

The Unlikely Event

A few years ago, for reasons that escape me, I had it in my head that *Beowulf* was a poem about the end of the world. When I tried explaining this theory to a friend over Skype, he misheard me. “What do you mean by the end of the word?”

I was reading Homer at the time and chewing over a sustaining feature of epic poems: the idea of an aftermath. The *Iliad* rages forth by pushing past points of no return—Patroclus’s death, Hector’s death—and the *Odyssey* continues this thread, unraveling in the wake of a war that Odysseus struggles to escape. Reading these poems taught me that death rarely acted as a period, but rather, as a comma or itinerant semicolon; despite having lost everything, characters found ways to live beyond what they had experienced. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* deals similarly with journeys to and from the underworld, the apocalypse implied in the moment a beloved’s breath catches behind teeth. Often, in these poems the last word was a privilege bestowed not to the character dying, but to the poet.

I still believe that *Beowulf* is a poem about the end of the world, though not in the traditional way we envision the end. When Beowulf slays the water monster, Grendel, he does not know that Grendel’s mother will return with a taste for retribution; when he slays Grendel’s mother, he does not know that there will be a dragon waiting to deal him a mortal blow. Each battle masquerades as an epistemological dead end. As with the word “apocalypse,” derived from a Greek word for “revelation,” Beowulf cannot know what will happen until it happens, until it is revealed to him. The end of the world becomes a series of silences, monsters muted by the din of Beowulf’s heroism. Not only does it feel apocalyptic, but it’s somehow also *post*-apocalyptic as a poem that scrapes after what it means to grieve and be haunted by the unforeseen repercussions of one’s actions. Like death, the end of the world is nothing but a blind spot that we fill with fictions to carry us forward.

Religious texts, sci-fi literature, and films have given us the pretense of thinking that we know what the end will look like: environmental catastrophe, alien invasions, divine wrath. Nuclear warfare has brought us closer to the possibility of our own complete and stupid annihilation. Pandemics have crept back onto the table of probable causes. Yet we forget that even with its glamorous iconography of burning skies and falling angels, the apocalypse assumes a more terrible form when rendered intimate: Lear carrying a dead Cordelia in his arms, sobbing, *never, never, never, never, never*. For me, the apocalypse story was never about the aesthetic of large-scale destruction; it was always about how language falters when we need it most.

Ayesha Ramachandran posits in her book, *The Worldmakers*, that conceptions of “the world” in its totality were made possible through early modern thinkers. Instead of a divine creation, the world came to be an artifact shaped by human hands, susceptible to historical change, formed through studies in cartography, science, philosophy, and poetry. It is perhaps a special irony that, if literature is among the forces that can rework what we imagine the world to be, it can also disfigure, and not just through fictional space battles and cosmic horror. The apocalypse connotes the end of the world *as we know it*, and stories are what continually transform the ways we come to know the world. Apocalyptic grief does not stem from the finality of our beloved planet—we will be long gone before that actualises, no matter how careless we remain in wrecking it—but from an expiration date on the ability to witness and describe our lives on it. The source of anxiety is the question of *when*.

Literature has honed an expectation for meaning in endings. As Frank Kermode writes in *The Sense of an Ending*, it is common to feel that we live at the end of times, because demise means all the more to us if we’re not simply dying in medias res. In fact, though, death in medias res would make for a more generative thought experiment. Bereft of assurance, we’d be forced to reflect on everything that *could have* unfolded, had we more time. Beowulf understood it well: we do not know the extent of what we have to lose. There’s a poem that I keep close to my heart as a reminder of this—W.S. Merwin’s “To the Unlikely Event,” which exacerbates the scope of loss by admitting how near to impossibility we live. The poem addresses the “unlikely event,” a

phrase we use to pretend that disaster is meaningful while ignoring the blank truth that *every* event is unlikely. We exist in the aftermath of every grim and beautiful thing that has come before us; what may seem commonplace and predictable exists in spite of infinitesimally narrow odds. And frankly, it is only when figuring the extent of our potential loss that we see clearly a landscape of love, drawn in language. What happens when, as the poem muses, “we turn / at the last minute to put it / into words what is there to say / that seems even possible”? What, indeed, would happen if we asked language not to be the apocalyptic prophet, or even the messiah, but simply, the quiet appreciator of life? When I first read Merwin’s poem as a dream-addled teenager, I penciled my own list of unlikely things in the margins of the book: bad jokes, online chat groups, libraries, 80s synth pop, dancing at night, four-chambered hearts, crushes. Being the age I was, I did not yet know what I had to lose. I only had the impulse to remember and be remembered, and that these things were important, even if I did not know why.

Epic poems are no strangers to invocations of futurity. Beowulf’s tale ends with the elegiac line, “leodum liðost ond lofgeornost,” which Seamus Heaney translates as “kindest to his people and keenest to win fame.” The words open forwards and backwards in time. Literature affords the privilege of a certain temporal movement that we will not have when the world ends. A fragment of Sappho speaks of how “someone, I tell you, / will remember us, / even in another time,” but what if we cannot be promised even that? The end of the world may as well be the end of the word. Without language to lift us across the mire of inchoate encounters, without the final line of Merwin’s poem, uttered like a prayer—*oh be unlikely forever*—we are left to face a future that does not, and will not, remember us.