

# Cometary

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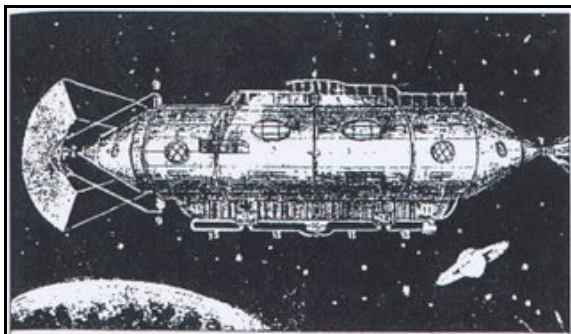
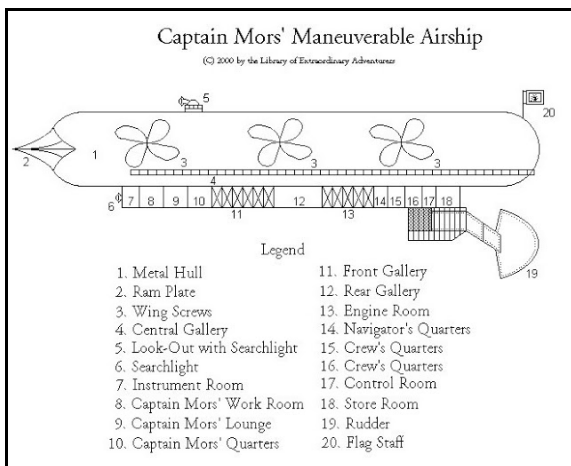
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In speculative-rational apocalyptic fiction, the actual ending of the world poses a considerable narrative problem, because the lack of human survivors puts the storytelling into a quandary. How does one maintain reasonable, albeit imaginary, plausibility in a story that anticipates the global demise of the human race, thereby eliminating the hypothetical narrator who would present our future as

if it were their past or present? One way to overcome this impasse is to replace the future voice with a current one that, thus, becomes premonitory. The end of the world is not narrated as something actually occurring in the fictional world created by the text, but as something taking place and being observed within a dream or a vision. This is what happens in the apocalyptic story named “Cometaria” (Cometary) by Emilia Pardo Bazán, perhaps the female Spanish novelist of greatest international renown. Even if critics have traditionally preferred her realist novels and short stories, Pardo Bazán was a female writer with a keen eye for the literary and intellectual novelties of her time, including the ones rooted in speculative fiction. Noteworthy examples are her short novel set in the Palaeolithic, *En las cavernas* (*In the caverns*, 1912), and, notwithstanding its shortness, the aforementioned short story, which was published in the magazine *La Ilustración Española y Americana* (*The Spanish and American Enlightenment*) in 1911.<sup>1</sup>

“Cometary” is presented as the fruit of an intellectual upper-class male character's fantasy. In the vein of contemporary theories that predicted humanity, and even life itself, would disappear altogether as a result



<sup>1</sup> The original text of the translation comes from the following critical edition: Emilia Pardo Bazán, *Cuentos completos*, Juan Paredes Núñez's edition, Volume III, La Coruña, Fundación “Pedro Barrie de la Maza, conde de Fenosa”, 1990, pp. 354-355.

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of the influence of poisonous gases from Halley's Comet, the protagonist closes his eyes and envisions the catastrophe, which he exclusively survives. When alone in the world, he is overwhelmed by the devastating sight of ruins and corpses, and he desperately looks for other survivors. Ultimately, he finds one: a low-class young woman. He hesitates whether to recreate humankind, like Adam and Eve, but with the difference of them crossing between social classes. This part of the story resembles broadly that of the novel *The Purple Cloud* (1901) by M. P. Shiel, although it seems unlikely Pardo Bazán knew of its existence. Besides, her story

expresses much more directly the fantasy of omnipotence (including the fantasy of committing a social and gender crime) in which the protagonist-narrator wallows. It thus implies the closeness between this type of fantasy and the very apocalyptic fantasy wherein it is embedded. The only survivor has the whole world and a woman all for himself. Since Pardo Bazán is a female writer, perhaps the story can also be interpreted from an ironic feminist viewpoint. However, even with a superficial read, it is still possible to admire the story's narrative deftness and the effective beauty of its style.

Emilia Pardo Bazán

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Astronomers were spreading the news from every observatory, academy and periodical: on the signalled day, when the comet would shroud us with its vast and luminous coma, the world would end... that is to say, our planet, Earth. Or, in other more accurate words, Humankind would end. I still stand corrected: it would be life itself that would end, since the *poisonous* cyanogen emanations, whose spectrum had been recognised in the coma by the telescopes, would leave no living being on the orb's surface. And life, thus extinguished, could not be expected to be reborn. The mysterious climate conditions wherein it came to be would not be replicated: the Carboniferous' fervent heat has been replaced by an infertile tepidness everywhere...

From the very first moment, I believed it wholeheartedly. Life was about to cease to exist –not just mine, but everyone's. I tried to envision the terrible moment closing my eyes in the silence of my unlit room. All at once, without any possible recourse to one another, we would fall like swarms of flies. Not even a single groan would be heard. The catastrophe would create absolute equality, which had been vainly dreamt since the species' origin. The king, the millionaire, the beggar, they would all exhale their final breath at the same hour, amongst identical yearnings. And what would happen as the inert bodies of humanity carpeted the ground and the comet moved away? What aspect would that hitherto inhabited part of the world present?

My imagination was in a frenzy. Before my eyes splendid cities were suddenly turned to vast cemeteries. As I wandered them, sheer horror ran through my vertebrae and racked my nerves with dark shivers. All because, and this was the most dreadful thing, mine had not been the common fate. I ignore by agency of which miracle, of which uncanny

privilege, I was alive... alone amongst the infinite desolation left by the corpses of the species. Within my hand's reach lay, as if it were an ironic temptation, the forsaken riches and artistic wonders I may have once coveted: no eyes but mine to contemplate Velázquez's paintings, Phidias' statues and Cellini's chiselling. And out there in derelict ships' secret cargoes, no hands but mine to sink into the heaps of banknotes and gold doubloons – which now were worthless, for there was nobody to accept them in exchange for anything.

Death was all around me: layers of the deceased, here and there strewn, in mute portray of the sundry facets of their brief agony... not even a single voice, nor the echo of a step. I spoke out loud, in case someone may reply, and when I screamed, it was the echo of my own shrill voice that answered. The sun shone on the lifeless bodies, over the tragically dumb metropolis. And so I dashed forth, running aimlessly, maddened as it were, seeking the being that would answer my calls. My hair bristled, my torso quivered and my eyes were at a loss where to look, as I searched streets and squares, temples and cafes, humble houses whose doors I pried open, and locked palaces I leaped into, in a fury, through their windows. Aloneness and silence only were to be found!

And, as night was nearing, I found at last another being spared from the hecatomb, under a humble hut in a beggarly borough. A young maid she was, who stuttered full of dread and could barely articulate a word. I did not look at her, I did not wish to know even what her face was like. I flung my arms around her neck, and we kissed, come undone in quivering tears...

And in so holding her tightly and understanding that my future and Humanity's resided with her, that we were the couple, the only survivors, the Adam and the Eve, not in



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Paradise, but in a wasteland of pain, I did not know for certain what I felt. Perhaps, for the sake of ending perpetual suffering, it might have been better that neither the infant daughter of the common people, nor I, the refined intellectual, had met. Perhaps it was fate which spared our existence in the atrocious

hour of the universal asphyxiation... As the poor little thing throbbed with fear and relish in my arms, I felt the urge to smother her, to erase her and so all those would come after. Mercy, all of a sudden, overwhelmed me, and because of mercy the wicked world was preserved.