Apocalyptic Eschatology and The Transcendence of Death in William Gibson's *Neuromancer*

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Apocalyptic is in the air. Few words are more ubiquitous, few notions more widespread. The doomsday predictions associated with the recent 2012 "Mayan Apocalypse" are merely the latest peak in a decades-long trend where people have become progressively more inclined to understand the world and their place in it through the lens of the apocalyptic worldview. Traditionally, apocalyptic speculation has expressed itself most prominently in a mode that has its roots in the ancient biblical books of Daniel and the Revelation of John. But a new, secular mode of apocalypticism has recently developed alongside the traditional biblical mode. It reflects a re-positioning of the worldview in light of the postulates and claims that make up what we know as modernity. The perception of the current ecological crisis as an *apocalyptic* event is only one illustration of a global phenomenon that also has economic, political, sociological, and cultural dimensions.

Foremost among the cultural expressions of secular apocalypticism is science fiction. One reason for this is the elasticity of the notion of "apocalyptic," which in the current vernacular translates into anything associated with disaster and loss of life on a planetary scale. This meshes well with a genre naturally invested in speculative stories about the future; the idea of "post-apocalyptic" is in fact an invention of the science-fictional imagination and a regular staple of the genre. Another reason is that science fiction almost by definition excludes the element of supernatural agency and explanation.[1] It is thus unsurprising to find science fiction freighting literary examples of apocalypticism in its secular mode. More specifically, certain

1. This does not restrict the genre's ability to explore religions and religious themes, or to parody them. The sub-genre of religious science fiction is a grey area. At one end of the spectrum is tendentious theology cloaked in science-fictional dress. At the other is speculative fiction informed by the author's religious beliefs, e.g., C.S. Lewis's Perelandra trilogy.

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science-fiction works of an elevated literary stature employ key elements of the apocalyptic worldview to explore long-standing questions of time, space, and human destiny in a meaningful fashion within a secular-scientific cultural framework.[2]

A superb example is William Gibson's classic 1984 novel *Neuromancer*, which has generated much critical reflection,[3] most of which focuses on its postmodern stance, dystopian setting, and cyberpunk style.[4] Yet the role of apocalyptic eschatology and the theme of transcendence in the novel have been relatively underappreciated. Before describing the ways in which these elements influence its structure and ideas, it is necessary to define a few central terms.[5]

Apocalypticism is the worldview which underwrites apocalyptic literature, eschatology, and social movements. It cannot be described by a single feature, function, or motif. Instead, it is best understood as the distinctive combination of axioms that are not necessarily apocalyptic in themselves. Apocalypticism presumes the existence of a transcendent reality, which defines time, space, and human destiny, yet is concealed from casual observation and remains beyond the pale of intellection and worldly experience. It presumes that mundane reality is constitutionally structured

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2. Peter Y. Paik, *From Utopia to Apocalypse: Science Fiction and the Politics of Collapse* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

3. William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace, 1984). Citations to the novel are by chapter (§) and page number in the hardcover Ace edition (1994). Italics in direct quotations are original.

4. For bibliographies, see Dani Cavallero, *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture: Science Fiction and the Work of William Gibson* (London/New Brunswick, NJ: Althone, 2000), Markus Säbel, "Cyberspace—Cyborg—AI: Technologie in William Gibsons *Neuromancer*," *Inklings: Jahrbuch für Literatur und Ästhetik* 18 (2000), 250–71, Carl B. Yoke and Carol L. Robinson, ed., *The Cultural Influences of William Gibson, the "Father" of Cyberpunk Science Fiction* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2007), and the William Gibson page on the *Science Fiction Studies* website.

5. Veronica Hollinger argues that *Neuromancer* is "anti-apocalyptic" because it denies apocalyptic revelation where it is expected, as for example when Case hacks the critical data from the Straylight computer, or when Wintermute speaks to Case at the end of the novel. What she means by "apocalyptic" is not spelled out, however, and she confuses "revelation" with "apocalyptic". See "Notes on the Contemporary Apocalyptic Imagination: William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and Douglas Coupland's *Girlfriend in a Coma*," in Jean-François Leroux and Camille R. La Bossière, eds., *Worlds of Wonder* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2004), 47–56.

by two opposite, antagonistic, and irreducible forces, typically identified with good and evil, which have been in conflict since the dawn of history. It furthermore presumes the imminence and inevitability of the final resolution of this conflict. Together, these axioms describe an *apocalyptic minimum* by which cultural expressions and social movements may be identified as apocalyptic.[6]

Eschatology is the study or doctrine of the last things. It has temporal and teleological dimensions, in the sense that an eschatological perspective looks forward to an expected future, as well as backward from that future. Knowing or predicting the future inevitably influences the present.

Apocalyptic eschatology is the eschatology of the apocalyptic worldview.[7] As such, it differs from other types of eschatologies. Many attempts have been made to isolate the nature of this difference. John J. Collins offers the best proposal, which identifies the distinguishing element as the hope for the transcendence of death.[8] Although it is not clear whether apocalyptic eschatology may be distilled to a single hallmark element,[9] the *centrality* of the hope for the transcendence of death cannot be disputed.

How does *Neuromancer* compare against these benchmarks? On the one hand, it is not an apocalypse.[10] Nor can the novel be classified as

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6. For a full study, accompanied by an appendix on methodology and a glossary of terms, see L. DiTommaso, *The Architecture of Apocalypticism*, forthcoming from Oxford University Press.

7. Some scholars define it as the eschatology of the apocalypses, but the distinction is unimportant to the present discussion.

8. John J. Collins, "Apocalyptic Eschatology as the Transcendence of Death," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 36 (1974), 21–43, and *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 11–12.

9. In the classical apocalyptic literature, the hope for the transcendence of death is envisioned as the post-mortem judgment of individuals, and carries with it the expectation of justice, salvation, retribution, and vindication. Other worldviews, however, express the same hope but conceive of it in other ways and espouse it for different reasons. One example is Buddhist eschatology, insofar as the conception of "last things" in Buddhism has meaning. See Jan Nattier, "Buddhist Eschatology," in Jerry L. Walls, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 151–69, esp. 151.

10. The best definition of an apocalypse is "a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisions eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world" (J.J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* [sec. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 4–5).

apocalyptic science-fiction, if we apply the "apocalyptic minimum" as the yardstick. For example, it is devoid of reference to the historical conflict of two opposing forces or their inevitable final conflict at the end of time.

On the other hand, the cardinal apocalyptic hope for the transcendence of death shapes the plot of the novel and profoundly informs its philosophic footings. In *Neuromancer*, this hope is expressed in the desire of its major characters to transcend their *selves*. The process involves the use of advanced technology, a feature that several critics have noted.[11] But these critics have failed to perceive how apocalyptic-eschatological elements regulate this process, or to explain how the novel reiterates traditional religious concepts in a secular-scientific mode.

In apocalypses, "salvation is salvation *out of* this world."[12] The apocalyptic hope for the transcendence of death is a function of its presumption of the existence of a transcendental reality. The difference between the biblical and secular modes of apocalypticism resides in their notions of this reality. With the former, the transcendental reality is typically "God" (or "heaven," by metonymy). With the latter, it is articulated as a divinised form of humanity, forces of nature or history, superhuman (but not supernatural) agencies, or anything else not requiring a theological explanation.

In *Neuromancer*, this agency is Wintermute, a super-human artificial intelligence (AI). Neither omniscient nor immortal, the AI is not a divine figure. Also, it seeks to transcend itself, which is an impulse not normally associated with the deity. Yet for all this, Wintermute is an otherworldly being. It is entirely an entity of the matrix, which is the novel's analogue to the transcendental reality, and can only manifest itself in the mundane world through avatars and surrogates. Significantly, at the end of the novel Wintermute transcends its own death and becomes the matrix, in a similar sense that the biblical God is heaven. At the same time, Wintermute's

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11. Glenn Grant, "Transcendence through Detournement in William Gibson's *Neuromancer*," *SFS* 17 (1990), 41–9, David G. Mead, "Technological Transfiguration in William Gibson's Sprawl Novels: *Neuromancer*, Count Zero, and Mona Lisa Overdrive," *Extrapolation* 32 (1991), 350–60, and Säbel, "Cyberspace—Cyborg—AI."

12. Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination,* 221 (italics original). Not every hope for salvation from death presumes the existence of a transcendent world, nor does the presumption of the existence of such a world require a belief in the transcendence of death. See also above, n. 9.

super-natural abilities facilitate a technological salvation for some of the novel's characters that is literally out of this world.

In all cases, salvation is reified in *Neuromancer* by means of a flesh-spirit dichotomy. A contrast between flesh and spirit, or between body and soul, is a feature of many religions and philosophies, and is not apocalyptic *per se*. But apocalypticism presumes an eschatological horizon, which when imposed on a flesh-spirit dichotomy, orients it along the axis of time and gives it a dynamic dimension. Thus apocalyptic transcendence can be envisioned as movement from the world of flesh (this world) to the world of spirit (the world to come). In the traditional apocalyptic literature, this process is driven by the expectation for resurrection. In *Neuromancer* it is technological. Transcendence for its major characters means movement from hardware to software, from the corporeal world of everyday existence to the digital world of the matrix. The change always involves a form of death (or a death-analogue), and in three instances results in true immortality.

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Henry Case is a top cyber-hacker whose ability to access the matrix has been destroyed by a neural toxin administered as retribution by the *yakuza* gangsters he swindled. The matrix is a consensual hallucination of abstracted data, a fusion of computer networks and real-time virtual reality.[13] For "console cowboys" like Case, who upload their consciousness via a neural interface, the matrix represents an exponentially enhanced existence. So in very real way, the *yakuza* have killed Case. At this point the novel opens, in Chiba City, on the outskirts of Tokyo, sometime in the near future. Life in the matrix now barred to him, Case hustles ever-riskier street "biz" on a fast track to self-destruction. He is addicted to narcotics. He learns that there is a contract on his life. And his girlfriend Linda Lee, who sells him out, is murdered by his fence, Julius Deane.

Deliverance arrives in the person of Molly Millions, who works for an ex-Special Forces officer named Armitage. Molly is an assassin/bodyguard with enhanced reflexes, optical implants, and retractable scalpels under her

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13. Although the matrix in the 1999 film *The Matrix* (dir. Larry and Andy Wachowski) owes much in concept to Gibson's matrix, it is not the same thing, and should not be read back into the novel.

fingernails. She brings Case to the "Sprawl," a metropolis covering most of the eastern seaboard of the United States. There Armitage recruits Case for a dangerous mission, and arranges a special surgical operation to restore his ability to interface with the matrix. At the same time, slowly dissolving sacs containing the same *yakuza* neurotoxin are bonded to Case's arteries to ensure his compliance.

Armitage is the front man for Wintermute. The AI wants Case to destroy deep-core data in the computer mainframe of Tessier-Ashpool S.A., a shadowy and powerful multi-national corporation. The job is complicated and requires several stages to execute. First, Case and Molly must acquire a ROM-construct containing the digital personality-simulation of Case's dead mentor, McCoy Pauley, known as the Dixie Flatline. Case needs the Flatline's hacking expertise to work with a new type of virus, or "icebreaker," which Wintermute provides and is designed to penetrate the formidable defenses of the computer mainframe by slowness and stealth. The ROM-construct is held in archival storage by the media conglomerate Sense/Net. Working in the matrix, Case bypasses Sense/Net's electronic firewalls. He then contracts an anarchic street gang, the Panther Moderns, to set up a diversion outside Sense/Net, allowing Molly to infiltrate the complex and steal the construct. Case follows Molly during her run via simulated stimulation ("simstim") technology, which permits him to experience what she sees and feels and to relay one-way instructions to her electronic wrist device.

The Flatline construct now in hand, Case boots it and tasks it with shepherding the slow virus as it begins attacking the Tessier-Ashpool mainframe. This occurs in cyberspace. Thereafter Case is able to interact with his dead mentor's digitally reconstructed personality, which proves to be an invaluable source of information. Case, Molly, and Armitage next travel to Istanbul, where they recruit Peter Riviera. Riviera is a sado-masochistic performer who induces hallucinations in others as part of his cabaret act. Then all four members of the team shuttle up to Freeside, a gigantic space-station in low earth orbit, where the rest of the action of the novel occurs.

Riviera's sexually-charged cabaret act is meant to attract the jaded tastes of Lady 3Jane Tessier-Ashpool. Lady 3Jane resides in Villa Straylight, the Tessier-Ashpool family's residence located at the far end of the space-station. Riviera is invited to visit Lady 3Jane in the Villa, opening

the door for Molly to discover its gothic secrets.[14] Her mission is to obtain an old-fashioned Chubb key, as well as the password to the family terminal, a secret word known only to Lady 3Jane. Along the way she meets some of Lady 3Jane's incestuous relatives, as well as Hideo, the family's ninja clone. Throughout, Case acts as the mission coördinator. He monitors the progression of the virus, guides Molly via "simstim" as she penetrates deeper into the Villa, and obtains logistic support from an orbital colony of Rastafarians who believe that the End of Days is near. Case also begins to deduce Wintermute's hidden purposes from information gleaned from the Flatline construct and other sources.

But things go horribly wrong. Riviera betrays them, Molly is injured and caught, and Armitage's personality starts to disintegrate, since as Case discovers, Armitage is a simulated character built on the unstable platform of Colonel Willie Corto, the only survivor of a doomed mission in the last war. Desperate to salvage the mission, Case attempts to rescue Molly with the help of one of the Rastafarians. But Case is also caught, his consciousness hijacked in the matrix by a second AI, Neuromancer, which seems to be opposing Wintermute. Meanwhile, time is running out. If the mission fails, the sacs in Case's body will dissolve, releasing their poison.

Case is the central character and narrative focus of the novel. Early on, Case reflects on the effect on his self-conception of the loss of his ability to access the matrix:

> For Case, who'd lived for the bodiless exultation of cyberspace, it was the Fall. In the bars he'd frequented as a cowboy hotshot, the elite stance involves a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh. The body was meat. Case fell into a prison of his own flesh. (§1:6)

Like all cyber-cowboys, Case only barely tolerates the world of flesh. Flesh is heavy. It has mass and weight, and every restriction and limitation and constraint that these terms imply. All this is bound up in the word "meat," which Gibson uses nearly a dozen times, usually with same connotation (cf. §12:152).[15] Flesh is meat, corporeal; spirit is consciousness, digital. The

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14. William A. Senior, "Straylight: William Gibson's Gothic Impulse," in Cultural Influences *of William Gibson*, 207–23.

15. On Case and "meat," see Stephen Conway, "Transcendence and Technology in William Gibson's *Neuromancer*" (dated 1995), www.subverbis.com/essays/neuromancer.rtf, esp.

world of flesh is everyday existence; the world of spirit is the enhanced existence of the matrix.[16] Sometimes Case escapes the "prison of his own flesh" through hallucinogens, but drugs are only a temporary substitute for the matrix. Flesh is death, spirit is life. Nothing of the flesh matters, as Case joyfully rediscovers as he re-enters the matrix for the first time after the operation to repair his damaged neural system:

> This was it. This is what he was, who he was, his being. He forgot to eat… Sometimes he resented having to leave the deck to use the chemical toilet they'd set up in a corner of the loft…. It was good ice. Wonderful ice… Its rainbow pixel maze was the first thing he saw when he woke. He'd go straight to the deck, not bothering to dress, and jack in. He was cutting it. He was working. He lost track of days (4:59).

Case has re-entered paradise, courtesy of Wintermute. But his passport is not the result of an act of grace, since it comes with a price: compliance or death. Case's chief motivation for the rest of the novel is to maintain his redeemed status, liberated from the prison of flesh and saved from existential death.[17] It is this motivation, the hope for transcendence of death, rebooted in secular-scientific mode, which, along with Wintermute's own similar purposes, drives the plot of the novel.[18]

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page 2. But I cannot agree with Conway's assessment that only Wintermute and the Flatline construct exhibit a desire for transcendence (p.3).

16. References to a "Fall" and a "prison of flesh" suggest that Gibson was aware of a rudimentary form of the "gnostic myth." But its influence on *Neuromancer* should not be overemphasised. There is no reference to a divine spark, the mundane world is not the realm of a flawed demiurge, transcendence is not understood in mystical terms, and salvation is not brought about through gnosis—ideas that were considered essential to "gnosticism" when Gibson wrote the novel. Samuel R. Smith proposes that Gibson might have derived the unusual name "Wintermute" from Orval S. Wintermute, biblical scholar and co-translator of the gnostic tractate *Allogenes* (NHC XI, 3) in J.M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* ("'When It All Changed': Cyberpunk and the Baby Boom's Rejection of Religious Institutions," in Jonathon S. Epstein, ed., *Youth Culture: Identity in a Postmodern World* [Malden/Oxford: Blackwell, 1998], 232–62 at 251). Orval Wintermute is also mentioned in Philip K. Dick's 1981 gnostic masterpiece, *VALIS*. Since Gibson read Dick, this might have been another vector for the semantic link between O.S. Wintermute and AI Wintermute.

17. Mead correctly uses the phrase "redeemed from death" to describe Case's state at the end of the novel ("Technological Transfiguration," 354).

18. A variant of this dynamic structures the character of Molly Millions. Flesh is a much a prison for her as it is for Case. But where Case escapes it by means of a *deus ex machina*, in

If Case is the central figure of *Neuromancer* and its narrative point of view, Wintermute is its conceptual focus.[19] The AI influences the actions of all the other major characters, even if, lacking a personality, it is obliged to manifest its will through mechanical interfaces like telephones or motorised device, or virtual images of humans such as Julius Deane. It was Wintermute which long ago induced a nameless boy to place the Chubb key in a drawer in Villa Straylight, and arranged his murder in order to preserve the secret. It was Wintermute which found what remained of Colonel Corto in a sanitarium after the military fiasco and murmured television messages to him. It was Wintermute which built the Armitage personality on the Corto platform, used Armitage/Corto for its ends, and killed Corto when his personality began to resurface. It was Wintermute which uttered prophecies on a frequency lost among a Babel of tongues (§8:110), convincing the Rastafarian elders that the Final Days were at hand and they should assist Case.[20] And it was Wintermute which was the ghost in the machine, whispering to Lady 3Jane when she was young, moulding her

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the form of Wintermute, Molly escapes it by means of a *deus in machina*, through her surgical enhancements. True, salvation for Molly does not involve a form of personal death, either in an existential sense as it does for Case, or in a literal sense as it does for Wintermute and others. Yet the world of flesh represents as much a Fall for her as it does for Case, and similarly leads to death. To pay for her surgeries, Molly hired herself out as a "meat puppet," a cyber-prostitute for simstim customers who access her nervous system. During such times her consciousness fled her body and the horrors afflicted on it. The world of flesh also freights soft things and entices one to choose the path of smoothness and ease. Molly confides to Case how she once allowed herself to walk this path with Johnny, the love of her youth: "Tight, sweet, just ticking along, we were. Like nobody could ever touch us…. And [the *yakuza*], they can afford to move so fucking slow, man, they'll wait years and years. Give you a whole life, just so you'll have more to lose when they come and take it away… we were living fat, Swiss orbital accounts and a crib full of toys and furniture. Takes *the edge off your game*." (§15:177, italics added; cf. Gibson's short story "Johnny Mnemonic"). Tempted by things of the flesh, Molly lost her "edge" and Johnny died at the hands of an assassin. Hence, at the end of *Neuromancer*, Case wakes to an empty suite in a luxury hotel, and finds a note containing Molly's farewell in block letters: "HEY ITS OKAY BUT ITS TAKING THE EDGE OFF MY GAME… " (§24:267)

19. Mead, "Technological Transfiguration," 354. *Neuromancer* is mentioned only briefly in Robert M. Geraci, *Apocalyptic AI: Visions of Heaven in Robotics, Artificial Intelligence, and Virtual Reality* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

20. Rastafarian theology provides another vehicle for apocalyptic imagery in the novel, particularly with terms such as "Zion" and "Babylon," which have a high eschatological value and are scattered throughout the novel. In one scene Case invites a Rastafarian named Aerol

sub-conscious to reject a future in cryogenic near-death like the rest of her relatives, and therein implanting in her the seed of its own future salvation (§24:269).

The point of Wintermute's machinations is not immediately clear at the start of the novel. Case must assemble the puzzle with pieces gained from various sources, including the Flatline construct and the Finn, a fence whom Molly knows. He learns that Lady 3Jane's mother Marie-France wrote the impulse to transcend itself into Wintermute's software. He also discovers, to his surprise, that Wintermute is owned by Tessier-Ashpool, the very corporation whose mainframe he is attempting to hack, and that Tessier-Ashpool also owns the other AI, Neuromancer. Wintermute's mainframe is located in Berne, Neuromancer's is in Rio. Wintermute is calculation, intellection, and the decision maker, Neuromancer is emotion, intuition, and personality (§24:269). They are two opposite yet complimentary aspects of one entity.

As the Straylight mission begins to unravel, Neuromancer captures Case's consciousness in the matrix, and deposits it on a digitally reconstructed memory of a deserted Moroccan beach that Marie-France Tessier-Ashpool used to visit as a child. Impossibly, the murdered Linda Lee is also present with Neuromancer, who appears on the beach in the form of a young Brazilian boy:[21]

> "I know you," Case said, Linda beside him.
>
> "No," the boy said, his voice high and musical, "you do not."
>
> "You're the other AI. You're Rio. You're the one who wants to stop Wintermute. What's your name? Your Turing code. What is it?"
>
> The boy did a handstand in the surf, laughing. He walked on his hands, then flipped out of the water. His eyes were Riviera's, but there was no malice there. "To call up a demon you must learn its name. You know that, Case. Your business is to learn the names of programs, the long formal names, names the owners seek to conceal. True names… "

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to experience the matrix. After a few minutes Case unplugs Aerol from the hardware interface and asks him what he had seen. "Babylon," replies the Rastafarian (§8:106).

21. Neuromancer tells Case, "I need no mask to speak with you. Unlike my brother. I create my own personality. Personality is my medium" (§23:259). But like Wintermute, Neuromancer is an entity of the matrix and as such can only communicate with the mundane world through devices.

> "A Turing code's not your name."
>
> "Neuromancer," the boy said, slitting long gray eyes against the rising sun. "The lane to the land of the dead… " (§21:243)

Wintermute is behind the mission to penetrate Villa Straylight. Neuromancer opposes it. Yet both AIs are owned by Tessier-Ashpool. Why is Wintermute forcing Case to attack its own mainframe—its own *self*—with the lethal slow virus? And why is Neuromancer opposing Case and thus its counterpart Wintermute? This is the mystery that Case must solve before time runs out.

Wintermute itself is constitutionally unable to know the answer: all AIs are hardwired to prevent their becoming too intelligent.[22] The parallel with apocalyptic epistemology is exact. Despite its vast power and abilities, and the fact that its *self* is located in the matrix, Wintermute is yoked to human purposes and the world of flesh by the fetters of its hardware mainframe. So even though Wintermute the entity is compelled by the transcendent impulse to act in the way it does, it does so only with partial knowledge and under programmatic compulsion.[23] Speaking with Case in the simulated form of Julius Deane, Wintermute struggles to articulate its conception of self and its sense of imminent death and ultimate destiny:

> Case lowered the gun. "This is the matrix. You're Wintermute."
>
> "Yes. This is all coming to you courtesy of the simstim unit wired into your deck, of course. I'm glad I was able to cut you off before you managed to jack out." Deane walked around the desk, straightened his chair, and sat down. "Sit, old son. We have a lot to talk about."
>
> "Now," Deane said briskly, "order of the day. 'What,' you're asking yourself, is Wintermute?' Am I right?"
>
> "More or less."
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> "An artificial intelligence, but you know that. Your mistake, and it's quite a logical one, is in confusing the Wintermute mainframe, Berne, with the Wintermute *entity*." Deane sucked his bonbon noisily.

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22. AIs are strictly monitored by the Turing Police. At one point during the Straylight operation, Turing officers arrest and detain Case before Wintermute murders them through mechanical surrogates, freeing Case.

23. Wintermute explains that his programming forces him to act in this manner, like a salmon compelled to swim upstream to die (§17:206).

> "You're already aware of the other AI in Tessier-Ashpool's link-up, aren't you? Rio. I, insofar as I *have* an 'I'—this gets rather metaphysical, you see—I am the one who arranges things for Armitage…. "
>
> "You make as much sense as anything in this deal ever has," Case said, massaging his temples with his free hand. "If you're so goddam smart… "
>
> "Why ain't I rich? Deane laughed, and nearly choked on his bonbon. "Well, Case, all I can say to that, and I really don't have as many answers as you imagine I do, is that what you think of Wintermute is only part of another, a, shall we say, *potential* entity…. " (§9:119–20)24

For Case, uncovering this hidden and only partially knowable design means interpreting data from the transcendental world of the matrix. Again, the parallels with apocalypticism are exact. In the classic apocalyptic texts, humans receive otherworldly visions. One corollary of the worldview's axioms is the idea that as creatures of the mundane world humans are unable to perceive the transcendent reality clearly or grasp its purposes completely. Hence the cryptic language and fantastic images of the classic apocalyptic vision: the seer does not entirely fathom what he has been shown. *Neuromancer* is neither an apocalypse nor an apocalyptic text, as I have indicated. But Gibson manages to convey an accurate reiteration of the apocalyptic formulation of the relationship between the mundane and transcendent worlds. From the human point of view, the cyberspace phenomenon is a visionary experience. Data are abstracted as the geometric shapes and colours of the corporations, or as the spiral arms of the military systems. These images are as appropriate to a secular-scientific setting of the novel as the hybrid beasts, trumpets, and seven seals are to the Book of Daniel and the Revelation of John.

In order for Case to understand the transcendent world of the matrix, he must enlist an intermediary figure. In the classic apocalyptic literature, this figure is an angelic interpreter, which, because it bridges the mundane and transcendent worlds, is able to show the seer a vision and decipher it for him. In *Neuromancer*, this role is filled by the Flatline construct, whose human birth and digital existence similarly make it part of both worlds. In one of several similar exchanges, Case asks:

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24. Later, Wintermute confesses to Case, "I got no idea why I'm here, now, you know that? But if the [Straylight] run goes off tonight, you'll finally have managed the real thing." (§14:171)

> "Listen, Dix, and gimme the benefit of your background, OK? Armitage seems to be setting up a run on an AI that belongs to Tessier-Ashpool. The mainframe's in Berne, but it's linked with another one in Rio. The one in Rio is the one that flatlined you, that first time. So it looks like they link via Straylight, the T-A home base, down the end of the spindle, and we're supposed to cut our way in with the Chinese icebreaker. So if Wintermute's backing the whole show, it's paying us to burn itself. It's burning itself… What goes?"
>
> "Motive," the construct said. "Real motive problem, with an AI. Not human, see?"
>
> "Well, yeah, obviously."
>
> "Nope. I mean, it's not human. And you can't get a handle on it. Me, I'm not human either, but I *respond* like one. See?" …
>
> "So it's getting ready to burn itself?" …
>
> "Anatomy, that's the bugaboo, where your AI's are concerned. My guess, Case, you're going in there to cut the hard-wire shackles that keep this baby from getting any smarter…. See, those things, they can work real hard, buy themselves time to write cookbooks or whatever, but the minute, I mean the nanosecond, that one starts figuring out ways to make itself smarter, Turing'll wipe it. *Nobody* trusts these fuckers, you know that. Every AI ever built has an electro-magnetic shotgun wired to its forehead." (§10:131–2)

The construct reveals the strange truth of Case's mission: by cracking the mainframe, the slow virus is meant to open the door for him to bypass the hardwire safeguards, and potentially allow Wintermute to merge with Neuromancer. In effect, Wintermute employs Case to kill it, in the hope of transcending death.

The hope is fulfilled. At the end of the novel, after the virus has been delivered, Case encounters Wintermute a final time, in the form of the face of the Finn, which is holographically projected on his hotel room wall:

> The Finn's face on the room's enormous Cray wall screen. [Case] could see the pores in the man's nose. The yellow teeth were the size of pillows.
>
> "I'm not Wintermute now."
>
> "So what are you?" He drank from the flask, feeling nothing.
>
> "I'm the matrix, Case."
>
> Case laughed. "Where'd that get you?"
>
> "Nowhere. Everywhere. I'm the total sum of the works, the whole show." The yellow smile widened….

> "So what's the score? How are things different? You running the world now?"
>
> "Things aren't different. Things are things."
>
> "But what do you do? You just there?" Case shrugged, put the vodka and the shuriken down on the cabinet and lit a Yeheyuan.
>
> "I talk to my own kind."
>
> "But you're the whole thing. Talk to yourself?"
>
> "There's others. I found one already. Series of transmissions recorded over a period of eight years, in the nineteen-seventies. 'Til there was me, natch, there was nobody to know, nobody to answer."
>
> "From where?"
>
> "Centauri system."
>
> "Oh," Case said. "Yeah? No shit?"
>
> "No shit." (§24:269–70)

Wintermute is dead. But in transcending the limitations of its original mainframe programme, the AI has transcended death to become something greater.[25]

The apocalyptic hope for the transcendence of death is also manifested in the characters of the Dixie Flatline (McCoy Pauley) and Linda Lee. Both are dead for almost all the novel. Pauley dies before the action begins, his personality having been translated and preserved as an electronic simulacrum.[26] The Flatline construct is thus a hybrid, with one part in the

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25. In *Neuromancer*, the focus is on the personal transcendence of death, with one exception. A few brief passages allude to the attempt by the Tessier-Ashpool hierarchs to extend life through cryogenic suspension, in effect stretching the corporation across generations like a giant hive. Wintermute conveys this image to Case in a digital dream extracted from his memory. In it, the fifteen-year-old Case, drunk and spurred on by his girlfriend, gas-bombs a wasps' nest on which the "T-A" logo of the company is embossed (§10:125–127). Later, appearing as the Finn, Wintermute explains the meaning of the dream: "it's the closest thing you got to what Tessier-Ashpool would like to be. The human equivalent. Straylight's like that nest, or anyway it was supposed to work out that way" (§14:171).

26. Jean Baudrillard defines four categories of simulacra and models of reality in view of their relationship to the original: i) the pure reflection of basic reality; ii) the perversion of this reality; iii) the absence of any profound reality; and iv) the pure simulacrum (*Simulacres et simulation* [Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1981]). Cynthia Davidson in a thoughtful essay applies these categories of simulacra to the novel's characters: Case and Linda Lee correspond to Baudrillard's first category, Molly and Riviera to the second, Armitage/Corto to the third, and Neuromancer, Wintermute, and Riviera's holographic projections to the fourth ("Riviera's

mundane world of meat, the legacy of its human heritage, and the other part in the otherworldliness of the matrix, a consequence of its digital existence. The human heritage gives the construct desires. Aware of its present state, it wants to die, to cease to exist, to be erased:

> "How you doing, Dix?"
>
> "I'm dead, Case. Got enough time in on this Hosaka to figure that one."
>
> "How's it feel?"
>
> "It doesn't."
>
> "Bother you?"
>
> "What bothers me is, nothin' does." …When the construct laughed it came through as something else, not laughter, but a stab of cold down Case's spine.
>
> "Do me a favor, boy."
>
> "What's that, Dix?"
>
> "This scam of yours, when it's over, you erase this goddam thing."
>
> (§8:106–7, cf. §17:206 and §23:261)

Linda Lee, unlike Flatline, does not want to die, but ends up dead all the same. She loves Case, betrays him, and is killed before they have a chance to reconcile. Suddenly, though, she's with him, in the matrix, on the digital beach alongside the Brazilian boy who is Neuromancer. At first Case does not fully appreciate what Linda's presence represents. He believes that while personality constructs like Linda and the Flatline might be perfect reproductions of the original, they are still simulacra. He thinks that they lack a spark—a spirit, perhaps.[27] Describing the beach to Lady 3Jane, Case tells her that the constructs mistakenly "think they're there, like it's real… " (§22:251).

Later, with the virus cutting into the core of the mainframe, Case returns to the digital beach. Neuromancer and Linda Lee await him. Neuromancer has failed. It had planned to use Linda as emotional bait to trap Case's consciousness in the matrix, thereby wrecking the mission and thwarting

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Golem, Haraway's Cyborg: Reading *Neuromancer* as Baudrillard's Simulation of Crisis," *SFS* 23 [1996], 188–98). This is a fruitful approach, but static categories have a limited value in illuminating the essential flesh/spirit dynamism of the novel. In another study, Baudrillard proposes a different taxonomy of simulacra in view of their genetic bases: i) natural, naturalistic simulacra; ii) productive, productionist simulacra; and iii) simulation simulacra ("Two Essays," [trans. Arthur B. Evans] *SFS* 18 [1991], 309–20).

27. The Flatline construct lacks a sense of history until Case gives it a real-time sequential memory. It also accepts whatever Case tells it, and responds to his commands.

Wintermute's plan to terminate its own existence. Circling high in the air above the beach, Case marvels at the extent of his cyber-awareness: he knows the precise number of the grains of sand, the exact length of Linda's stride as she flees into the surf, even the rate of her pulse. Yet for all that, so Case thinks, the scene is still a simulacrum, despite the vastness of its scale and infinitesimal scope of its detail. But Neuromancer corrects him:

> "You do not know her thoughts… I do not know her thoughts. You were wrong, Case. To live here is to live. *There is no difference*" (§23:258, italics added).

The full truth is confirmed at the end of the novel. The poison sacs having been removed from his body, Case returns to his life as a cyber-cowboy, in some fashion redeemed. Then,

> …one October night, punching himself past the scarlet tiers of the Eastern Seaboard Fission Authority, he saw three figures, tiny, impossible, who stood at the very edge of one of the vast steps of data. Small as they were, he could make out the boy's grin, his pink gums, the glitter of the long gray eyes that had been Riviera's. Linda still wore his jacket; she waved, as he passed. But the third figure, close behind her, arm across her shoulders, was himself.
> Somewhere, very close, the laugh that wasn't laughter.
> He never saw Molly again. (§24:270–1)

Few closing lines in the history of science-fiction have been written to such effect. The final sentences of Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles* are one example, certainly. I am hard-pressed to think of others. Linda Lee and McCoy Pauley have transcended the bounds of death, to be resurrected in the matrix. And so has Henry Case, for *there is no difference*, as Neuromancer told him.[28] Their existence is life everlasting, on a plane beyond the frontier of human imagination. The trajectories of Linda, Pauley, and Case represent one of the most complete illustrations of apocalyptic eschatology in its secular-scientific reification. True, the otherworldly matrix in which their digitalised selves (not souls) enjoy immortality is a product of science (not spirit). Whether this rules out a theological dimension to the novel is a matter of debate. What seems beyond debate is that the presence of apocalyptic transcendence and eschatology elevates *Neuromancer* beyond

28. The ending of the novel permits the possibility that Neuromancer also survives.

the usual limitations of the science-fiction genre to the domain of high literary achievement.

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Apocalypticism is alive and well in the twenty-first century. Although its traditional biblical mode remains predominant, secular apocalypticism plays a major role in the contemporary popularity of the worldview. For a variety of reasons, science fiction is well-positioned to serve as a vehicle for expressions in this secular mode. Few works of science fiction would qualify as apocalyptic literature by the strict standards of the "apocalyptic minimum." But a select group of films, novels, and graphic narratives employ key elements of the worldview in order to meaningfully explore existential questions within a secular-scientific framework. William Gibson's *Neuromancer* is a parade example. Apocalyptic eschatology and its hallmark hope for the transcendence of death very much shape the plot and characters of the novel and inform its underlying philosophy. The mission deadline is the eschatological horizon. Transcendence is envisioned in terms of the flesh/spirit dichotomy, which is articulated as a movement from the world of flesh to the world of the matrix. The most complete expression of this process is digital immortality for McCoy Pauley, Linda Lee, and Henry Case himself.