

# Anti-Apocalyptic Optimism: Religious Eschatology and the Italian Environmental Humanities

FLORIAN MUSSGNUG

University College London

**ABSTRACT:** *This article discusses Carla Benedetti's influential critique of eschatological climate fatalism, which is centered on two religious concepts, "apocalypse" and "prophecy." These concepts are described by Benedetti as contrasting cognitive and affective orientations. I compare Benedetti's approach with the work of philosopher Déborah Danowski and anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, and with the ideas of theologians Catherine Keller, Judith Kovacs, Christopher Rowland, and Jakub Kowalewski, who have variously explored the connections between apocalyptic urgency and radical social and political critique: a nexus that, for Benedetti, is afforded by prophecy, but not by apocalyptic thinking. I also consider the question of anthropocentric scale, which I address from the perspective of literary critics Astrid Bracke, Timothy Clark, and Greg Garrard. I suggest that anti-apocalyptic environmentalism can lapse into a nostalgic attachment to the present, which I describe, with cultural theorist Lauren Berlant, as a form of clichéd optimism.*

**KEYWORDS:** apocalypse, eschatology, global heating, mass extinction, ecocriticism, environmental humanities

## I. Introduction

In her influential monograph *La letteratura ci salverà dall'estinzione*, literary scholar Carla Benedetti pits apocalyptic fatalism against radical hope, human survival, and planetary well-being. Human life in the Anthropocene, she explains, is lived in the shadow of extinction: "Siamo le prime generazioni a vivere nella prospettiva di una possibile estinzione di specie" (Benedetti, *Letteratura* 8). Record-breaking temperatures, superstorms, droughts, wildfires, rising sea levels, zoonotic pandemics, forced mass migration, resource wars: these catastrophic manifestations of global heating and environmental degradation have already entered our daily lives, like harbingers of an uninhabitable planetary future. We know that our survival as a species will depend on our ability to adapt to climate change and to prevent its

worst consequences. We recognize that we must focus our attention and resources on new, radically different forms of social, political, and economic organization. We have good reason to fear the progressive breakdown of vital infrastructures, in the face of intensifying climate disaster. We understand the existential importance of imagining new ways of life and the need for more resilient and fairer societies. But this knowledge has not, until now, inspired a bold rethinking of values and norms, or the emergence of genuinely new forms of creative expression and political organization. Benedetti writes:

C'è bisogno di una metamorfosi. C'è bisogno di immaginare e di inventare qualcosa di diverso dall'esistente, di creare altre possibilità rispetto al corso odierno della vita e della storia. E mai come oggi si è avvertita la necessità di *una grande invenzione*, cioè di qualcosa che non riusciamo a immaginare a partire dall'esistente. . . . Quello che più dolorosamente colpisce nel nostro tempo, e con cui dobbiamo fare i conti con l'urgenza del rischio che stiamo correndo, è che sapere non basta. (*Letteratura* 13; italics in the original)

Benedetti deplores a lack of complexity, adventurousness, and open-endedness in creative-critical thinking about the climate crisis. Her critique is focused on the humanities, where she detects worrying levels of intellectual complacency. Benedetti remarks that, among natural scientists, the facts about global heating are well known, and that the risk of human extinction is fully understood. More than two decades have passed since atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen coined the term *Anthropocene*, and during this time, Earth scientists and life scientists have become increasingly attentive to political, economic, and cultural structures. As a result, the Anthropocene has emerged as a powerful transdisciplinary vector and as a catalyst for debates about social and environmental justice. According to Benedetti, scholars in the humanities, by contrast, have been reluctant to turn their attention to Crutzen's concept: "Mentre le scienze della Terra registravano un mutamento epocale di portata geologica . . . le cerimonie di denominazione e le categorie storico-culturali degli umanisti non rilevavano nessuna rottura epocale clamorosa con la modernità" (*Letteratura* 79). As a result of this disciplinary inertia, Benedetti claims, a gap has opened up between different fields of specialist inquiry, and researchers in the humanities have failed to inspire wider political agendas. We may note here that Benedetti's critique of the humanities seems especially relevant to peninsular Italian literary studies (*italianistica*) and less pertinent to wider, transnational contexts, especially in the Anglosphere, where numerous debates have focused on the Anthropocene and on its derivatives: Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chtulucene, Necrocene, Wasteocene, and so on.<sup>1</sup>

Researchers in the humanities, in Italy, are not the only ones who have ignored or repressed the threat of human extinction. Benedetti also sees most literary writers

as complicit, to a greater or lesser extent, with short-sightedness and complacency. Instead of exploring the conditions for species survival, she claims, many contemporary novelists, like Italian society at large, have entered a mood of short-term frenzy and deep-seated fatalism: “paura, colpa, e quindi paralisi” (*Letteratura* 10). This also holds true for climate fiction: “I romanzi scritti in questi anni che hanno per tema la crisi climatica, e per i quali è stata creata un’apposita casella nel sistema letterario del nostro tempo. . . . [R]ischiano anch’essi di passare attraverso le nostre menti e i nostri corpi senza sconvolgere i piani consueti della visione del mondo” (16). Benedetti claims that authors of climate fiction imagine the future as a global, catastrophic unfolding of contemporary calamities: a dystopian grand finale or apocalyptic culmination of sadly familiar processes of planetary deterioration. According to her, such narratives of near-future climate catastrophe leave little room for alternative forms of social organization or collective resistance. For example, Bruno Arpaia’s near-future dystopia, *Qualcosa, là fuori*, is described as a typical cultural product of apocalyptic climate pessimism: “Queste narrazioni sono certamente efficaci nel farci pensare possibile il disastro climatico che ci minaccia, abbattendo la rimozione che l’ha reso a lungo nascosto nonostante la sua evidenza scientifica, ma fanno leva su un solo sentimento, lo spavento per la catastrofe che ci aspetta—che di per sé può portare all’azione ma anche alla paralisi” (17).

In brief, Benedetti suggests that literature and the arts, since the early decades of the twenty-first century, have been dominated by a dysphoric mood: a mixture of disorientation, guilt, denial, and despair. Against this trend, she argues, it is important to create a space for different forms of creative practice, which can foster hope for positive change: “Al posto della cornice apocalittica . . . bisognerebbe usare delle narrazioni ‘positive,’ che aiutino a immaginare ‘un recupero della natura e degli ecosistemi,’ dando stimolo e speranza” (*Letteratura* 10). Benedetti acknowledges that environmental concerns have become more widespread in Italy in recent years, but her assessment of literary figurations of global heating remains pessimistic. The commercial success of genre fiction, she claims, stems from the appeal of its well-rehearsed plots and tropes and from its ability to satisfy predictable expectations. Popular genres such as climate fiction or the post-apocalyptic novel provide only a superficial sense of predictability and reassurance. In this way, they obscure the need for more decisive forms of political action: “Una buona parte della letteratura e del cinema apocalittici narra di catastrofi da cui l’umanità, o una piccola parte di essa, riesce in qualche modo a salvarsi. E questo può anche essere un modo per *esorcizzare* la paura della fine” (48, italics in the original). We find a similar remark in a recent book by cultural theorist Claire Colebrook, *Who Would You Kill to Save the World?:* “In an age of resource depletion and planetary disasters,” writes Colebrook, “there is a flourishing genre of popular culture that imagines that the world could end, and yet ‘we’ would survive and emerge as better and truer versions of ourselves” (4).<sup>2</sup>

The planetary conditions that have surfaced since the dawn of the Anthropocene will outlast us, not only as individuals, but also as a species. So why have humanists and novelists struggled to offer a meaningful response to these conditions? Benedetti argues that apocalyptic thinking marks an obstacle to human survival, because it inspires a sense of inevitability. Our collective response to emergency, she explains, is shaped by cognitive and affective orientations that have their cultural origins in ancient Judaism and early Christianity: “L’apocalisse narrata da Giovanni nel libro omonimo è entrata nel nostro immaginario al punto che il suo concetto, divenuto aggettivo, è uno dei qualificativi più usati per indicare indiscriminatamente ogni prefigurazione di catastrofe” (*Letteratura* 50). This pervasive influence of Christian eschatology can be gathered from the near-ubiquity of apocalyptic worldviews in contemporary popular culture: melodramatic narratives of end time and global catastrophe abound in social media, Hollywood movies, and internationally successful television series. Just as importantly, apocalyptic thinking has inspired environmentalist protest movements across the globe and has shaped the language in which we express our anxieties about global heating and planetary degradation. Yet, according to Benedetti, apocalyptic thinking proves ineffective as a way of motivating political dissent, because it takes for granted the inevitability of future catastrophe: “La fine dei tempi cristiana può essere ritardata . . . ma non evitata, essendo da sempre nel disegno divino. E così succede anche nella sua versione immanente alla storia” (*Letteratura* 52). In other words, eschatological worldviews, for Benedetti, inspire apathy or, alternatively, provide a false sense of reassurance, because the end of the human world (apocalypse or extinction) is imagined as an event that exists outside our own lifeworld: “Ammettere [la fine della specie] in un futuro indeterminato è assai diverso dal percepirla come una possibilità imminente, come un rischio concreto che pende su di noi e sulle generazioni dei nostri figli e nipoti” (42). In this way, imaginative engagement with the end of the world distracts us from the global environmental catastrophe that is already happening around us: “[L]’apocalisse, così come è stata declinata nelle moderne società occidentali, appare incapace di dare espressione alle inquietudini che ci attraversano . . . : un ostacolo mentale a un agire adeguato all’emergenza. La forma apocalittica è intrisa di un senso di ineluttabilità. La fine che annuncia non può non avvenire, perché la si suppone portata da una necessità sovrastante” (51–52).

In sum, eschatological thinking, with its religious undertones of inevitability and teleological closure, increases the likelihood of human extinction. This claim marks a central tenet of Benedetti’s critique of apocalyptic environmentalism and an important premise of her case for the vital role of literature in an age of planetary destruction. Only literature, she argues, can unsettle established belief systems and behavioral patterns and thereby create a space for radical change, beyond the strictures, injustices, and existential threats produced by global capitalism: “[D]a dove

potrebbe sorgere una parola suscitatrice capace di allargare la prospettiva fino a provocare qualcosa di non immaginabile, una svolta, . . . se non da questo patrimonio immenso che la specie umana ancora continua ad arricchire senza nessuna finalità immediata . . . ?” (*Letteratura* 119). In order to embrace this hope, she contends, we must first unlearn the cultural and political forms that stem from apocalyptic eschatology.

In this article, I wish to respond to Benedetti’s argument on three levels. First, I examine the religious roots and philosophical affordances of Benedetti’s understanding of prophecy and apocalypse. Drawing from the work of philosopher Déborah Danowski and anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, I argue that Benedetti’s critique of eschatology struggles to address the legacy of Eurocentric universalism in contemporary apocalyptic thinking. Second, I compare Benedetti’s claims with the ideas of theologians Catherine Keller, Judith Kovacs, Christopher Rowland, and Jakub Kowalewski, who have variously explored the connections between apocalyptic urgency and radical social and political critique—a nexus that, for Benedetti, is afforded by prophecy, but not by apocalyptic thinking. I suggest that Keller and Kowalewski, in particular, have embraced the intrinsic plurality of eschatological belief systems. Finally, I will turn my attention to the work of three prominent critics of apocalyptic thinking: feminist historian of consciousness Donna J. Haraway, philosopher and literary critic Timothy Morton, and media scholar Joanna Zylińska. I engage with the question of anthropocentric scale, which I address from the perspective of literary critics Astrid Bracke, Timothy Clark, and Greg Garrard. In conclusion, I suggest that anti-apocalyptic environmentalism—unlike other prominent critiques of apocalyptic thinking—risks turning into what I have chosen to call, with cultural theorist Lauren Berlant, *clichéd optimism*. In her magisterial last book, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, Berlant writes: “A cliché is a performance of optimism about truth: that there is truth, that it can be efficiently captured in phrases, and that it will not be too disturbing” (69). Clichéd thinking, in other words, delineates a conceptual space and an affective atmosphere in which we respond to situations of great distress with reassuring truths and sovereign fantasies: a grandiose feeling of being in control. For Berlant, this cognitive and affective response to crisis is prefigurative, in the sense that it conjures the illusion of a readable present and a foreseeable future. Clichéd thinking is also performative. It flourishes in conditions of unpredictability, when our familiar experience of time and self is disrupted. It provides reassurance, in the short term, and forges a transient sense of stability and futurity around common practices and shared assumptions. In sum, my discussion of Benedetti’s anti-apocalyptic environmentalism will lead me to consider the limitations of clichéd optimism about the role of literature in the climate crisis.

## 2. Prophecy, Agency, Universalism

Benedetti's critique of climate fatalism is centered on two religious concepts, "apocalypse" and "prophecy," which she describes as contrasting cognitive and affective orientations. Apocalyptic thinking, as we have seen, is associated by Benedetti with emotional paralysis and political impasse. By contrast, prophetic writing about the climate crisis empowers its readers through a shared feeling of urgency: "La parola profetica . . . anticipa con vividezza la catastrofe futura . . . e così fa nascere un senso di emergenza in grado di fronteggiarla" (*Letteratura* 53). Within this prophetic tradition, Benedetti further distinguishes between two types of speech acts: prophetic announcements ("parole annunciatrici") and prophetic evocation ("parole suscitatrici"). Benedetti explains: "Si tratta di due diversi tipi di parola profetica: una che semplicemente *annuncia* la catastrofe futura, l'altra che invece ne impersona performativamente il dolore per *suscitare* le forze sopite che aiuteranno a evitarla. Chiamerò la prima *assertiva* (o *annunciatrice*), l'altra *suscitatrice*" (37; italics in the original).

Prophetic announcements ("parole annunciatrici") are constative speech acts, which, for Benedetti, bear a superficial resemblance with apocalyptic thinking. Like properly eschatological utterances, they offer a glimpse beyond our quotidian world. We might say, with attention to the etymology of the Greek verb *apokalyptein*, that prophetic announcements *reveal* a transcendent reality outside our familiar human world, or, in secular terms, that they invite us to ponder human extinction as a possible disaster of the highest magnitude. Unlike apocalyptic thinking, however, prophetic announcements are exclusively concerned with human justice *in the present*. They do not claim that the end of human history is inevitable, but urge us to improve ourselves. In Benedetti's secular terms: "[C]iò che annuncia [il profeta] *non necessariamente accadrà*, perché l'esito dipende dagli uomini, non da un disegno divino imperscrutabile" (*Letteratura* 53; italics in the original). Performative articulations of prophecy ("parole suscitatrici") highlight the power of human agency and solicit a strong affective response and behavioral change. This is where Benedetti locates the mythopoetic force of literature, and where she sees humanity's only possible escape route from its one-way road to extinction.

It is not surprising, then, that Benedetti's manifesto calls for a spiritual re-enchantment of the modern world. Biblical and Hellenic myths, she argues, speak to the shared condition of humans in the twenty-first century, because they invite us to understand the values of literature as timeless: "Ogni storia narrata, anche la più piccola, echeggia dentro a questa cassa di risonanza di ampiezza cosmica ed epica, costituita dall'intera storia degli uomini" (*Letteratura* 94). If we take this idea seriously, Benedetti insists, we begin to see that literary works of all ages are coconstitutive parts of a single ongoing, collaborative effort to fashion human identity

at the level of species: “non . . . qualcosa di unicamente culturale o estetico, ma al contrario . . . un’invenzione di specie” (121). Unfortunately, this awareness of the universal value of literature, for Benedetti, has faltered in the modern age, and has been eclipsed and replaced by the secular figure of the interchangeable, autonomous individual: the modern human Self who understands, demarcates, and controls the more-than-human world. “[L]a secolarizzazione è un processo selettivo che . . . toglie via tutto ciò che nel mondo cosiddetto naturale è attivo, vivente, per trasformarlo in un fondale inerte. . . . La cultura “secolare” si sorregge su una tale operazione astrattiva che separa le figure umane dallo sfondo non umano e dall’abisso oscuro del mondo” (108).

Planetary environmental catastrophe, with its shared sense of helplessness and fear of extinction, has put a halt to such modern fantasies of autological subjectivity.<sup>3</sup> According to Benedetti, global heating and environmental degradation have shifted the focus of our cultural orientations away from the modern figure of the Self and towards a postsecular, planetary, environmental holism and an interest in species being. Discourses of self-sovereignty and individual freedom are fatally inadequate: “Di fronte alla nostra condizione di vita sulla Terra, ormai a rischio, i nostri attuali strumenti concettuali, la nostra idea di storia, di vita e di morte, persino la temporalità dei racconti, si stanno spezzando come una freccia troppo leggera che urta contro un muro d’acciaio” (*Letteratura*, 98). Fortunately, new forms of planetary thinking are at hand. Benedetti explains: “esistono nella nostra cultura zone meno sorvegliate di altre, dove l’immaginazione e la sensibilità umane bruciano con maggiore forza” (99).

In her book, Benedetti alludes to three such domains, which, for her, have inspired alternative conceptions of the more-than-human world: the classical literary genre of the epic (Homer) and its modern inheritors (Herman Melville, Leo Tolstoy, and Antonio Moresco, among others), youth culture (Greta Thunberg), and African postcolonial literature (Chinua Achebe). She sees these traditions as nonhegemonic and salvific (the title of her book states clearly that literature *will* save us from extinction). However, salvation, for Benedetti, should not be understood in conventionally Christological terms. Nonhegemonic literary forms contain a promise of cosmic re-enchantment. But their prophetic force does not belong exclusively to any philosophical, cultural, or religious tradition. In the central chapters of *Letteratura ci salverà dall’estinzione*, Benedetti analyzes philosopher Günther Anders’s retelling of the Genesis flood narrative, “Die beweihte Zukunft,” and suggests that Noah’s anger and his proleptic grief for the future victims of the flood are not the exclusive domain of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. Even less can they be said to belong to those self-styled “moderns,” who, in the words of philosopher Bruno Latour, coined the idea of man as a “being par excellence capable of extricating itself from nature . . . thanks to its soul, its culture, or its intelligence” (*Down* 85–86). Instead, the salvific



power of literature must be imagined, like global heating itself, as a cultural force that affects all humans. It marks the species' collective response to what historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has called humanity's "shared catastrophe" (218): a condition that appears darkly relevant to all potential victims of environmental collapse, and therefore to all present and future people on Earth.

Benedetti's manifesto is explicitly universalistic. Salvific literature, she claims, enables us to see ecological issues not through the lens of our private concerns but at the level of intergenerational responsibility and planetary forcings. It foregrounds the importance of collective actions that must be taken by *all humans*. Salvific literature also reveals that the meaning of human life is distributed across an internally heterogeneous range of vastly different temporal scales and ontological registers. Consider, for example, Homer's *Iliad*: "[L]'orizzonte di specie non impedisce affatto a Omero, e ad altri scrittori del passato e moderni, di narrare vite particolari; semmai proprio questo orizzonte conferisce a quelle vicende individuali una cassa di risonanza potente, un senso tragico della vita. . . . Non ci si dimentica mai, nel seguire le storie, che gli uomini sono come le foglie" (Benedetti, *Letteratura* 91).

By posing the question of human suffering, simultaneously, at the level of individual freedom ("vite particolari") and of species being ("gli uomini sono come le foglie"), Homer provides us with a method for grasping, concurrently, the importance of biographical, historical, biological, and geological temporal scales. This is a remarkably complex claim, and all the more remarkable because, in advancing it, Benedetti appears to be moving away from the Foucauldian understanding of subjectivity and subjugation central to her earlier work (*Ombra*). On a more critical note, Benedetti's sophisticated analysis of the productive tension, in aesthetic experience, between individual self-reflectivity ("le vicende individuali") and collective self-fashioning ("l'orizzonte di specie") pays little attention to the historical processes and biopolitical actors who have brought us on the brink of extinction. Despite a brief parenthesis on "ciò che resta delle culture primitive [sic] dopo la colonizzazione" (Benedetti, *Letteratura* 103), Benedetti's work glosses over anthropological or cultural difference. Her conceptually rich and ethically nuanced discussion of prophetic voice conjures a sense of collective, existential threat, but disregards socioeconomic inequalities and differential responsibilities.

This particularity of Benedetti's approach becomes apparent if we compare her take on environmental catastrophe with a line of reasoning that has been adopted by philosopher Déborah Danowski and anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro in their coauthored book, *The Ends of the World*. While Benedetti describes apocalyptic eschatology as a transhistorical and cross-cultural force, Danowski and Viveiros de Castro stress that enjoyment of fictional apocalypse, until recently, appeared to be a privilege of the relatively affluent: planetary elites, upwardly mobile middle classes, and, more generally, inhabitants of the Global North, who imagined themselves



safe from the environmental and social consequences of civilizational or climate breakdown. Of course, the planetary crisis has made it more difficult for anybody to imagine that their familiar world will simply go on. And yet, it would be naive to think of global heating as a great leveller. The spiraling effects of climate change will be unevenly distributed. In Danowski and Viveiros de Castro's words, environmental breakdown will "drag with it a sizeable portion of human population, obviously beginning with the destitute masses that inhabit the ghettos and garbage dumps of the world system" (2). For this reason, Danowski and Viveiros de Castro claim, apocalypse should not be imagined as a future *event*. Instead, the concept, in their work, describes the lingering force of ancestral forms of colonial and settler colonial violence, and the patterns of inequality and injustice that these forms have brought about. We find the same approach in the work of literary scholar Elizabeth DeLoughrey, a sympathetic reader of Danowski and Viveiros de Castro. In *Allegories of the Anthropocene*, DeLoughrey calls for greater attention to the plural origins of twenty-first-century ecological catastrophe, from transatlantic European colonization to the modern fossil fuel industry. Indigenous and decolonial perspectives, she suggests, can remind us that "catastrophic ruptures to social and ecological systems have already been experienced through the violent processes of empire. In other words, the apocalypse has already happened; it continues because empire is a process" (2). Benedetti appears to be sympathetic to this political agenda, but her use of the first-person pronoun ("noi/ci"), in the title of the manifesto and in the main body of its text, does not challenge the universalizing impulses of familiar Eurocentric historical narratives. I will return to this point in the final part of my article. First, let me consider the position of a group of influential, contemporary political thinkers, who have variously *endorsed* apocalyptic thinking as a positive catalyst for political action and behavioral change.

### 3. Affordances of Environmental Apocalyptic Thinking

Constructive theologian Catherine Keller—the author of two influential books, *Apocalypse Now and Then* and *Facing Apocalypse*—suggests that apocalyptic thinking coheres around a set of recurrent and recognizable motifs but cannot be reduced to a single cultural expression or political expectation. Apocalyptic thinkers, she explains, urge us to see the world as a transient precursor to a different, more meaningful reality. In this way, they invite us to imagine afresh what it means to be human and encourage us to rethink all aspects of our public and private lives, in anticipation of a promised reversal of *all* current circumstances. For Keller, this emphasis on rupture and renewal is historically rooted in John of Patmos's discursive resistance against empire. Politically and aesthetically, it takes a variety of different forms: evangelical Christianity, ethnonationalism, far-right conspiracy belief, but also, at the other

end of the political spectrum, liberation theology, anti-colonialism, radical environmentalism. Needless to say, there are profound differences between apocalyptic environmentalists, millenarian Christians, and far-right conspiracy theorists. These groups operate on the basis of different belief systems. From a political perspective, their disagreements weigh more heavily than the rhetorical similarities which they share. And yet, parallels at the level of style and form are an important indicator of common cultural roots. Keller describes her long-standing fascination with the political ambivalence of apocalypse in the following passage:

I realized that I couldn't simply write off the last book of the Bible—despite its bitter determinism, its misogynist, good/evil dualism, its forecasts of violent mass death. There was something more to its radical vision. It turns out that all the Western egalitarian or revolutionary movements, the fights for democracy, socialism, women's rights, emancipation of slaves, right on through Martin Luther King's "dream," tapped apocalyptic metaphors of great tribulation and transformation. (*Facing Apocalypse* ix)

While Benedetti associates apocalyptic thinking with apathy, fear, and guilt, Keller points out that the biblical Book of Revelation has underpinned numerous attempts to dislodge Eurocentric and humanistic habits of thought in the works of anticolonial thinkers such as W. E. B. Dubois, Aimé Césaire, and Frantz Fanon. Poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant, for example, glosses the Book of Revelation in the well-known opening chapter of his *Poetics of Relation*. Here, the belly of a slave ship is compared to the biblical image of the bottomless pit, and the debasement of deported Africans is described as "more eternal than apocalypse" (6). Similarly, and closer to the time of this writing, climate activist Greta Thunberg has evoked the dualism of the apocalyptic imagination—the idea of an ultimate battle between good and evil—in her attacks on fossil capitalism: "Because if the emissions have to stop, then we must stop the emissions. To me that is black and white. There are no grey areas when it comes to survival" (Klein 15).<sup>4</sup> Through her engagement with these examples, Keller alerts her readers to the fact that millenarians, environmental campaigners, social reformers, and ethnonationalists borrow from the same apocalyptic tradition. They place this tradition in relation to the interpreter's own circumstances, whether personal, political, or social. In this way, they shape the contours of important debates about the future and raise public awareness of existential risk.

Keller's remarks about the political and cultural *plurality* of apocalypticism resonate with the ideas of other religious scholars. Theologians Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland have argued that contemporary representations of political and military conflict, environmental hazard, and economic risk function as diverse *actualizations* of apocalyptic eschatology, despite their prevalently secular orientations (7–11). In a similar spirit, theologian Jakub Kowalewski, the editor of an

interesting collection of essays on eco-apocalypse, points out that apocalyptic thinking, in recent years, has come to dominate the environmental humanities. We live in an age of apocalyptic apprehension, argues Kowalewski. In affluent communities, lifestyles that would have seemed normal and unproblematic twenty years ago are beginning to look untenable. Social arrangements that were taken for granted by earlier generations appear insufficient, inadequate, or unsustainable. The pressures of a rapidly heating planet are forcing us to reconsider the meaning of individual freedom and collective obligation, for example in the context of procreative choices and parental responsibility, meat consumption, travel, and practices of transnational and intergenerational solidarity and care. In many parts of the world, growing numbers of people live in irrational fear of hidden, dark forces that operate conspiratorially, and whose indestructible tentacles, for them, appear to extend everywhere. Apocalypse—the “ancient script that has somehow not exhausted itself, even after century upon century of false end time predictions” (Keller, *Facing Apocalypse* 3)—resonates powerfully in our postsecular lives. It would be misleading, however, to read this common fascination with apocalypse as a sign of universal political or affective alignment. Kowalewski remarks that “the concept of environmental apocalypse . . . is not fixed” and that “the polysemy of the term ‘climate apocalypse’” constitutes “the only adequate way of grasping the complexity of the eco-apocalyptic situation” (Kowalewski xvii). In other words, Kowalewski argues that references to apocalypse have functioned, in the environmental humanities, as what anthropologist Marilyn Strathern calls an *attractor*: they remain underdetermined and, for this reason, hold the power to engage other terms and concepts, draw in values, and disseminate feelings “exactly as though everyone knew what was meant” (2). This point has also been made by biblical scholar John J. Collins in relation to theological debates. In his introduction to the *Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature* (2014), Collins muses that “it is perhaps unfortunate that apocalyptic literature is so often invested with theological authority, with an eye to coded messages and instructions, rather than being read as an exuberant product of the human imagination” (Collins 13).

Biblical scholars like Keller, Kowalewski, and Collins describe apocalyptic thinking as a rich plurality of diverse political, cognitive, and affective orientations. What these different manifestations of eschatology have in common, according to them, is a sense of existential urgency: a feeling that arises from the expectation of an imminent end of history: a widespread feeling, to quote philosopher Slavoj Žižek, that we are “living in the end times.” In the epochal rhetoric of ancient Judaism and early Christianity, this sense of urgency took the shape of a “temporal paradox at the heart of apocalyptic discourse,” in the words of communication scholar Stephen O’Leary. He writes: “The declaration of the End of time is itself constitutive of a community which must then reconceive and redefine its place in universal history” (50). In more recent decades, this same paradoxical sense of apocalyptic urgency

has been evoked, by leftist thinkers, to advance radical forms of social and political critique. From the Industrial Revolution to the Great Acceleration and the self-conscious Anthropocene, green protest movements have been inspired by “visions of man’s coming ecological suicide [which] stand within old traditions of Christian apocalypse,” as historian Joachim Radkau has shown in his comprehensive, transnational study of political environmentalism, *The Age of Ecology* (182).<sup>5</sup> Apocalyptic rhetoric has also been used to draw attention to those whose humanity is denied by anthropocentric, Eurocentric humanism, on the grounds of their class, ethnicity, ability, or gender. Here, the biblical Book of Revelation functions as a symbolic precursor of modern critiques of colonial and racialized power, through the imaginative approaches of critics who find inspiration in John of Patmos’s discursive resistance against empire. Just as importantly, apocalyptic thinking has served as a critique of capitalist globalization. In the words of theologian Graham Ward, “Religion that was once the object of critique is now presented with an object for its own critique—the secular logics of Western global capitalism” (3). In brief, apocalyptic thinking, in these examples, functions as a creative and transformative reflection that breaks the spell of the status quo. For Benedetti, by contrast, this politically transformative force is unique to prophecy. In the next part of the article, we will see how Benedetti’s argument fares in relation to the work of prominent anti-apocalyptic environmentalist thinkers such as Donna Haraway, Timothy Morton, and Joanna Zylińska.

#### 4. Holding Apocalypse to Account

Thirty years ago, pioneering ecocritic Lawrence Buell observed that apocalypse is “the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal” (285). Since then, apocalyptic environmentalism has come under repeated and multipronged attack, not only from climate change skeptics but also from environmentalists, who have questioned the political efficacy of eschatological thinking. Inquiries into the behavioral and psychological effects of proleptic fear have suggested that apocalyptic framings of climate change produce apathy and hopelessness (Fagan). Influential artists and writers have queried the appeal of dystopian futures in literature, film, and popular culture. According to political theorist Mathias Thaler, “[T]he two horns of the dilemma—lazy inaction and nervous fatalism—expose that the apocalyptic imaginary has manoeuvred itself into a dead end” (229–30). Yet anti-apocalypticism is not a single, philosophically harmonious movement. Just like the pro-apocalyptic thinkers whom we considered in the previous section, critics of apocalyptic environmentalism constitute a broad church composed of competing political orientations. In the next section of this article, we will pay attention to the arguments of some influential critics of apocalyptic environmentalism and compare their views to Benedetti’s.

Literary scholar and environmental thinker Timothy Morton is perhaps the most well-known spokesperson of philosophical anti-apocalypticism. Political debates about global heating, they argue, have mostly focused on just one temporal vector: the negative long-term effects of present-day human behavior on future humans. Against this trend, Morton reminds us that environmental catastrophe is already happening all around us, and that it has its roots in the past. Imaginative engagement with future catastrophe can easily become a distraction or a form of escapism: “a way for us to try to install ourselves at a fictional point in time before global warming happened. We are trying to anticipate something inside which we already find ourselves” (Morton xxiii). More specifically, the slow temporality of species extinction runs counter to established, apocalyptic ideas of environmental collapse as catastrophic rupture.<sup>6</sup> Morton writes:

Maybe the actual problem has been that we keep telling ourselves that we need a totally new way of looking at things because the ecological age is some kind of apocalypse where our familiar world is totally ripped apart. But is this hoping for a new way to see or be really ecological, or is it just a retweet of the agricultural-age monotheism that has got us into this stage in the first place? (xxiii)

A similar critique of apocalyptic futurity stems from the doyenne of critical posthumanism, Donna J. Haraway. In her widely influential monograph, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, the biologist and historian of consciousness urges her readers to shift their attention from ominous future catastrophe to the lived experience of ecological devastation in the present. “Staying with the trouble,” she writes, “requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or Edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings” (1). More specifically, Haraway’s critique is directed against two substantially different, but equally widespread cultural attitudes, which, for her, are equally rooted in the Western apocalyptic imagination. The first, which is dismissed by Haraway as “a comic faith in technofixes” (3), places disproportionate confidence in humanity’s exponentially growing powers, technological advances, and the human ability to shape planetary processes. The second fosters a nostalgic or pessimistic attitude and finds expression in elegiac or melodramatic narratives of human extinction. Haraway admits that “bitter cynicism” may be an entirely rational response to global heating, especially for climate scientists and political activists. Yet, even in dark times, climate fatalism, for Haraway, is not a robust basis for emancipatory political movements. In order to make kin with other species, she insists, we must not “succumb to abstract futurism, its affects of sublime despair and its politics of sublime indifference” (4).

In recent years, Haraway’s critique of techno-supremacism and nostalgic despair has been taken up by many scholars in the field of critical posthuman studies.

For example, media theorist Joanna Zylinka has highlighted structural similarities between religious narratives of apocalyptic redemption and contemporary fantasies of technological mastery, transhuman enhancement, and planetary settler colonialism. Where Haraway challenges the concept of futurity, Zylinka focuses her critique on ideas of metaphysical transcendence or rupture. She suggests that an apocalyptic shift from historical, linear time to utopian timelessness can be observed in the writings of theorists of human technological perfectibility. “It is significant,” Zylinka writes, “that the Anthropocene should usher in not just apocalyptic narratives about the disappearance of Man as a species but also redemptive discourses about the human’s upgrade . . . coupled with research into longevity and ‘disrupting death’” (23–24). Transhumanism and (imaginary) space travel, for Zylinka, are politically dangerous fantasies of apocalyptic end time. What they share with their religious precursors is an assumption that the future will offer deliverance from our world, and that it will leave the world profoundly and definitively transformed. Futuristic forms of computational human enhancement have also been mocked by Bruno Latour, who describes private space travel and fantasies of interplanetary colonization as thinly disguised travesties of religious eschatology:

We terrestrials [now] find ourselves up against an extreme version of religious religion and of secularized religion, which have merged “God” and the “Dollar,” “God” and “Mammon,” in an explicit project of definitive flight from this world that legitimizes the destruction of the greatest possible number of resources, leaving the greatest number of surnumeraries *left behind* to fend for themselves however they can. The end of the world—the end of their world—risks taking a terrifying turn in their hands (Latour, *After* 56–57; emphasis in the original).

A different, but similarly influential critique of apocalyptic thinking holds that the eschatological imagination, with its characteristic focus on the cleansing of human guilt, is structurally anthropocentric, and therefore politically ineffective. Literary scholar Greg Garrard, for instance, has claimed that apocalypse literature is complicit with the imaginative traditions of Eurocentric humanism, and that both worldviews share a tendency to reduce complex issues to a “monocausal crisis involving conflicts between recognizably opposed groups” (105). Literary critic Astrid Bracke elaborates on this idea in her work on British climate fiction and reminds her readers that “human minds are best at grasping events and environments on a medium scale” (27). Apocalyptic storytelling, according to Bracke, is hampered by this shortfall of the human imagination, and by our inability to conceive and represent non-anthropocentric geological and climactic timescales. Much environmental damage happens at a scale that cannot be fully expressed by traditional modes of literary representation, including modern, secular apocalypse fiction. Global heating is brought about by individual human actions, which are not ecologically significant

in themselves but which collectively, across space and over time, threaten much of what we value about humanity and the more-than-human world. As ecocritic Timothy Clark has explained, this relation between individual, observable causes and vast global effects marks a stark challenge to anthropocentric narratives: “Issues such as global warming or ocean acidification, so overwhelming in scale, can threaten to dwarf any individual or state action, even as both phenomena cannot immediately be seen, localized, or in many cases, even acknowledged” (38).

Benedetti’s anti-apocalypticism differs from these approaches. Unlike Haraway, Garrad, and Bracke, she foregrounds the figure of the human, metonymically, as a marker of planetary futurity (or futurelessness). She does not deny, of course, that the threat of extinction also extends to other species. Global heating, she writes, is “una condizione che unisce concretamente non solo tutti gli uomini e le donne del pianeta, ma tutti i viventi, anche di altre specie” (*Letteratura* 90). Nevertheless—and despite her engagement with Bruno Latour—Benedetti’s plea for the importance of literature appears structurally anthropocentric. She writes that “[t]errestri è una parola semplice, primaria, che indica con precisione ciò che noi siamo prima di ogni altra cosa. . . . [S]iamo esseri che vivono su questo pianeta, in relazione vitale con gli altri viventi non umani” (134; italics in the original).<sup>7</sup> But she also associates planetary well-being with a single form of cultural practice, literature, which she considers unique to humans. At this level, Benedetti’s book can be said to belong to an influential tradition of environmentalist writing, of which ecocritic Ursula K. Heise has written that “in literary, visual, and musical representations of extinction, biological crisis typically becomes a proxy for cultural concerns” (49).

## 5. Conclusion

So why, in times of trouble, are we fascinated by narratives of apocalypse? Is the genre inherently pessimistic, as Benedetti argues? Or should we treat its popularity as the expression of a deep-seated desire to come to terms with life on an unpredictable, dangerous, and heating planet? According to Danowski and Viveiros de Castro, we are about to enter, or may have already entered, a period in which “the *near* future becomes unpredictable, if not indeed unimaginable outside the framework of science-fiction scenarios or messianic eschatologies” (12; emphasis in the original). In this context, proclamations of the end of the world can be read as a critique of anthropocentric worldviews, as literary researcher Jemma Deer points out: “The future of human life in fact depends upon the end of a world in which human beings narcissistically act as if they are separable from or independent of other living sense. The end [of that world] would be the beginning of a less destructive or pathological relationship between humans and the other forms of life with which we share this planet” (2).



As I have suggested in this article, Benedetti rejects the idea of a politically enabling, progressive form of apocalyptic thinking. Unlike DeLoughrey and Deer, among others, she uses the term *apocalypse* exclusively to describe an existential threat to humanity, in the future, which can and must be averted. This understanding of apocalypse gives a clear political value to Benedetti's work, in the context of an ideologically charged debate where, in the words of Mathias Thaler, "it matters, politically speaking and in terms of which alternatives are being pondered, whether we believe ecological Armageddon is already a reality or whether we hope the final reckoning can still be forestalled" (232–33). Unlike many anti-apocalyptic posthumanists (Haraway, Morton, and so on), Benedetti offers a critique of capitalist modernity that appears ultimately nostalgic. Her attack on apocalyptic thinking is motivated by a desire to preserve the world's current biological and cultural diversity for future generations against the looming threat of species extinction. In this important sense, we might say that Benedetti's anti-apocalypticism is optimistic, according to the definition that Lauren Berlant has sketched in her most well-known work, *Cruel Optimism*: "Whatever the *experience* of optimism is in particular, then, the *affective structure* of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that this time, nearness to this thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way" (2; italics in the original).

Benedetti's anti-apocalyptic manifesto is optimistically attached to the fantasy of a world that can still be set right. Her optimistic attachment to the pre-apocalyptic present is centered on the salvific power of literature. Her fascination with prophetic evocation expresses a desire for stability, which is born from a common experience of vulnerability and disorientation. As we have seen, Benedetti's tribute to the salvific power of literature inspires a nuanced and powerful critique of ecological fatalism. But it also means that Benedetti's manifesto can be read—against her intentions—as an articulation of clichéd thinking, or rather, as an endorsement of structurally dominant narratives (canonical literature) and imaginaries of power (anthropocentrism, Eurocentrism). To resist such a reading, we must engage further with the extraordinary, disquieting potential of Benedetti's approach. We need to bear in mind, *pace* Benedetti, that salvific literature, despite its appeal of quasi-natural and transhistorical solidity, is but another figment of humanity's inextricably woven lifeworld, and that, as such, it may need to be undone and remade, if we wish to continue to thrive on Earth, together with all other beings.

## Notes

Research for this article was carried out at the University of Heidelberg's Käte Hamburger Centre for Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic Studies (CAPAS), where I held a residential research fellowship in 2022–23. I thank the team at CAPAS and the organisers and coparticipants of our weekly reading group for inspiration and support.

1. Historians Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz discuss seven such neologisms (99–287). See also Mentz for a more recent overview, with references to twenty-four ‘cenes.
2. See also Niccolò Scaffai: “Il catastrofismo può rappresentare infatti anche una forma di esorcismo rispetto alle paure profonde; proprio per questo, le narrazioni più perturbanti sono quelle in cui la catastrofe non viene rappresentata mentre accade e in cui cause e dinamiche del disastro vengono esplicitate. Il rifiuto dell’esorcismo, disattivando la funzione consolatoria e deresponsabilizzante su cui si fondano le rappresentazioni apocalittiche più banali, può esprimere invece una riflessione ecologica complessa” (137).
3. Anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli defines the autological subject as a figure that is shaped by “discourses, practices, and fantasies about self-making, self-sovereignty, and the value of individual freedom” (135).
4. Thunberg is also discussed by Benedetti as an example of prophetic utterance: “Nei discorsi di Greta Thunberg colpisce l’assenza di termini come ‘capitalismo,’ non perché non lo consideri un male, al contrario, ma perché lo chiama in tutt’altro modo, con parole primarie, più semplici e vivide” (*Letteratura* 102).
5. I use the term *self-conscious Anthropocene* to refer to the period since approximately 2000, during which the Anthropocene has come into view as a transdisciplinary, generative concept and as an emergent *cultural dominant* in academia, policy, and society at large (Mussnug).
6. Philosopher Paolo Missiroli describes this fascination with novelty and rupture as the “promethean rhetoric” of the Anthropocene (31).
7. Latour discusses the concept of the “Earthbound” (*terrestre*) in *Facing Gaia* and, again, in *After Lockdown*. See also Luisetti.

## Works Cited

- Anders, Günther. “Die beweinte Zukunft.” *Endzeit und Zeitenende. Gedanken über die atomare Situation*, C. H. Beck, 1972, pp. 1–10.
- Benedetti, Carla. *La letteratura ci salverà dall’estinzione*. Einaudi, 2021.
- . *Lombra lunga dell’autore. Indagine su una figura cancellata*. Feltrinelli, 1999.
- Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke UP, 2011.
- . *On the Inconvenience of Other People*. Duke UP, 2022.
- Bonneuil, Christophe, and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz. *The Shock of the Anthropocene*. Translated by David Fernbach, Verso, 2015.
- Bracke, Astrid. *Climate Crisis and the 21st-Century British Novel*. Bloomsbury, 2018.
- Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture*. Princeton UP, 1995.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. “The Climate of History: Four Theses.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2009, pp. 197–222.
- Clark, Timothy. *The Value of Ecocriticism*. Cambridge UP, 2019.
- Colebrook, Claire. *Who Would You Kill to Save the World?* U of Nebraska P, 2023.
- Collins, John J. “What is Apocalyptic Literature?” *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*, edited by John J. Collins, Oxford UP, 2014, pp. 1–18.
- Danowski, Deborah, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. *The Ends of the World*. Translated by Rodrigo Nunes, Polity, 2017.

- Deer, Jemma. *Radical Animism: Reading for the End of the World*. Bloomsbury, 2021.
- DeLoughrey, Elizabeth. *Allegories of the Anthropocene*. Duke UP, 2019.
- Fagan, Madeleine. "Who's Afraid of the Ecological Apocalypse? Climate Change and the Production of the Ethical Subject." *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2017, pp. 225–44.
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. Routledge, 2004.
- Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing, U of Michigan P, 1997.
- Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke UP, 2016.
- Heise, Ursula K. *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meaning of Endangered Species*. U of Chicago P, 2016.
- Keller, Catherine. *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World*. Beacon, 1996.
- . *Facing Apocalypse: Climate, Democracy, and Other Last Chances*. Orbis, 2021.
- Klein, Naomi. *On Fire: The Burning Case for a Green New Deal*. Penguin, 2019.
- Kovacs, Judith, and Christopher Rowland. *Revelation: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ*. Blackwell, 2004.
- Kowalewski, Jakub. "Introduction". *The Environmental Apocalypse: Interdisciplinary Reflections on the Climate Crisis*, edited by Jakub Kowalewski, Routledge, 2023, pp. xiii–xvii.
- Latour, Bruno. *After Lockdown: A Metamorphosis*. Translated by Julie Rose, Polity, 2021.
- . *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*. Translated by Catherine Porter, Polity, 2018.
- . *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*. Translated by Catherine Porter, Polity, 2017.
- Luisetti, Federico. *Nonhuman Subjects: An Ecology of Earth-Beings*. Cambridge UP, 2023.
- Mentz, Steve. *Break Up the Anthropocene*. U of Minnesota P, 2019.
- Missiroli, Paolo. *Teoria critica dell'Antropocene. Vivere dopo la Terra, vivere nella Terra*. Mimesis, 2022.
- Morton, Timothy. *Being Ecological*. MIT Press, 2018.
- Mussnug, Florian. "World Literature and the Self-Conscious Anthropocene." *Literary Research / Recherche Littéraire*, vol. 36, 2021, pp. 207–14.
- O'Leary, Stephen. *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric*. Oxford UP, 1994.
- Povinelli, Elizabeth. *Between Gaia and Ground: Four Axioms of Existence and the Ancestral Catastrophe of Late Liberalism*. Duke UP, 2021.
- Radkau, Joachim. *The Age of Ecology*. Polity, 2014.
- Scaffai, Niccolò. *Letteratura e ecologia. Forme e temi di una relazione narrativa*. Carocci, 2017.
- Strathern, Marilyn. *Relations: An Anthropological Account*. Duke UP, 2020.
- Thaler, Mathias. *No Other Planet: Utopian Visions for a Climate-Changed World*. Cambridge UP, 2022.
- Ward, Graham. *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*. Cambridge UP, 2005.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *Living in the End Times*. Verso, 2010.
- Zylinska, Joanna. *The End of Man: A Feminist Counterapocalypse*. U of Minnesota P, 2018.