer and witness the ultimate destruction of mankind. With an astute yet distanced observer's eye and scientific precision, Byron depicts the different stages of despair and chaos.

- 1 I had a dream, which was not all a dream.  
The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars  
Did wander darkling in the eternal space,  
Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth
- 5 Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air;  
Morn came and went—and came, and brought no day,  
And men forgot their passions in the dread  
Of this their desolation; and all hearts  
Were chill'd into a selfish prayer for light:
- 10 And they did live by watchfires—and the thrones,  
The palaces of crowned kings—the huts,  
The habitations of all things which dwell,  
Were burnt for beacons; cities were consum'd,  
And men were gather'd round their blazing homes
- 15 To look once more into each other's face;  
Happy were those who dwelt within the eye  
Of the volcanos, and their mountain-torch:  
A fearful hope was all the world contain'd;  
Forests were set on fire—but hour by hour

- 20 They fell and faded—and the crackling trunks  
 Extinguish'd with a crash—and all was black.  
 The brows of men by the despairing light  
 Wore an unearthly aspect, as by fits  
 The flashes fell upon them; some lay down
- 25 And hid their eyes and wept; and some did rest  
 Their chins upon their clenched hands, and smil'd;  
 And others hurried to and fro, and fed  
 Their funeral piles with fuel, and look'd up  
 With mad disquietude on the dull sky,
- 30 The pall of a past world; and then again  
 With curses cast them down upon the dust,  
 And gnash'd their teeth and howl'd: the wild birds shriek'd  
 And, terrified, did flutter on the ground,  
 And flap their useless wings; the wildest brutes
- 35 Came tame and tremulous; and vipers crawl'd  
 And twin'd themselves among the multitude,  
 Hissing, but stingless—they were slain for food.  
 And War, which for a moment was no more,  
 Did glut himself again: a meal was bought
- 40 With blood, and each sate sullenly apart  
 Gorging himself in gloom: no love was left;  
 All earth was but one thought—and that was death  
 Immediate and inglorious; and the pang  
 Of famine fed upon all entrails—men
- 45 Died, and their bones were tombless as their flesh;  
 The meagre by the meagre were devour'd,  
 Even dogs assail'd their masters, all save one,  
 And he was faithful to a corse, and kept  
 The birds and beasts and famish'd men at bay,
- 50 Till hunger clung them, or the dropping dead  
 Lur'd their lank jaws; himself sought out no food,  
 But with a piteous and perpetual moan,  
 And a quick desolate cry, licking the hand  
 Which answer'd not with a caress—he died.
- 55 The crowd was famish'd by degrees; but two  
 Of an enormous city did survive,  
 And they were enemies: they met beside  
 The dying embers of an altar-place  
 Where had been heap'd a mass of holy things
- 60 For an unholy usage; they rak'd up,  
 And shivering scrap'd with their cold skeleton hands  
 The feeble ashes, and their feeble breath  
 Blew for a little life, and made a flame  
 Which was a mockery; then they lifted up
- 65 Their eyes as it grew lighter, and beheld  
 Each other's aspects—saw, and shriek'd, and died—

Even of their mutual hideousness they died,  
 Unknowing who he was upon whose brow  
 Famine had written Fiend. The world was void,  
 70 The populous and the powerful was a lump,  
 Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless—  
 A lump of death—a chaos of hard clay.  
 The rivers, lakes and ocean all stood still,  
 And nothing stirr'd within their silent depths;  
 75 Ships sailorless lay rotting on the sea,  
 And their masts fell down piecemeal: as they dropp'd  
 They slept on the abyss without a surge—  
 The waves were dead; the tides were in their grave,  
 The moon, their mistress, had expir'd before;  
 80 The winds were wither'd in the stagnant air,  
 And the clouds perish'd; Darkness had no need  
 Of aid from them—She was the Universe.

Byron, like Jean Paul, declares his vision “a dream,” yet one “which was not all a dream,” and he is more interested than Jean Paul in how his imaginings relate to reality—that is, in the heuristic value of his vision. His catastrophic vision is not just a pure act of invention, but a form of imagination that today one would call a “worst-case scenario,” a detailed depiction of a possible yet highly undesirable event, sketching out all the potential consequences this event could entail. Byron’s daydream places humanity in a disaster scenario just as a scientist would subject individuals to an experiment, as R. Dingley remarked: “At the very least mankind seems to be failing a kind of ultimate test.”<sup>15</sup> *Darkness* is the poetic account of a hypothetical anthropological stress test.

The poem’s point of departure—the total and definitive eclipse of the sun—is not new. As a possible cosmic event it had already been discussed in Fontenelle’s *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1686).<sup>16</sup> Byron gives this scenario a totally different twist, however, by turning the cosmic disaster into a very specific *social catastrophe*. First people burn everything that can give them light and heat. They consume all available resources—the forests, the “habitations of all things which dwell.” Next the symbols of power and wealth disappear: “palaces” and “thrones” are used as combustibles. The institutions of social order are destroyed. In addition, the “humaneness” of humans vanishes under the stress of panic and despair: “some lay down / And hid their eyes and wept; and some did rest / Their chins upon their clenched hands, and smil’d; And others hurried to and fro, and

15 R. J. Dingley, “‘I had a Dream’: Byron’s ‘Darkness,’” *Byron Journal* 9 (1981): 26.

16 Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle, *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1686; Paris: Ménéard et Desenne, 1828), 181–184.

fed / Their funeral piles with fuel” (ll. 24–28). Using a monotonous blank verse with a paratactical syntax, in which each stage of disaster is linked to the next through a long series of clauses joined by “and,” Byron throws a merciless glance on the progressing stages of humans’ distress. Some weep, some fall into a hysterical frenzy, some simply await their death in silence. Byron likens mankind’s desperate and clueless behavior to that of the animals: the birds shriek and are unable to fly, the vipers unable to sting, humans are unable to reason or to act. In other words, people are reduced to frantic, senseless, irrational beings, no different from the stunned animals; both humans and beasts are overwhelmed by their panic, unable to act or help others. Once bereft of light and heat, man is simply one more living creature madly and recklessly trying to survive.

In the next step, war of everybody against everybody breaks out; mankind falls back into the Hobbesian state of nature and omnipresent violence: “And War, which for a moment was no more, / Did glut himself again: a meal was bought / With blood, and each sate sullenly apart / Gorging himself in gloom: no love was left” (ll. 38–41). No love was left—no solidarity, no mutual help, no empathy is left among the dying humans. Under the pressure of catastrophe, Byron demonstrates, people lose all “humaneness.” In one last step, man even violates the ultimate taboo: cannibalism. “[T]he pang / Of famine fed upon all entrails—men / Died, and their bones were tombless as their flesh; / The meagre by the meagre were devour’d” (ll. 43–46).

Clearly, Byron’s focus is not on the old apocalyptic symbolisms, which are surprisingly scarce in the poem.<sup>17</sup> He is interested not in the theological dimension of world’s end but in the catastrophe’s social and moral consequences. As his end of the world is not an eschatological event but a natural disaster, his Last Man has a purely secular existence; he is an animate being, a biological entity reduced to his bodily needs and overwhelming affects. Byron thus calls into question not humanity’s spiritual salvation but its anthropological nature. What his stress test reveals is a human nature stripped of any impulse toward empathy, altruism, compassion, or solidarity. Under duress, human life is nothing but an existence ridden by selfishness, fear, and perverse brutality, symbolized by cannibalism and the “hideousness” of the last two men.

Through this depiction of mankind in the catastrophe, *Darkness* mordantly does away with the image of humankind that Enlightenment anthropology had composed. Rousseau had declared compassion the chief human quality.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Paley, “Envisioning Lastness,” 6.

<sup>18</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “A Discourse upon the Origin and the Foundation of the Inequality among Mankind,” in *The Harvard Classics*, vol. 34, part 3 (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1909–1914).

Lessing, Herder, Condorcet, and others had outlined a history of mankind that showed man's infinite potential for moral and intellectual perfection and progress.<sup>19</sup> The eighteenth century had seen empathy, friendship, and rationality as the chief human virtues. In Byron's *Darkness* these virtues have disappeared without a trace. The poem targets the mask projected onto the human face by the optimistic anthropology of the Enlightenment, ripping that mask off to reveal that humans are animals—or, worse, that humans are even more brutal, egoistic, and ruthless than the beasts. The only “humane” figure in the poem is a dog who faithfully guards his master's corpse until his own death (ll. 46–54).

Byron's catastrophic vision of the future thus discards an image of mankind apt to infinite perfection. Instead, he seems to pay heed to an entirely different and new anthropological and political discourse that was much debated at the beginning of the nineteenth century: Thomas Robert Malthus's highly controversial *Essay on the Principle of Population*. The first edition of Malthus's essay was published in 1798; substantially revised versions came out in 1803 (this was the second edition, which Malthus considered a totally new work), 1806, 1807, 1817, and 1826. Byron's poem, I argue, is profoundly marked by Malthus's economic perspective, though it never explicitly mentions its keywords or its author. Like Byron's *Darkness*, Malthus's essay attacked the optimistic anthropology of the Enlightenment and devised an image of human futurity that was more than dire: in his highly polemical treatise, aimed at disproving the idea of a progressing humanity, Malthus argued that because food production was not keeping pace with population growth mankind was headed toward a catastrophic subsistence crisis. Since the reproduction rate of the European populations, according to Malthus, rose at a geometrical (i.e., exponential) rate and food production rose only at a linear rate, sooner or later these populations would suffer more and more food shortages, soaring wheat prices, and consequently hunger, child mortality, and epidemics.

[S]upposing the present population [of the entire globe] equal to a thousand millions, the human species would increase as the numbers 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256, and subsistence as 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9. In two centuries the population would be to the means of subsistence as 256 to 9; in three centuries as 4096 to 13; and in two thousand years the difference would be almost incalculable.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Jean-Antoine-Nicolas Caritat Marquis de Condorcet, *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1795; Paris: Vrin, 1970); Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* (Berlin: Christian Friedrich Voß und Sohn, 1760); Johann Gottfried Herder, *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (n.p., 1774).

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, 2nd heavily revised ed. from 1803, ed. Patricia James (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 15.

Taking his point of departure from an economic analysis, Malthus essentially criticized the central tenets of Enlightenment anthropology, mainly the idea of the perfectibility of human society, as laid out in Condorcet's *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1795). What is interesting, however, is not so much Malthus's forecast and his (questionable) statistics as his shift of anthropological focus: Malthus's argument is based not on man's moral and intellectual capacities (as Condorcet's, Herder's, and Lessing's treatises are) but on man *as a living being*, as a biological existence, a body. This body has two contradicting qualities: on the one hand, it consumes certain resources (such as food, combustibles, habitations, space); on the other hand, it procreates and thereby multiplies—exponentially, as Malthus concluded. He based this conclusion on the British birth statistics of the last decades of the eighteenth century and extrapolated his findings to larger numbers and time frames (the globe, the future of humanity).

This is exactly what makes Malthus a genuinely modern author. His view of humans as living entities, as bodies that consume and multiply, makes Malthus one of the godfathers of what Michel Foucault calls modern biopolitics. Biopolitics addresses man not as the bearer of rights or of intellectual capacities but as a living being. Foucault put it this way:

For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question.<sup>21</sup>

Man is a body, but a *political body*. The modern age—modern biopolitics—makes humans' bodily functions—fertility, sexual behavior, need for nourishment, ability to work, need for rest, and so on—the object of political control and regulation. Moreover, Malthus's economic approach addresses man not only from the viewpoint of his or her biological existence but also from the viewpoint of large numbers, that is, of statistics. The burgeoning discourse of economics addresses the human species as a population, as a collective singular, not as individuals, groups, or classes. Looking at the growth or decline of this collective body, economics—starting with the German economist and statistician Johann Peter Süßmilch—discovers statistical laws that govern the rates of deaths and births, the consumption and production rates of certain goods.<sup>22</sup> What Süßmilch had seen

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<sup>21</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 143.

<sup>22</sup> Johann Peter Süßmilch, *Die göttliche Ordnung in den Veränderungen des menschlichen Geschlechts aus der Geburt, dem Tode und der Fortpflanzung desselben* (Berlin: Verlag des Buchladens der Realschule, 1761).

was the surprising stability in the statistics of such unsettling human events such as birth and death; what Malthus discovers is the latent instability present in the statistical regularities, their constant drift toward catastrophe.

The intense controversy that Malthus provoked stems in part from the coldness of his diagnosis, from the icy mercilessness that simply accepts starvation as a law of nature—or, more precisely, a law of statistics:

It has appeared, that from the inevitable laws of our nature some human beings must suffer from want. These are the unhappy persons who, in the great lottery of life, have drawn a blank.<sup>23</sup>

Life, according to Malthus, is a lottery of survival—and some have just drawn a blank. In a way, this economic take on human life gives a meaning to what Jean Paul’s Romantic apocalypse calls “chill eternal necessity” and “insane chance.” Our well-being and survival are subject to an economic and statistical calculus, that is, “insane chance.” This calculus also informs Malthus’s drab forecast of humanity’s future:

Famine seems to be the last, the most dreadful resource of nature. The power of population is so superior to the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man, that premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race. The vices of mankind are active and able ministers of depopulation. They are the precursors in the great army of destruction; and often finish the dreadful work themselves. But should they fail in this war of extermination, sickly seasons, epidemics, pestilence, and plague, advance in terrific array, and sweep off their thousands and ten thousands. Should success be still incomplete, gigantic inevitable famine stalks in the rear, and with one mighty blow levels the population with the food of the world.<sup>24</sup>

According to Malthus, man is heading toward a crushing subsistence crisis unless the reproduction rate of mankind is—as Malthus proposes—checked by political intervention: Malthus suggests laws that prescribe late marriage and premarital chastity, aided by—if need be—prostitution and abortion. Extrapolating from the birth rates of the past twenty years in relation to the food supply, Malthus makes a particularly dire forecast. If population is not regulated in relation to the existing resources, he predicts, it will instead be “checked”—that is, diminished—by nature’s own means of population control: famine. Global and fatal famine is the essence of Malthus’s forecast for the future of humanity.

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population as it affects the Future Improvement of Society with remarks on the speculations of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorcet, and other writers...* (London: Johnson, 1798; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 14.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

From here, it becomes clearer why Malthus might have been an important, yet hidden reference for Byron's catastrophic imaginary. "Famine," Malthus's evil bottom line, is one of the chief factors in humanity's demise at the end of the world as Byron envisions it. Byron depicts the encounter of the two last survivors, driven by hunger: "The crowd was *famish'd* by degrees; but two / Of an enormous city did survive, / ... Their eyes as it grew lighter, and beheld / Each other's aspects—saw, and shriek'd, and died— / Even of their mutual hideousness they died, / Unknowing who he was upon whose brow / *Famine* had written Fiend. The world was void" (ll. 55–69). Just as Malthus predicted, famine is the human condition of the future; famine is the essence of the secular apocalypse that will await the Last Man. Byron's last men will die in fear of one another, terrorized by an enmity that is nothing but a brutal battle for resources. The end of humankind will be a hunger war that leads us to violate the greatest taboo of Occidental culture: cannibalism.

What is striking in *Darkness*, however, is not only this scathing diagnosis of man's anthropological essence; it is also Byron's merciless, distanced perspective on the ultimate disaster. Through this distance, Byron casts exactly the same view on human beings that economists do. Like Malthus, he looks at people statistically, interested not in any individual's fate but in the form of population, the collective singular whom Byron makes his unlikely protagonist: nowhere in the poem is a single individual (except for the steadfast dog) mentioned—the text only speaks about "men" or "they" as the abstract totality of the entire human population. The poem's narrative thus adopts (as it were) a "statistical" perspective on mankind's suffering. Byron shares Malthus's economic epistemology, fleshing it out in a lurid vision that is more terrible than anything even the callous Malthus would have ever imagined. Uninterested in individual tragedies, it looks on humanity as a mass, coolly observing the steady decimation of the human species until the world is ultimately depopulated.

Like Martin's dark sun, Byron's *Darkness* sheds a gloomy light on human nature, much akin to a view on humanity after a century of genocides, nuclear bombs, and unbridled exploitation of human and natural resources. On the somber test site of Romantic apocalypse, the humanist mask that the Enlightenment had put on man's face is ripped off. What is left is a much older, much less optimistic conception of the human: *Homo hominis lupus*. Byron's Last Man is the wolf that devours his neighbor.

If this is a dream, it is not all a dream. Byron's scenario of a planet plunged in darkness can be traced to a specific historical occasion. The poem was written in July or August 1816 on the shores of Lac Léman, close to Geneva, Switzerland. Byron spent the summer with his friends Mary Godwin and Percy Shelley, among others, confined to the villa Diodati because the weather was very bad.



(The most famous product of this sojourn is the book Mary Shelley (née Godwin) wrote during their stay: *Frankenstein*.) Percy Shelley and Byron wrote letters complaining about the “stress of weather.”<sup>25</sup> Actually, the weather was beyond bad: constant rains and flooding around the lake, bad harvests, and freezing temperatures even in July. On July 29, 1816, Byron wrote to Samuel Rogers: “We had lately such stupid mists—fogs—rains—and perpetual density.”<sup>26</sup> He later recalled that he wrote his poem “at Geneva, when there was a celebrated dark day, on which the fowls went to roost at noon, and the candles were lighted as at midnight.”<sup>27</sup> Even in June at Geneva the temperatures dropped below the freezing point, there were floods in the city, and the harvest was ruined. The reason for this disastrous weather was actually an incident of acute global climate disaster, arguably the biggest in recorded history: in April 1815 the volcano Tambora on the island of Sumbawa (Dutch India, today Indonesia) had erupted, ejecting immense amounts of ashes and sulfur into the upper atmosphere. The ashes floated in the atmosphere around the globe and filtered the sunlight for the next four years, causing intense climatic aberrations in the entire Northern Hemisphere. The year 1816 became famous as the “Year without a Summer” and as one of the great subsistence crises of the Western world.

The climate disaster that followed the Tambora eruption entailed particular distress in Europe and North America: it caused harvests to fail and resulted in starving animals, and soaring food prices. After more than twenty years of war in the wake of the French Revolution, the subsistence crisis in Europe added to the existing social and economic problems and triggered poverty riots in England and Germany. In an indirect way, however, the poem does bear witness to the climatic event—without ever mentioning it explicitly.<sup>28</sup> And it does so in a way that casts a light on Byron’s poetic technique: while talking about a temporality that could not be further away in time—the end of the world—Byron actually refers to the historical reality he lives in. As Jonathan Bate put it, “The poem is as contemporary as it is apocalyptic.”<sup>29</sup> Byron’s poetic technique essentially consists in an imaginary extrapolation of a particular and relatively small disaster into the extreme: whereas there was fog and cold in Geneva, in the poem there is total

<sup>25</sup> See Jonathan Bate, “Living with the Weather,” *Studies in Romanticism* 35, no. 3 (1996): 433.

<sup>26</sup> *Byron’s Letters and Journals*, vol. 5, ed. Leslie E. Marchand (London: John Murray, 1976) 86.

<sup>27</sup> Baron George Gordon Byron, *His Very Self and Voice: Collected Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest Lovell Jr. (New York: Macmillan, 1954), 299.

<sup>28</sup> In 1816, science was still unable to trace the causal relation between the Tambora eruption and the global change of weather. Only in 1883, with a global telegraph network and a better understanding of climate mechanisms, were scientists able to establish the link between the eruption of the volcano Krakatau (Indonesia) and a change of weather in Europe.

<sup>29</sup> Bate, “Living with the Weather,” 435.

darkness and freezing cold; whereas there are hunger riots in Europe, in the poem there is a gory war for food; whereas there is food shortage and hunger in Switzerland, in the poem there is global famine. The end of the world is an extrapolation, that is, the projection of a contemporary European social and economic crisis into a global apocalyptic scenario. If I describe Byron's poetics as a form of extrapolation, I refer to the term in its mathematical sense. Extrapolation involves estimating an uncertain value based on a small known sample. This is exactly Malthus's way of deducting overpopulation and global famine from the sample of late eighteenth-century birth statistics. Byron proceeds on an epistemological path that runs parallel to Malthus's statistical method: he uses the climate crisis of 1816 in the same way that one uses a small number as a statistical sample in order to forecast the size or trajectory of larger numbers. From the local and limited disaster of cool and gloomy weather Byron reasons the apocalyptic scenario of a cold and dark end of the world. For both Byron and Malthus—albeit by totally different means of representation: poetry for one, statistics for the other—the catastrophic future is nothing but an extrapolation.

Apart from this poetics of extrapolation, Byron also shifts the view from a human being as a creature made and punished by God to an entirely secular anthropological perspective marked by a profoundly pessimistic view of mankind. This is what his stress test on humanity reveals: under duress, humans are weak, irrational, and selfish beings, driven by their bodily needs. Dismissing the anthropological notions of the Enlightenment, Byron presents a new view of humankind, one that sees people as living beings subject to the same natural laws that govern any other living beings. This is what Byron's view on mankind shares with his contemporary Malthus and the economic discourse around 1800: in them humans are animals whose physical existence becomes the object of a political epistemology (statistics), and political measures of control and regulation. This marks the birth of modern biopolitics. What the new economic discourse addresses, as we saw in Malthus, is scarcity not as an occasional "accident" in the circulation of goods, but as a human condition that directly depends on our procreation as a species. Famine and scarcity are conditions deeply built into humans' past, present, and future existence as living, consuming, and reproducing bodies. But Byron gives the Malthusian forecast an additional political and anthropological twist: when resources become scarce, civilization, social order, and moral orientation will yield to violence, egoism, and social chaos. In the past wars may have been waged for territory or ideologies, as Europe had just witnessed during the twenty years of Napoleonic wars, which had come to an end only a year before Byron's poem. But in the modern age, as Byron understands it (with the help of Malthus), war may be waged for nothing but food. "No love was left," says the poem. No love is left when food gets scarce.

The catastrophic imaginary deployed in Byron's text relates to today's world through his brutally modern, illusion-free view of humankind as a biopolitical entity whose existence ultimately depends not on rationality or civilization but on the availability of resources. Here the Last Man, who even now keeps haunting our popular post-apocalyptic fictions, has shed all optimistic projections cast upon him by humanism. Some of Byron's motives return in an uncanny way: Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel *The Road* (2006) features two Last Men, a father and a son trudging through a dark, destroyed, and icy landscape, hunted by cannibalistic gangs. Where there is nothing left to consume, people consume their own kind. The current topicality of Byron's poem, however, goes beyond these contemporary references to him by McCarthy and others. It lies precisely in the historical situation that inspired the gloomy forecast captured in Byron's *Darkness*. The "Year without a Summer," 1816, was a global climate disaster that caused one of the bigger subsistence crises in the Western world.<sup>30</sup> It offers a lesson about the dependence of the resources fundamental to human civilization and society on events too global, complex, and mighty to be controlled or forestalled by human foresight. Climate is the epitome of an ungovernable and hardly predictable force of nature (Jean Paul's "chill eternal necessity" and "insane chance"). It is that which we ultimately cannot regulate and influence, a brute and incomprehensible force, but also an extremely complex balance and the very condition of our survival. We are exposed to it just as the European and American population was exposed to the Indonesian ashes in 1816. Yet as a population we are obviously tampering with this complex balance and brute force, not only through big political decisions but also through tiny, innocent, everyday practices such as using cars, taking planes, heating in badly insulated houses, wasting freshwater, and so on. These are practices that contribute to what we euphemistically call "climate change"—a collective intervention into something that fundamentally exceeds our understanding and control.

In the crisis that Tambora brought upon the West or that the extinguished sun in *Darkness* brings upon the entire planet, there is—strangely enough—no victim and no culprit, much as there is no judgment and no redemption. What Byron depicts is, in contemporary terms, what the German sociologist Harald Welzer and others have analyzed as a "climate war."<sup>31</sup> Climate wars are wars that will break out in situations of scarcity—of land, food, or water—in the wake of

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**30** Clive Oppenheimer, "Climatic, Environmental, and Human Consequences of the Largest Known Historic Eruption: Tambora Volcano (Indonesia) 1815," *Progress in Physical Geography* 27, no. 2 (2003): 249.

**31** Harald Welzer, *Climate Wars: What People Will Be Killed For in the 21st Century* (Malden, MA, and Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).

climatic or environmental changes. Climate wars are resource wars, struggles that will be justified by the sheer human need to live, to survive. The extinction of the sun may not be an overexaggerated image of what could eventually happen in the terrible convergence of natural disaster, societal collapse, and the all-too-human fight for survival that Byron envisions. Bruno Latour has analyzed our current situation in terms of a new model of world's end that is neither natural disaster nor final judgment nor man-made global destruction, but a bit of all three:

The end of the world is something that we conjure upon ourselves by a narcotic effect of blind reflexivity. Every one of us—to the extent that we are rich or poor, powerful or powerless, wasteful or ascetic—we are at the same time the innocent victims, the culprits and the exterminating angel.<sup>32</sup>

Today, we may be well advised to look deep into the Romantic darkness to help relieve our blindness.

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<sup>32</sup> Bruno Latour, “Si tu viens à perdre la Terre, à quoi te sers d’avoir sauvé ton âme?” Talk given 2008 at the Institut Catholique de Paris, available at <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/109-ECOTHEO-FR.pdf> (accessed July 30, 2013). Translation mine.