

WHEN THE SHIT GOES DOWN:
An Etymology of the Eschatology of the
Collective American Psyche

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I think it is because I am a musician that I am fascinated by language. I feel fortunate in that I happen to be a native speaker of the English language, because within it there are very interesting words and phrases that have complex inherent meaning, but which concepts are essentially untranslatable. I also enjoy English because it reminds me of 20th Century music: it is vibrant pastiche of styles, sonorities, and colors that is ever changing and recombining itself with new influences that it gladly appropriates. Of course, due to the fact I am an American, I naturally believe that American English best represents the oft-touted mutt-like nature of the English language, in that, culturally, ethnically, and America itself is the ultimate mutt: the “melting pot”. However, as it is the dominant language of trade and culture on this, our home planet, having ostensibly conquered all other contenders, there are of course, many critics of English as well. Classicists complain that English is not as precise a language as Greek or Latin. The French think that English is both unpoetic in sound, and in meaning. Leftists academics think it is an inherently sexist, oppressive language. There is also the matter of inter-English rivalry between the British and Americans: the latter, a most circumlocutory rabble, claiming that the former butcher the language by abrupt, artless, and tactless self-centered monologue, as well as possess a general disregard for time-established grammatical rules; with the former not giving a hoot-in-hell what those damn Limeys think because, after all, we saved their rears in the big WWII. To all of these sayers of “nay” I say “Nay!” The English language may not be quite so compact as Greek or Latin, and might not sound as pretty as the French think their language sounds, but it certainly is not without its poetry. Of course, it is true that English, while extremely precise under some conditions is painfully abstruse in others. Take, for example, the sentence: “The man told his servant to tie his shoe.” Whose shoe is the object of the tying, the man’s, or his servant’s? In Greek or Latin, determining the owner of the shoe would not be a problem, due to the nature of the grammar. On

the other hand, neither Greek nor Latin, for all their grammatical precision, can make the distinction between a “house” and one’s “home” like English does. It certainly has its share of idiotic sounding words, like “nosegay” or “opsablepsia” to name a few; neither of which really roll off of the tongue poetically, and for that reason are not generally found in poetry. It also has quite a few ridiculous compounds, like “antidisestablishmentarianism,” which are far too hippopotomonstrosesquipedalian in my opinion, and which are generally not found in poetry either. Consider the following, which should make the point clear: “My love has opsablepsia/I’m sorry to say/But I give her flowers/Always a nosegay/My love for her beams/like the light through a prism/Although she’s pretty fond of/antidisestablishmentarianism.” It seems quite plausible to say that in English, creating a poetic Frankenstein is in all probability, much more likely.

However, where the English language, especially the American variety, displays in peacock-like-fashion its poetic flair and its great precision to define the abstract, is in its slang. I could easily spend pages just listing the many interesting slang words and phrases in American English (which are very descriptive, precise, *and* poetic), but there are whole dictionaries for that. I shall, however, explore the meaning of one particular and uniquely American phrase that is so abstract, yet so simple and so laden with concrete meaning, that it is worthy of extended examination. It is a phrase with which every American is familiar, and which I believe reveals a great deal about the collective American psyche: “When the shit goes down.”

Although I am not a linguist, I believe it is easy to see that this sentence does not require much of an extensive grammatical accounting. “When,” used here as an adverb, simply means “at what time.” Next, we have “the shit” which is the subject, and lastly “goes down”, which is the main verb governed by a preposition. Clearly, this is the simplest of sentences. Regarding vocabulary, anyone who understands American slang knows that, among other things, “to go down” simply means “to happen.” This leaves us with defining “the shit,” which, it will be seen, is a metaphor for something. While we all know what “shit” is, what exactly is “*the* shit”? For this we must go back to the beginning.

In the ancient world, there was no abstract metaphorical *shit* as we know it today. Shit was shit. Feces. Crap. Dung. Catullus, Cicero, Plutarch, and Paul the Apostle, just to name a few, used the term with this most basic of meanings in mind. Of course there were various classes of such terminology—polite terms, vulgar terms, veterinary terms and medical terms—but they all essentially meant “refuse” or “offal.” The ancients might have said that something reminded them of shit, or was worthy to be regarded as shit, but they would not have said something like “I can’t find my shit.” In most modern slang usage, however, the word “shit” when used as noun, simply means “stuff”, as seen in the following examples: “Here’s your shit” or “Get your shit off of my car,” and so forth. Although the modern usage still retains a trace of its original excremental effluvium, it is largely a figure of speech, and not a direct comparison with excrement.

The demonstrative *shit*—*this* shit or *that* shit—has the sense of intensifying the shit in question. “Get *that shit* off of my car!” is a little stronger of an imperative than merely “Get your shit off of my car.” Although it does begin to take a slight turn towards the abstract in “Man, to hell with *that* shit!” it generally does not tend to venture much further along such lines in its demonstrative form.

The articular *shit*, however—*the* shit—is a linguistic occurrence unique to Twentieth Century American English. It is here that *shit* takes on a truly abstract nature. On one level, it is the *summum*—the highest, most superior thing. “That’s *the shit*,” someone will say, meaning “That thing (in whatever category it belongs) is the best/most ultimate.” It is also worth nothing that we might also say “That’s *the Bomb*”, which, for reasons that shall become clear upon reflection, is socio-linguistically related to The Shit. I will leave that discussion, however, for another time. But on a much grander scale, we can see that in this, our deceptively simple phrase, *the shit* articular is referring to more than just the best or most excellent thing: “When [that thing which is] *the best thing* goes down” doesn’t really seem to make much sense. Context implies that *the shit* as it is used in our example has the sense of a proper noun, and indeed it is. For “The Shit” as I am about to describe it indeed towers over the other uses of lower-case *shit* in the same way the statue of Abraham Lincoln in Washington D.C. dwarfs the visitors who gaze thereupon in

Founding-Father awe. And gazing back imperially down from its throne, The Shit beams broadly its security in its position as *rex tremendae* of the collective American subconscious.

So, what is The Shit? What is this King that rules over the Id of all Americans, and why? While possessing its own face and coming in its own guise to every individual American each has some definitive sense of The Shit, and its imminence thereof. To the right-wing conservative of the 1950s, The Shit was the inevitable Soviet invasion and/or nuking of America. To the hippie of the 1960s, it was the inevitable oppression of anti-freedom-agenda-driven non-democratic American government. Surprisingly, to the right-winger of the 1980s and 90s, it is both the inevitable military invasion of America by her enemies, *and* the inevitable oppression of anti-freedom-agenda-driven non-democratic American government. To Premillennial Christians, it is the Great Tribulation. To the Amillennial Christians, it is the Second Coming of Christ. To African-Americans it is the Race War. To Caucasian Americans it is the Race War. To those of my Jewish heritage, it is an ancient companion, cycling periodically in our history like a comet on a large orbit, only it slams into us *every single time!* We are almost on a first name basis with it. “Here It comes” we say with a dispassionate tone, because of its inevitability. On a general and more universally applicable scale, however, to the collective average American, *The Shit* as expressed in our curious phrase is nothing less than the Eschaton—The End. It is the moment when the world-as-we-know-it becomes *nihil*, and we flee in abject terror, crying for the rocks to cover us; or, the moment we break out our .45 and take out as many of the bastards as we can before they pry it out of our cold, dead fingers.

I think every American knows what I am talking about.

What I find even more interesting than what the interpretation of The Shit is to various groups of Americans, however, is that it, in fact, just *is*. And, as a necessary corollary, its assumed inevitability in going down. As Americans, we simply know *for a fact* that The Shit is going to go down, even more so than we know the sun is going to rise tomorrow. Because if, in fact, the sun *doesn't* rise tomorrow, then we the know with incontestable certainty that The Shit went down. So convinced are Americans that The Shit is going to go down, that the phrase begins with “when,” as

opposed to a conditional like “if” or “unless.” Our phrase is even sometimes preceded by “Well, you know...” revealing that there is the assumption of shared awareness among the collective of Americans that we have not the least doubt that it will go down. Maybe not today, maybe not in our lifetime, but it is *definitely* going down.

How do I know this to be true? A brief examination into the history of the media and entertainment in America quickly reveals the truth of my proposition. No sooner was the radio invented than America heard broadcast over it *The War of the Worlds*. I could go on and on with such examples, but to choose just a very few notable and more recent ones: *Dr. Strangelove*, *Andromeda Strain*, *Omega Man*, *Soylent Green*, *The Planet of the Apes*, *Red Dawn*, *Terminator*, *Terminator 2: “Judgment Day”* (*that’s pretty revealing*), *12 Monkeys*, *Independence Day*, *Deep Impact*, *Armageddon*, and most recently *End of Days*. There are literally hundreds of others. The Shit is so in our brains as Americans, it is in our popular entertainment. Now *that’s* some shit.

Americans also inherently perceive that whatever The Shit will exhibit itself to be, there will be a lot of spilled blood when it goes down. So whether we are the ones instigating The Shit (like the Christians that were kicked out of Israel for planning to start Armageddon over the millennial celebration), or we are quietly preparing for the Shit to go down, we nonetheless know that when The Shit does, in fact, go down, it’s gonna be some Bad Shit. And so, those among us who are preparing for The Shit to go down, are indeed preparing for the worst. It is an amazing but nonetheless concrete reality that in preparation for the perceived Shit Inevitable, it is simply accepted and understood some of our fellow countrypersons own guns, some own gold, some stock water and canned foods in their basement. Some live in houses where people once built bunkers, and some are building bunkers of their own. And while the average city-dwelling American might think this behavior is a bit paranoid, much of this bunkering, hunkering, stockpiling activity goes on largely without significant contest by the rest of us. Even for the most “enlightened” of us who claim that we don’t even care about The Shit and it’s going down, the truth is that when we go home to our trophy spouse, our solid gold dog, and our swimming pool shaped like a middle

finger, we nevertheless know, way deep down inside, that *The Shit is gonna go down*. Oh yes, we know. And so we suppress that very un-self-actualizing thought through repeated indulgence in gluttonous consumerism. America is, in my opinion, a consumer society precisely because we Americans figure we might as well get as much shit as we can before It goes down. And while we might think that those stockpiling, bunker-building, hunkerers-down are crazy, in our subconscious the rest of us wonder if we should stockpile that shit and hunker in our bunker too, because we, as Americans, cannot ever really escape the nagging of our inherited psychological imprinting that keeps saying “Get your shit together because It’s gonna go down!” This certain knowledge of *The Shit*, and its inevitability in going down, never quite goes away in the mind of the American. What we, as Americans, don’t clearly grasp is that no one else in the world thinks this way. Aside from their individual existences being snuffed out by periodic waves of despotism, most other peoples of the world generally think that civilization (or the world) itself will always continue. Americans, on the other hand, are genuinely convinced it is going to end.

How did this towering edifice of belief get constructed in the collective American psyche? Where do Americans get this apocalyptic psychology? We have to reexamine the history of our self-concept as Americans, which goes much farther back than one might think, even before the American Revolution. Our impending sense of *The Shit* going down really is born with the Protestant Reformation.

In 16th Century Europe, the Church was everything. The Church wasn’t just part of the world, it *was* the world. So when Martin Luther tacked his 95 theses to the door of the church at Wittenburg, saying that what the world appeared to be was not what it was, or what it should be; he was, in slang terminology, “throwing down.” In fact, he did a Galileo *before* Galileo. Now, although Luther never really intended his dissension to be a public affair, it nevertheless became so very quickly because of a new invention called printing. And because of printing, the average European peasant, previously kept in intellectual (as well as luminescent) darkness, suddenly became privy to the Church’s privies, so to speak. Accidentally uncovering your parents’ nakedness, aside from being fairly revolting, also generally changes your opinion of them for the worse.

There's just a bit of respect lost there. And so, I have no doubt that this peasant, awed by the vision of impending war that was to take place between a Church whose nakedness had been uncovered (and which at the time was indeed revolting), and Luther, this father of dissension and uncoverer of ecclesiastical nakednesses, said something that could roughly be translated into modern slang as "Well, The Shit is sure as hell gonna go down now." And with these words having been uttered, Europe subsequently plunged headlong into utter chaos, where it remained for nearly a century.

And so, freed from the Dark Ages, people of every class up and rebelled against just about everything. Some of this rebellion was productive, and some of it was a poor waste of precious resources. But, among these many numerous acts of rebellion against the hegemonies of the day, the one that is etymologically relevant is that some radical Christian sects in England said "Screw this shit" and left their land for a better one—a land which they thought "floweth with milk and honey." We all know the rest of that story. Or do we? Most of us are under the impression that the founding of our nation was based upon Enlightenment principles by some white elite men that, at least in theory, had a measurable interest in the *idea* of human equality and freedom, if not exactly in the practice. This is only the façade to the more disturbing reality. On a much more basic level, the founding of America was wholly and fervently a religious movement, with very distinct millennial goals in mind. The common people of pre-revolutionary America, fueled by the orations of innumerable itinerant preachers, were utterly convinced that King George was, very literally, the anti-Christ. They also were convinced that the founding of the American nation would catalyze the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, wherein Christ would find holy ground in which to establish His New Jerusalem . Now, whatever our familiarity with or affinity towards Christianity might be, I think most of us would agree that the Second Coming of Christ is without a doubt, and in the strictest of terms, *the* quintessential definition of "The Shit Going Down." The Shit simply can't get any worse than when God pulls the plug on our Matrix. And what is scary, is that the proto-Americans *wanted* that shit to go down. What is even scarier is that some people are still trying.

Of course, we know that The Shit did not go down with the founding of the American nation, not in the way the neo-Americans expected and hoped at least. But that is not the issue. What is the issue is that we, as children of those 18th Century revolutionaries, who themselves were philosophical children of the Reformers (another group of radicals), are inheritors of extremely revolutionary tendencies. It flows in our veins. And just because few of us go to church or read the Bible anymore, doesn't mean that we have been released from the influence of the millennial preoccupations of our religious forbears. Asteroids, nuclear war, and alien invasions have just secularized our deep seated belief in the violent End of the World, and our ambivalent desire to see it happen, making The Shit and the inevitability of its going down just as American as apple pie, and as ubiquitous as well. Do we really think that the hysteria over Y2K was some recent psychological phenomenon? Au contraire, the truth is that we've been waiting for this since the beginning.

If it weren't for the important position The Shit holds in the collective American psyche, Arnold Schwarzenegger would be more of a Jack LaLane figure, the Cold War might never have happened, and Jerry Bruckheimer films might be considered obscure enough to be shown on the Independent Film Channel. I mean, what other nation in the world possesses a phrase so unexceptional and yet so heavily laden with physical, psychological, political, sociological and otherwise Apocalyptic violence to one's very person? Being an heir to this Apocalyptic psychology, I don't expect this etymology to truly make sense to someone who is not an American, especially one who does not speak American English. But I am thoroughly convinced that for those who do not presently understand what I am talking about, they will get a much clearer understanding when in fact The Shit goes down.