

*Exploring the Postmodern Apocalyptic Narrative:
A Jamesonian Reading of Etel Adnan's
Master of the Eclipse*

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Abstract. The tale of the apocalypse is considered a current subject of debate that has captivated the attention of postmodern writers. Similarly, in a postmodern atmosphere, Etel Adnan's masterpiece, *Master of the Eclipse* (2009), problematizes the traditional apocalyptic narrative. Thus, this study sheds light on the postmodern deconstructive aspect of Adnan's literary text, involving how the author challenges the traditional apocalyptic narrative by foregrounding postmodern apocalyptic subjects. This last includes constant violence, international terror, the downfall of communities, and the subjection of human beings to world crises. These themes subvert the traditional apocalyptic narrative that establishes order, linearity and harmony and calls for Utopia. This study also highlights the collapse of historical metanarrative by drawing upon Frederic Jameson's notion of 'historical deafness'¹ and its consequences on the postmodern subject, including 'schizophrenia' and the 'waning of affect'. It also examines the role of art, a remedy presented as a counter-response to turbulent postmodern times. It transpired that the postmodern vision advocates historical authenticity and reflects a pessimistic society's experiences of despair and the loss of reality.

Keywords: Etel Adnan, *Master of the Eclipse*, Frederic Jameson, Historical Deafness, Schizophrenia

¹ Historical Deafness: One identifiable marker of postmodern thought, according to Frederic Jameson, is "historical deafness": history is no longer of any value to a postmodern protagonist who denies its relevance and instead preoccupies himself with the present and the now.

Schizophrenia: The experience of postmodernity is too fragmented, multiple, and overloaded with information to be understood through paranoia as well as it is understood through schizophrenia. (Danielle Bukowski)

Waning of Affect: A feature of the new depthlessness in art attributed to the cultural transformation known as postmodernism as described in Frederic Jameson's essay "Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" (1984)

Introduction

The late nineteenth century witnessed unprecedented prosperity in the social, economic and political aspects of life, which, in effect, altered drastically due to the technological evolution, essentially, and also the advancement of scientific studies. Nonetheless, this surpassing development did not have benevolent intentions when technological advance led to the creation of the atomic bomb. Indeed, during the Second World War, the nuclear bomb, ironically the zenith of human genius, resulted in the murder of millions, shaping a world of terror, apprehension and devastation. Therefore, constant natural and unnatural disasters prompted people to conceptualise how the end would be or, in another sense, to imagine 'the apocalypse'.

Historically speaking, the tale of the apocalypse has been deemed a timeless myth that has fascinated the imagination of ancient cultures and civilisations, such as the Egyptians, Mesopotamians and Greeks. This attraction is because "the apocalyptic temper is an attempt by a culture that is genuinely puzzled and deeply disturbed to understand itself and its own time" (Dewey 1990: 10). Hence, the apocalyptic vision, hypothesising the termination of the world crisis, comforts an exhausted humanity that wishes nothing but to end the constant global turmoil. The term 'apocalypse' can be linked to the ultimate devastation of the world portrayed in the Book of Revelation (the last book of the New Testament). In this sense, the Collins dictionary demonstrates that the term apocalypse is rooted in the Greek word *apocalypsis*, which means 'unveiling or 'uncovering'. It was first used to refer to God's revelation to St John of Patmos, showing the continuous struggle between benevolent and malevolent forces and God's final judgment upon humankind. Although the conventional apocalyptic narrative panicked individuals, who felt unsure whether or not they would be exonerated on Judgement Day, it also diffuses optimism and maintains hope and faith in God's will.

The concept of the apocalypse, in effect, has also been incorporated into literary studies. According to Richard Taylor, in his book *Interpreting the Apocalyptic Literature*, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the broader field of apocalyptic literature came to the foreground in light of the Book of Revelation thanks to investigation by the German scholar Frederick Luck (2016: 24). Thus, this term was not only manifest in theology, but also in literature, where it referred to, "A genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, ... an apocalypse is intended to interpret present, earthly circumstances in the light of the supernatural world, and to influence both the understanding and the behaviour of the audience by means of divine authority" (qtd. in Taylor 2016: 31–32). In this sense, apocalyptic literature contains prophecies disclosed

by supernatural messengers, such as angels or heavenly creatures, to a human prophet. By interpreting social anarchy within the religious context, apocalyptic literature tells its audience that the chaotic status quo is temporary, and that everything, in the end, should settle down. Thereupon, God intervenes, first, to impose justice and then to judge mankind's deeds, thus, salvation is the reward for the faithful and punishment is given to those who failed to correct their faults.

Interestingly, in the postmodern epoch, the conventions of the traditional apocalyptic narrative have been shaken. In this context, Josef Broeck advances the claim that "the apocalyptic genre in the 1980 s emancipated itself from its historical and biblical roots, so there is no common agreement on the form, content, or function of apocalyptic thinking or writing" (1985: 94). Thence, the hopeful apocalyptic version, entailing God's salvation, shifts to become more pessimistic and distant from its theological context, assuming human extinction and punishment. Subsequently, from this platform, postmodern writers deconstruct the traditional apocalyptic narrative asserting the fallacy of God's salvation and the inevitability of a gloomy end scenario.

The meaning of the term apocalypse itself shifts drastically from denoting a divine narrative entailing punishment and reward to a term referring to the conclusive terror or devastation. The loss of hope in God, in addition to the loss of hope in Enlightenment and reason accused of being responsible for increasing worldly terror, such as the atomic bomb, and later on the Gulf war, led to the emergence of a new apocalyptic paradigm that demolishes the earlier optimistic traditional apocalyptic framework and mirrors current global violence and its effect on human beings (May 1972: 72). Contemporary apocalypticism, unlike the traditional version, arrives at a pessimistic conclusion in the sense that all humankind are unable to escape God's punishment simply because they are beyond rejuvenation.

Among the postmodern writers interested in the postmodern apocalyptic worldview is the American-Syrian writer Etel Adnan. She was born in 1925 in Beirut to a Greek mother and a Syrian father. Etel studied at the Sorbonne University in Paris where she got a degree in philosophy, then becoming a poet, essayist and visual artist. Her prose piece *Master of the Eclipse* (2009) had international appeal and was awarded the Arab American Book Award. Another significant achievement was the publication of *Sitt Marie Rose* (2011), which was awarded the France-Pays Arabes.

Therefore, this paper attempts to establish ties between postmodernism and apocalyptic fiction. It then examines Etel Adnan's fiction from a postmodern perspective by drawing upon Frederic Jameson's criticism. In particular, this

contribution of this study lies in reading notions of “historical deafness”, “schizophrenia” and “waning of affect” into Etel Adnan’s *Master of the Eclipse*.

1. Theoretical Background

1.1. A Cultural Approach to Postmodernism

Postmodernism is considered one of the foremost disputable terms in literary theory and criticism. Nonetheless, postmodernism was first coined within the 1940s as a reference to a reaction against the modern movement in architecture. The development spread more within the 1960s, being particularly spread by American social and cultural critics like Susan Sontag and Leslie Fiedler, who considered it a ‘new sensibility’ in writing that either rejected modernism with its trends and techniques or accepted and expanded them. The development does not incorporate only architecture and literary criticism, but also other angles of study such as social, cultural, and other fields such as media studies, visual arts, philosophy and history. This divergence in the utilisation of the term overloaded it with meaning when it was utilised to depict the characteristics of the social and political scene, in addition to being applied to cultural production.

To explain further, the postmodern movement fosters a strong reaction to the ideologies of modernism; nonetheless, the attitude of postmodernism towards modernism is controversial. Some critics claim that postmodernism is a radical break from modernism, dating back to the end of the 1950s or early 1960s. Others see postmodernism as a complex cultural phenomenon related to different aspects of contemporary life, including literature, art, philosophy, history, linguistics, economics, architecture and fiction. A set of definitions are given to the cultural concept of postmodernism by many theoreticians, including Jean-François Leotard, Jürgen Habermas, and Frederic Jameson, who explains the idea in *Postmodernism and Consumer Society* as follows:

A periodizing concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and new economic order what is often called ... consumer society, the society, the society of the media, or the spectacle ... This new moment of capitalism can be dated from the postwar boom in the United States in the late 1940s and early '50s or, in France, from the establishment of the Fifth Republic in 1958 (1983: 113).

Further, Jameson believes that “historical deafness” and “schizophrenia” are features of the postmodern age. The postmodern subject with “heightened intensity bearing a mysterious charge of affect”, experiences schizophrenia due to the loss of historicity (1983: 73). In other words, the loss of historicity

renders the postmodern subject unable to make a connection between the past and the future; thus, he or she is unable to form a homogeneous experience of the present. This status, according to Jameson, is viewed as schizophrenic and the subject under its influence is characterised by “a charge of affect” (ibid.), an energy coming from despair, anxiety. Most importantly, the subject collides with what is called ‘the loss of reality’, a notion usually associated with Jean Baudrillard. The loss of historicity was not unprecedented as Benedict Anderson suggests that it has not always been with us, but might be a product of modernity and the Enlightenment, a way of bringing order into the past, present and future. Here, one can also point to the changing meaning of calendars, from listing (eternal and unchanging) days of saints to commemorating historical events that took place on a specific date so and so many years ago (1983: 23).

To Jameson, postmodernity started with the emergence of late capitalism, which led to a series of development in contemporary culture. On the other hand, in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* Jean Baudrillard argues that there is a rupture between modernism and postmodernism “the end of labour. The end of production. The end of political economy. The end of the signifier/signified dialectic...this historical and social mutation is legible at every level. In this way the era of simulation is announced everywhere...everywhere we see the genius of simulacra” (2016: 30).

The economic system characterised as being a mode of production alters radically, in the sense that it becomes no longer a relationship between owners and labourers. In the modern period, private owners monopolised the means of production to make financial profit, exploiting this transaction in the workers’ bodies under what is called the capitalist system. Nevertheless, in the postmodern age, ‘the simulacrum’ is “the generation by models of a real without origin” (1994: 170); that is to say, an imaginary copy of reality generated by technology and media determines a new social system in which the image precedes reality resulting in the loss of reality. Consequently, Baudrillard assumes the occurrence of a remarkable break in history that establishes the end of the modern period and the beginning of a postmodern period dominated by a simulation of reality that is exercised by technology and the media. Ashley Woodward sates that “postmodernism as a mode of thought is often accused of being nihilistic, and postmodernity is often seen as a nihilistic state of society” (2009: 51). Actually, postmodernism dismantles the fundamental conceptions that were once taken for granted as the narratives that explain the world to human beings, for example politics, religion and history. In this context, Jean-François Lyotard describes postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarratives”, and goes on to ask “where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside?” (1984: XXV).

Whence some critics discard postmodernism as it implies the dissolution of Western values, morals and metanarratives, the institutions that explain the world through, for example, religion, science and history. Despite the fact that human endeavours to discover meaning have not ceased, a gloomier outlook on life emerged, heralding the dawn of the postmodern era.

1.2. History, Historicity and Postmodernism

Before positioning the concept of ‘historicity’ in literary criticism, a literal or primary meaning is required in order to differentiate between the terms ‘history’ and ‘historicity’. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term historicity denotes “historical authenticity”, meaning that events that occurred in the past have existence, or in simpler words, they happened. Another definition to the term, which extends this meaning, is “the condition of having actually occurred in history, authenticity”. Particularly in a matter of historical occurrence, the historicity of an event implies its validity as being real or true. Sometimes, certain past events come under suspicion, and so in such as case to use historicity guarantees its authenticity. A further itemised explanation of the term is:

Historicity has emerged within anthropology to refer to cultural perceptions of the past... The concept is in essential tension with the meaning of the term as ‘factuality’ within the discipline of history and in wider society. Anthropologists also sometimes compose histories within this western paradigm, but historicity in anthropology orientates a different objective, namely to discover the ways (beyond Western historicism) in which people, whether within or outside the west, construe and represent the past (Stewart 2016: 01).

That is to say, the term historicity, essentially, originates within anthropological studies in opposition to ‘facts’ in order to serve the purpose of indicating the different versions constructed outside Western historicism and how are they constructed. This would have a real benefit because anthropologists include their historical composition in the Western paradigm.

The interplay between history and historicity is noteworthy. In this context, Gauthier Vanhouse states that: “history is a succession of answers and questions which are revealed in the questioning one undertakes in regard to them. Historicity is the constant presence of the question-answer difference, thanks to which an identity of reality, which we call ‘reality’, is available to us” (2007: 358). That is to say, history deals with the examination of past human events registered via remaining manuscripts and documents. On the other hand,

historicity is the study of historical authenticity to validate whether historical events and figures truly existed or whether they belong to myths, *ergo* historicity reveals real events that happened in the past. Undoubtedly, “for a long time it has been a widespread notion that narrative and history were sister arts, working hand in hand to the end of representing experience faithfully, and, at the same time, of gaining the reader’s mind; they were performing equivalent tasks, in an almost bi-dimensional paradigm” (De Bhar 2009: 209–210). In a previous time, history was told through narratives to reveal what happened in the past with the historian providing a faithful representation of the past; however, representing history has become highly significant in the postmodern age.

Frederic Jameson raises this issue in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*: “The problem of representation, and most particularly of the representation of history: as has already been suggested, this is essentially a narrative problem, a question of the adequacy of any storytelling framework in which history might be represented” (2020: 49). Thence, postmodernism debates the representation of history in narratives and, in particular, the storyteller. The historical record is thus a collection of historical metafiction, a version that demonstrates the lack of objectivity and transparency when documenting history. In this context Francis Fukuyama literally and positively identified the end of history with American liberal democracy and contemporary capitalism (Timofeeva 2014: 56).

1.3 History in Postmodern Apocalyptic Fiction

The existence of a link between the apocalypse and postmodernism is noteworthy in the sense that postmodernism entails apocalyptic scenarios. To explain further, subjects such as the end of history, constant terror and nuclear and environmental disasters are widespread in postmodern apocalyptic narratives. Essentially, these kinds of narrative echo the communities’ despondency when history is drastically ruptured, causing as an outcome a common sense of anxiety and despair. In the same vein, as elaborated earlier, postmodernism scrutinises metanarratives, among them history evokes an attitude of uncertainty and scepticism about history. That is to say, history under the postmodern umbrella is never objective and is thus “dehistoricized” (Foucault 2005: 02). Postmodernism resists foundationalism and universal values, rejects the validity of science and questions religion and history. “Postmodernity taken in this way suggests the demise or fragmentation of the grand narratives of history, the traditional apocalyptic narrative included. The historical narrative has, therefore, come to be doubted as something which carries any claim to truth, nor can it any longer be accepted as having a meaningful shape or direction” (Humphreys

2011: 6). The collapse of historical metanarrative in postmodern literature, for example in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, is remarkable, a case in point that "drifts away from grand narratives and official historical records, and focuses on the local and the limited" (Mandrecardo 2010: 52).

2. Discussion

2.1. The Postmodern Apocalyptic Mood

Etel Adnan begins the first section in her book, also entitled "Master of the Eclipse", with thought-provoking sentences advanced by the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin. In her endeavours to highlight the poet's place in the contemporary world, she wonders through Friedrich Hölderlin's words: "...what are poets for in these destitute times?", replying "...but only poets found that which will endure" (Etel 2009: 3). Through these epigraphs Etel reveals her sensitivity towards the world's nightmarish status quo and the downfall of Arab countries, responding through her poetic voice in a piece of prose.

In the opening to the book, Etel narrates her journey heading towards Sicily, when she recalls painfully the memories of wounded Iraq in the summer of 1991. Her narration echoes the apocalyptic mood and the international terror: "...bombs are falling...on Iraq; the country is being destroyed; ...looked irreversible and the outcome bound to be annihilation" (ibid.). Interestingly, the atmosphere of the narrative is one of preoccupation with death and anxiety, going on to say that terrorism, "the apocalyptic narrative in this sense includes ideas about the end of history, the spectre of nuclear annihilation, genocide, millennialism, and terrorism" (Humphreys 2011: 5). This style mirrors Etel's fascination with the apocalypse, something that is not unusual for her as she has already published *The Arab Apocalypse*, a ravishing piece on contemporary Arab cataclysm, calamities, constant violence and "an immersion into a rapture of chaos clawing toward destiny, and nullified hope refusing its zero" (49). The reflection on the link between aesthetics and politics was sparked by the intertextual dance between written and visual aspects: "Adnan evokes the extreme tension and violence of the war by using an abrupt telegraphic style, as well as by punctuating her verses with abstract symbols that provide a rhythm for the entire poem" (Naef 7). In addition, in Etel Adnan's book *There: In the Light and the Darkness of the Self and of the Other*, the cataclysmic future of the millenniums and the dazzling postapocalyptic world are not promised. As an alternative, Etel insistently establishes the text's postapocalyptic present as an actuality (Ignacio 2014: 305).

In recounting the adventures of Gibelina's summer poetry festival, Etel again evokes an apocalyptic mood: "I am in the midst of the Gulf war: a movie is passing in front of my eyes but the images...tell me that Iraq is being crushed under bombs" (5). Interestingly, she is an outcast from reality and immersed in the movie, an idea linked to Jean Baudrillard's legacy in media theories. In this context, Ashley Woodward explains Baudrillard's notion of changed meaning in the postmodern world:

The transparency Baudrillard associates with contemporary nihilism is the loss of the distance between representation and the real that comes with simulation. Baudrillard argues that when simulations no longer refer to an independent real, there is a confusion between models and their referents, which results in a kind of generalized epistemological nihilism (2002: 97).

Interestingly, Etel's apocalyptic vision is clearly portrayed once more in her description of the canvas in the artist's studio. In depicting the canvas, she mentions "canvases earth coloured...are covered with layers of diluted ochre acrylics...dispersed marks mean to signify airports outposts...they could also mean tracks left by the American armored vehicles that are equipped with low-level radioactive weapons... Iraq with its battlegrounds is being transferred...by an Italian painter who's declaring his horror through maps" (Etel 2009: 6). In addition to writing, painting also helps to convey the despair and depression of the postmodern period, even the use of colours – 'earth coloured', 'ochre' – evokes a sensory image in the reader. Not unrelated to Etel's poetry is the aesthetic style of *The Arab Apocalypse*, because "colour as noticed...reinforces the influence of Baudelaire's aesthetic, particularly his view of colour as a compositional element in painting and poetry" (Scott 1988: 39).

Furthermore, the apocalyptic mood fits in well with readings at the summer poetry festival: "a dirge poem about bulls trembling in fog and death sentences pursuing the East...mixing talk with his poems, he was going back and forth, declaring that emigrants suffer from knots, ulcers, cancer... he went on reading about people drinking seawater and women wading in the twin rivers of Iraq" (Etel 2009: 10). Etel's apocalyptic mood not pertaining only to the Iraq war, but also to the war in Vietnam, is found in her account of the American movie *Apocalypse Now*: "Schlöndorff would create his own version of the tragic opera that armies stage by their very actions in the midst of ruined landscapes... You're all nihilists, aren't you?/We're all the contemplatives of an on-going apocalypse?" (Etel 2009: 34). Postmodernism untangles the totalitarian narratives that are used to explain the world; consequently, a nihilistic atmosphere spreads intensely in the Western world. Anthony Harrigan comments in this context:

The essence of post-modernism is nihilistic-the denial of any meaning or purpose in existence-or, more exactly, the triumph of nihilism in societies of the western world. It is a phenomenon identical with atheism as it denies the existence of any permanent ethic order. It marks a turning away from the moral teaching that have come down to us from Moses and brought to their highest level in Christianity. Nihilism is worse barbarians of antiquity at least based their lives on tribal rules (1998: 24).

Moreover, the postmodern stylistic strategies of *Master of the Eclipse* also craft an apocalyptic mood, noticeably in the use of intertextuality. In describing the actress brought from Naples, the narrator states: “her long hair was *Catching Fire*, reflecting the light of the long candles that were the guardian angels of the ceremony” (Etel 2009: 7). The words “Catching Fire” allude to one of the best-known dystopian science fiction novels, Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*. The use of intertextuality in postmodern literature is noteworthy: “Postmodernism embraces an extreme notion of intertextuality, in which the play of meaning is infinite, in which anything goes. The limits of interpretation are set only by the boundaries of the imagination” (Sim 2001: 250). Thence, it can be said that the significance of the ‘catching fire’ scene in *The Hunger Games* (2013), in which the protagonist Catniss displays her dress, releasing fire and defying Mr Snow, gives rise to a profound meaning in *Master of the Eclipse*. And we should not forget the transformation of the dress into a mocking jay, a symbol of revolution that gives hope to the citizens. In *Master of The Eclipse*, the character not only mesmerises the audience, with candlelight reflecting in her hair, but also introduces a note of hope. The chandeliers, which “...offered such a contrast with the austere stone walls, were dimmed” (2009: 8). In this sense, by referring to Catniss in *Master of the Eclipse*, the character spreads optimism.

2.2. Revisiting History

In *The Politics of Historical Vision*, Steven Best highlights the symptoms of the postmodern condition. Postmodernism, he says, generates scepticism and constant fear as it shakes the meta-narratives of the Western tradition, including history. “Postmodern visions of history typically see no progress or directional tendencies in history, deny the authority of science and validity of facts and causal and objective analysis, and reject foundationalism and universal values” (Best 1995: 26). In the same vein, Etel denounces history through the words of the professor: “History, History! What a junkyard for the human race’s stupid deeds!” (Etel 2009: 37). What seems evident is that history, according to the postmodern worldview, does not offer or anticipate either order or harmony, it

exposes human decadence, degeneration and subjugation. In an essay entitled "Nietzsche, Genealogy and History", Michel Foucault says that "Humanity does not gradually progress from combat to combat until it arrives at universal reciprocity, where the rule of law finally replaces warfare; humanity installs each of its violence in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination" (1977: 377–378). Foucault's conjecture responds to the hegemony which some ruling systems impose on less powerful classes, an action promulgated under, supposedly, laws. This irony is obvious in Buland's words: "none of them reach the bottom of truth and that truth is simple: the pleasure to kill is the greatest of pleasures. We made of history the justification of that pleasure... We ask little girls to kiss bombs that will be sent to smash other people's skulls" (Etel 2009: 35).

To this extent, the postmodern apocalyptic narrative excels in exposing past crises and historical black holes, circumstances clearly portrayed in the narrator's thoughts. When she is watching the news, a series of apocalyptic events is seen on the TV: "...an earthquake in Iran, a flood south of the Sahara...the burning of Baghdad's main library...the disappearance of its National Museum...a line out of Walter Benjamin's Theses on the Philosophy of History shot through my mind...even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins" (Etel 2009: 40). Indeed, history considered as 'his-story' does not articulate any occurrence or authenticity, a condition that pertains to the postmodern apocalyptic paradigm.

In the same line as Benjamin's thought, Frederic Jameson also challenges the metanarrative of history: "we are condemned to seek history by way of our own pop images and a simulacrum of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach" (1991: 25). To put it in other words, in the postmodern age, the mass media simulates reality, which makes the real indistinguishable from the unreal. Consequently, human conception of past events is modified as the present disbands and the past vanishes. In this context, English history, a non-totalitarian entity, is therefore under investigation through Etel's words: "History itself is before me, riding a horse, personified by an authentic prince and princes. But would Charles become King of England? Isn't Mrs Thatcher the one who exercises real power in the country? Charles becomes a symbol, a drawing on a page. History does not depend on his will". Through Etel's words, history is incarnated in the figure of Charles, who subsequently becomes a symbol, or a simulacrum, "a breakdown of the signifying chain" (1991: 27).

The intervention of the mass media in the postmodern age renders subjects schizophrenic with "a mysterious charge of affect...described in the negative terms of anxiety and loss of reality, but which one could just as well imagine

in the positive terms of euphoria, a high, an intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity” (Jameson 1991: 28).

The passage stated above alludes to Friedrich Hegel’s famous comment in *The Philosophy of History* about Napoleon: “world history on horseback”. After meeting Napoleon, Hegel became amazed by his achievements in war and considered him a heroic historical figure. It is also a reference to the Hegelian view that history is the outcome of human endeavour (1956: 45); Frederic then objects to this view as he does not believe that history depends on Prince Charles’s will. Throughout this passage Jameson problematises and rethinks the understanding of historical events.

Among postmodernist poetics is historiographic metafiction, which bridges the gap between history and literature. In using historiographic metafiction as a mode of presentation, Etel criticised history, rewriting a new version to create a sense of historicity and restore the human relationship with the past. It is worth noting the importance of French historian Pierre Nora’s studies of so-called sites of memory – “*lieux de mémoire*” – and the role these sites, such as a monument, a museum, a cultural landmark, play in relating people in the here and now to past events (1996: 13). Therefore, “*lieux de memoire*” contribute to the creation of a sense of historicity.

The approach of postmodern writers to history and the past involves rewriting, revisiting and remembering it. The label of ‘historiographic metafiction’ gathers narratives that engage with the past and self-consciously interrogate the way in which history is recorded. In response to Fredric Jameson’s prognosis of the loss of the sense of historicity in postmodernity, historiographic metafiction actively promotes a sense of historicity and of thinking through our relationship with the past. (Mandrecardo 2010: 271)

Relying on historiographic metafiction in her narrative, Etel influences readers’ understanding of political and historical events and also reconnects them to the past. The employment of historiographic metafiction in postmodern fiction is an attempt to cover the lack of historical authenticity in postmodernity.

2.3. Art as a Remedy in Turbulent Postmodern Times

In Etel’s debate about Iraqi poets with Mister Professor, a projection of the poet’s role today is emphasised. Etel believes that poets are a “mystery, but we nevertheless read them” (Etel 2009: 41). She draws attention to the Iraqi poet whose ambiguity lays in his “obsession with angels” (*ibid.*). In addition, she believes that “poets deal with the invisible” (Etel 2009: 42), an idea that seemed unpleasant to the professor. To convince the professor and to support her claim, she exemplifies her point with Paul Klee, a Swiss-born German artist

who “was assigned to paint airplane wings. After the war he devoted himself to the task of changing the world through art” (*ibid.*). In effect, through time and place, art, whether painting or writing, always manages to influence individual views and promote universal values less cherished in the postmodern age. For instance, in his paintings, Paul Klee captured the invisible disgrace of war as a sort of catharsis.

Later, during his illness, Klee returned to his passion for angels, which became a recurring motif in his work, especially in 1938. They’re among Klee’s best-known paintings. Interestingly, the persistent appeal of angels may have something to do with the fact that, like humans, they have faults and vulnerabilities and are capable of being humorous, anxious, or even wicked at times (*Amazon*):

The advent of World War II threw him into a panic. He returned to his preoccupation with angels. While he was disintegrating in his body, literally drying up, he had a series of visions of angels that he recorded, made visible, in drawings and paintings. Their ominous presence constituted an avalanche: Archangel, Angelus Militants, Vigilant Angel, Angel Overflowing, Angel from a Star (43).

Surprisingly, Walter Benjamin, the German critic and philosopher who purchased one of his paintings, named *Angelus Novus* in 1921, expresses it thusly in his 1940 essay “Theses on the Philosophy of History”:

Angelus Novus shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (1969: 249).

Accordingly, Benjamin’s “angel of history” idea, inspired by *Angelus Novus*, appears as a dismal perspective on history as a never-ending cycle of desolation; or, put slightly differently, the importance of art is manifested in the way that Klee’s *Angelus Novus* influences Benjamin’s thinking on history.

Nonetheless, it noteworthy that art also comes under severe criticism in the postmodern age as it loses its ‘aura’ or originality due to the rise of

photography, which duplicates original works of art. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin says:

One might subsume the eliminated in the term “aura” and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence (2008: 1).

In other words, the original piece of art represents a unique copy, unlike the photograph which is a copy of the original work of art. Therefore, photography and also film, by duplicating the originality of art minimise its value. This distances the work of art from its originality, and the artist from the audience.

Etel continues to convince the professor that poets are similar to angels because “There are realms for which only poets have keys... When Klee drew that angel, he endowed him with the totality of his metaphysical vision. That angel is not only the angel of history but also the angel of the future, a future whose cataclysms will continue and surpass those of the past” (Etel 2009: 45). Indeed, art exposes the worries and dilemmas of communities, but assists them in enduring the burden of life, even suggesting remedies. In this sense, metanarratives can be created with artistic means and, thus, new values emerge that inspire hope and meaning. In addition, the poet’s responsibility lies in influencing society through his or her voice, or, as they say, “the pen is mightier than the sword”. Poets can engage their audiences in a unique realm where they approach the world with more profound angels. According to Etel, Klee “is the prototype of the poets (poet/philosophers, and artists) who will deal with these destitute times. That’s what poets are for: to be the energy, to take part in the perennial physical and spiritual battles waged for the destiny of man” (Etel 2009: 46).

Conclusion

Through her vibrant masterpiece *Master of the Eclipse* Etel Adnan voices the sensibilities of postmodernity. Unlike the traditional apocalyptic narrative that calls for order and harmony, the postmodern apocalyptic version believes in the disruption of history, revealing postmodern age predicaments including terrorism and nuclear destruction. For long stretches of time, history, a totalising entity, in effect, became subject to criticism in the postmodern context. Ultimately, Etel presents art, including poetry, as a solution to coping with and

thus overcoming the burden of the destitute postmodern era. It is certainly true that poetry targets the emotions and feelings of its audience and delves into the mysteries of the world. For Etel, the poet deals with the invisible, granting his or her readers a deeper level of understanding.

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