The End: Closure and Disclosure in the Fiction of the Americas

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Writing the Apocalypse: Historical Vision in Contemporary U.S. and Latin American Fiction

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As the quincentennial anniversary of the "discovery" of the Americas approaches, an increasing number of studies on the consequences of the European conquest of the so-called New World is only to be expected. No doubt the oft-posed question as to why the United States is the story of success and Latin America the history of failure will again be addressed by critics on both sides of the Atlantic as well as on either side of the Rio Grande. But when a book – written by an American and published in the United States – comes along to challenge and even reverse the implications of the question itself, it is time to sit up and take notice. The United States: a culture doomed to failure? Latin America: transformed into a success? The beginnings and endings implied in such questions reveal the overarching concern of this book: human history and destiny.

In her comparative analysis of six contemporary American fiction writers – three from the U.S. and three from Latin American countries – Lois Parkinson Zamora seeks to illustrate the enduring relevance of narrative which explores the relationship of the individual, the community and the novel itself to the process of history. The organizing principle, that which accounts for both the selection and assessment of the texts under scrutiny, is the myth of apocalypse. Although apocalyptic visions of the Americas have been examined in literary and other cultural expressions on previous occasions – the author herself has edited one such study (Zamora 1982) – this is the first attempt to engage in a North-South literary comparison for the purpose of understanding and articulating basic cultural similarities and differences. Since this investigation advances essentialist theses about U.S. and Latin American cultures, it may be as well to probe certain questions which immediately come to mind and are only partially addressed by Zamora, before commenting on her separate comparative analyses and the conclusions she draws from them.

1 Apocalypse: Appropriate Archetypal Model?

The first question concerns the exclusion of writers that do not fit the patterns of apocalyptic vision, in this case women and the marginalized sectors of the two Americas. As regards the omission of women writers, Zamora tentatively explains that "the macrocosmic and totalizing political intent of apocalyptic

vision is less compelling for most women writers than psychological relations on a more intimate scale" (1989: 7). There is no motivation offered for excluding the other voices.

The reader will wonder whether Zamora is justified in engaging in a comparative cultural analysis based on literary texts written by representatives of far less than half their respective populations!

Even if the authors discussed in this book were more representative, one might still ask whether this particular myth is so revealing of the ethos of both U.S. and Latin American cultures as to constitute their respective figurative centres. Was it not, as J.M. Coetzee believes, the garden myth, the myth of a return to Eden and original innocence which brought about the beginning and shaped the history of Europe's New World colonies (Coetzee 1988: 2)? Certainly this was the view of many Spanish Republican exiles living in Spanish America after the Civil War. The most notable feature of their theory was that true national essence could only lie before and outside history: in myth, specifically in a myth of origins (Labanyi 1982: 70). Strongly implied in this search for primal innocence is the rejection or "undoing" of history, and hence of accountability and guilt. Is the contemporary Latin American preoccupation with myth to affirm a unique identity simply an echo of the slogan "Spain is different"? Or is it not rather a critique of the Edenic myth, one which highlights the dangers in using this myth as a compensation for historical failure?

Zamora's book provides a discerning answer to these questions by postulating a more appropriate myth with which to characterize and differentiate not only Latin American, but also U.S. thinking, one that is grounded in historical circumstances: the myth of apocalypse. Apocalyptic writing, she explains, began to replace traditional Hebrew prophetic scripture in the century before Christ, as the contradiction between prophetic ideals and the actual experience of the Hebrew nation became more and more apparent. The apocalyptist, contrary to the prophet who sees the future arising out of the past, sees the future breaking into the present, and this world being replaced by a new world under God's aegis. Because it developed in response to a worsening political situation, there is a direct relationship between apocalyptic thought and its sociological and political context (Zamora 1989: 10, 11). Because it is concerned with final things, with the end of the present age and with the age to follow, apocalypse is eschatological in nature. But it is not merely a synonym for disaster or cataclysm; it is also revelation, from the Greek apokálypsis, meaning to uncover, reveal, disclose (Zamora 1989: 10).

The apocalyptist feels inspired and compelled to reveal to his audience what has been revealed to him by God: the divinely predetermined totality of history and also the total meaning of the sacred scriptures. While conveying the power of God's retributive justice, he also conveys his own longing for vengeance on his oppressors. According to Zamora, this ambivalence between being both appalled and enthralled by God's wrath accounts for the interplay of tones and antithetical figures that characterize apocalyptic expression: punishment and reward; the metaphoric contraries of Christ and

Antichrist; whore and bride; Babylon and the New Jerusalem; this world and the next (Zamora 1989: 12). It can be seen from this brief description that it is principally Saint John's Revelation, considered the most complete and finest of biblical apocalyptic texts, which is Zamora's source of inspiration.

It is not difficult to find the inscription of apocalyptic thought in current Latin American and U.S. concerns expressed in a variety of media. Social and political upheaval in almost all Latin American countries, plus a preoccupation with defining a true Latin American identity, virtually assures an apocalyptic reaction there. In the U.S. apocalyptic thinking can be attributed to the temporal uncertainties brought about by recent and not so recent political events – the Gulf War, Vietnam, the Cold War, for example – and ecological and demographic events. (The "revolution and revelation" theme resonates for us here in South Africa as the title of the 1991 AUETSA conference suggests: Awaiting the Millenium.)

The perception, in such apocalyptic visions, of a revelation of deeper, even concealed, national animating forces demands a return to the beginnings of American history and a study of the resurgence of this mode of thought throughout the subsequent history of the Americas. In this, Zamora's overview of the apocalyptic spirit governing the discoverers and first settlers in the New World is thoughtful and well-documented. The imaginative association of both Americas with the promise of apocalyptic historical renewal did indeed begin with Christopher Columbus himself who, in letters to his Spanish royal patrons, referred to passages from Revelation and Isaiah which describe the new heaven and new earth.

Spain's messianic historical mission in Latin America was followed some hundred years later by the theological visions embraced by the Puritans in New England. The promise of renewal of the English New World emerged from Martin Luther's apocalyptic interpretation of the Reformation and the Puritans' literal acceptance of Revelation (Zamora 1989: 8).

While grounding the beginnings of New World apocalyptic vision, Zamora chooses not to survey here its echoes in the subsequent cultural and literary history of the Americas. Her previous study justifies this omission regarding U.S. literature, but at least she should have referred readers to discussions of the mythic tradition in Latin American writing by critics such as Angel Rama (Rama 1982), René Jara (Jara 1989), Carlos Fuentes (Fuentes 1969), etc., before pointing to ways in which selected contemporary narrative works recognize and perpetuate the theme of apocalypse. It is important to be aware that in Spanish America the narrative tradition itself is a relatively short one, since all fiction was proscribed by the Spanish crown during the colonial period. Until Independence in the nineteenth century, apocalypse was inscribed in historical rather than fictional literature. (See Vargas Llosa 1987: 1–17 for an interesting discussion of what he terms "the revenge of the novel" in Latin America.)

Yet another, quite obvious, question arises out of the selection of narrative works from one country – the U.S. – for comparison with works from three others. Can one simply apply the general category "Latin American" to the very different cultures of Colombia, Argentina and Mexico, the home

countries of the authors under discussion? Zamora answers this question by referring to a number of Latin American writers who themselves give unconditional primacy to the notion of a Latin American commonality, who engage in, and in some sense also create, the reality shared by the many countries and cultures of their region. As Carlos Fuentes has said: "I am a citizen of Mexico, and a writer from Latin America" (Fuentes 1988: 199 in Zamora 1989: 20).

A final question concerns the validity of comparing Thomas Pynchon, John Barth and Walker Percy, writing in the context of late capitalism, to Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar and Carlos Fuentes, writing in economic and social situations rather different from those of U.S. writers, and for very different reading publics. The latter are all major novelists of the so-called "boom" period in Latin American letters, popular both in their own region and in the U.S. The reverse is not true: the U.S. writers are virtually unknown in Latin America, nor have they attained "popular writer" status in their own country. Although Zamora does not set out to define contemporary U.S. literature in terms of the contemporary Latin American literature, nor vice versa, her comparative project is preconditioned from the outset by her choice of authors.

It is important to examine briefly the relationship of apocalypse to narrative in order to understand Zamora's study of it in this North-South literary context. The key word is plot: the biblical apocalyptist proposes nothing less than God's own plot for history, the only plot in which by definition end and ending coincide. There are two parallel quests embodied in biblical apocalypse: one for an understanding of history and the other for the means to narrate that understanding. As the medium between God's projection of truth and the reader's reception of that truth, the biblical apocalyptist self-consciously presents himself as both reader and writer. This creates the tension always present in apocalypse: in the tone, which fluctuates between authority and uncertainty, assertiveness and awe; in the language, which also fluctuates between the accessible – or revelation – and the obscure – or concealment – understandable only to the initiated; and in the eye of the apocalyptist, which is *caught* by the static, ideal realm at the end of the historical upheaval, but which is *held* by the dynamism of the upheaval itself (Zamora 1989: 16).

Biblical apocalypse has bequeathed to narrative fiction a wealth of ideas and images about the historical process, about the act of writing, about the problem of interpretation itself. What characterizes contemporary apocalyptic fiction in particular is a self-conscious consideration of the implications of ends and endings. Each of the authors discussed by Zamora in her book link in one way or another the present with both past and future, their subject matter being the substance, form and meaning of history itself.

2 Comparative Studies of U.S. and Latin American Writers of Fiction

For her critical discussion of the images and patterns of apocalypse, Zamora acknowledges the works of Frank Kermode (*The Sense of an Ending* 1967),

Norman Cohn (*The Pursuit of the Millenium* 1970) and Meyer H. Abrams (*Natural Supernaturalism* 1971). According to David Bethea, who has recently written on the apocalyptic model in Russian narrative, these books are "classics in the field for anyone interested either in the roots of Western apocalyptic or in the impact that social and cultural models of the End have had on literary form" (1989: xiii). However, it will clearly emerge from Zamora's comparative discussion of literature in the American hemispheric context that she advances the relevance of other theoretical models – Deconstruction and New Historicism – which, *inter alia,* ask the reader to recognize the complex cultural environment of which literature is a part.

The choice of Gabriel García Márquez as her point of departure is fitting in more ways than one. Not only is his fiction the most explicit example of the patterns of apocalypse, but the problem of comparative analysis in the first of a series is resolved by the strong presence of William Faulkner in García Márquez's fiction. This early cross-cultural influence, admitted by the Colombian writer (*Les Prix Nobel 1982;* Simón Martínez 1971; Milla Batres 1968), is shown by the critic to mark the end of a period in U.S. letters and the beginning of another, similar one in Latin America. The lines of convergence implied here concern the notion of national failure and how writers in both continents incorporate it into their works: the guilt of the colonist who had profaned his pristine land, the decadence of an irrelevant aristocracy, the injustice and racial cruelty of the white-skinned usurper, etc. (Zamora 1989: 33).

The connection between Faulkner and García Márquez is perhaps most clearly evident in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) as both novels trace the cataclysmic history of the individuals and communities of Yoknapatawpha County and Macondo respectively, but they are also about the deciphering of the manuscripts that record and preserve their histories, and about the narrative equivocations inherent in these processes. Zamora's specific critique of these apocalyptic elements in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* provides the reader with clear examples of the benefits as well as the shortcomings of this analytical framework.

The first apocalyptic feature of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is probably the most controversial: its temporal structure, which Zamora states is rectilinear rather than cyclical. Critics such as Mario Vargas Llosa (1971), Ricardo Gullón (1979) and many others cited by Zamora (1989: 199) would disagree with her. However she convincingly shows that the 100-year history of Macondo, told from its beginning to its end, is the progressive temporal framework within and against which the novel's many cyclical elements – the repetition of names, the recurrence of events and activities, etc. – are set. The failure of Macondo's founding couple, the Buendías, to avert its end by creating a place where time – past, present and future – is unified in innocence is also apocalyptic. The past erupts into the present of Macondo at the same time as clocks make their appearance. From then the characters are engulfed in their memories and premonitions, in their solitude and isolation from one another, seeking release in multiple ways. Without wishing to detract from the seriousness of purpose in Zamora's study and García Márquez's novel, it

is regrettable that the apocalyptic grid allows for no consideration of the humour and comic relief provided by the eccentric releases of so many characters – a woman sails to heaven on spinnakers of laundry, a priest levitates after drinking hot chocolate – and even of things which, we are reminded, "have a life of their own . . . . It's simply a question of waking up their souls" (García Márquez 1970: 7).

What is of particular interest and moment in the ending of Macondo is that not only does it coincide with the end of the novel, but also with the revelation of the identity of the narrator, who of course must disappear with the destruction of the fictional world. Melquíades, who is not a member of the Buendía family, is the one to tell their story, to see their history whole, with apocalyptic hindsight according to Zamora (1989: 36). How does he confer meaning upon both history and biography if he is destroyed? The reader can only turn to the other reality outside the narration – that of the author. What has survived the destruction of the fictional world is the author's testimony, the novel itself. And language, the sole remaining defence of the apocalyptist against historical chaos and finality.

If the annihilation suffered either by individuals or whole communities in García Márquez's fictional works has an antidote in the survival of the narrations themselves, the same transformative power of fiction is not apparent in the pessimistic eschatology inherent in the works of Thomas Pynchon. The view of time and the end of the world of both these authors provides the common apocalyptic ground against which Zamora highlights their differences. *V.* (1963), *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) are the principal texts selected for comparison with the fiction of the Colombian writer. Zamora avers that Pynchon's narratives start out with an apocalyptic vision of history in that their temporal movement is unidirectional and irreversible (1989: 55). However this vision is invariably supplanted by an entropic one, a gradual descent into total chaos.

The law of entropy, being a law of physics which describes the slow death of the universe, is unavoidable and therefore human efforts to oppose it and oblivion are not seen as tragic, as in García Márquez's fictions, but simply as energy spent, not even misspent. Pynchon's characters, for example Callisto in the aptly named story "Entropy" or Stencil in *V.* do want to decipher historical reality and give it significance, but they are led to an ultimately unsearchable, unfathomable world wherein tensions are unresolved. Entropy, like the myth of origins, permits a release from history and from the continuities it implies, from accountability. Unlike the Edenic vision, entropy dismisses the present and the future as every act becomes an isolated event, without consequence and without moral content.

In this chapter Zamora describes Pynchon's entropic vision as a metaphor for the end of contemporary U.S. culture, a consumer culture he sees progressively disintegrating, being slowly eaten up by its insatiable appetite for new things, its technological advances overtaking any attempt at a genuine sense of history and moral equilibrium.

This "mechanistic" view of time and the universe is more prevalent in U.S. fiction than in Latin American narrative literature which, Zamora says, is

more "organic" in its interpretation of time and the world. The critic uses this opportunity to begin her reflections on one of the reasons which might explain the contrast in attitudes. She links it to the split in twentieth-century philosophical thinking: from a naturalistic and organic, i.e. Bergsonian and modernist, view of the universe to a mechanistic and postmodernist interpretation based on the physics of Henry Adams (1989: 73). According to Zamora, contemporary Latin American fiction writers align with Bergson in rejecting the overarching temporal patterns projected by the radical finalism or mechanism present in contemporary U.S. fiction precisely because such an historical vision "sacrifices experience to a system and thus obviates humanity's participation in duration" (Zamora 1989: 74). This reasoning will be taken up again by Zamora in subsequent chapters and in particular in her conclusions. It is therefore important to note here that whereas it is highly compatible with her interpretation of apocalyptic writing in the two hemispheres, there is no direct evidence that Latin American thinking has been influenced by Bergson. The French philosopher's essential influence on Faulkner could indeed be the link to the other South, but this ignores the Latin American continued preoccupation with developing its own philosophy and its own sense of history, since Independence in the early decades of the nineteenth century. But more about this in the conclusion to the present review.

The fiction of John Barth, the second of the U.S. writers under discussion, focuses the reader's attention on endings, not as the inevitable pattern of history which Pynchon portrays, but as that of fictional literature. Novels such as *The Floating Opera* (1956), *The End of the Road* (1958), and *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), have closed narrative endings which only send the reader back, in circular fashion, into each narration. Any "meaningful" ending is therefore subverted or denied; the invocation of apocalypse by Barth is more timeless than terminal. Zamora quotes the author who, likening himself to Scheherazade, feels compelled to keep on spinning tales within tales, to publish or perish (1989: 97).

As there is no potential future projected beyond the confines of these literary artefacts, Zamora sees in them another example of the U.S. postmodernist view of history as annihilation.

Whereas John Barth's fiction embodies the predicament of literature in an age of exhaustion, that of Julio Cortázar, with whom he is compared, opens the way to transcendence, to the transformative vision of the artistic imagination. According to Zamora, the myth of apocalypse underlies and integrates this Argentine author's aesthetic and political idealism (1989: 78). As a counterbalance to scientific rationalism – the mechanistic view already mentioned – Cortázar reintroduces inspiration as "the apocalyptic 'explosion' which he believes to be the artist's function" (Zamora 1989: 78, quoting from Cortázar's essay "Algunos aspectos del cuento" (1973)). The inspired transcendence of the artist in Cortázar's early works – the jazz artist in *The Pursuer* and the novelist in *Hopscotch* for example – is embodied in the political activist in his later fiction. Andrés in the novel *A Manual for Manuel* (1974) moves from a position of neutrality to commitment to the revolution.

It is this political engagement that permits his artistic engagement, namely the book he will begin after the end of Cortázar's novel to preserve a record of the past for Manuel, the baby of one of the revolutionaries, in the future. What is important to remember is that "revolution" in Cortázar's works combines the original etymology of the word – which implies primacy of the past – with the modern usage – which implies primacy of the future. Regard for the past and visions of a better future and how to incorporate them in narrative are the concern of the apocalyptist. Cortázar's narrators reflect this in their open-ended narrative structures, in stark contrast to the closed endings of John Barth's fictions.

Of the three U.S. writers discussed by Zamora, only Walker Percy would seem to embody in his fictional works the traditional apocalyptic vision of cataclysm and hope which is embraced by the Latin American authors. Perhaps it is no more coincidence that he is from the U.S. South and writes from "an avowedly Christian eschatological point of view" (Zamora 1989: 120). Percy's sense of an ending is not entropic, as in Pynchon's, nor is it subverted by closed structures as in Barth's fiction. It is conditioned by the historical catastrophes and awesome weapons of the twentieth century. The single, central metaphor of the end of the world in all his fiction expresses Percy's most basic cultural and spiritual concern (Zamora 1989: 124). The only way to avert that end is by writing about it, by construing it in a positive light, as the symbolic precursor to spiritual and cultural renewal. Will Barrett, the character developed over the course of two novels, *The Last Gentleman* (1966) and *The Second Coming* (1980), best illustrates this apocalyptic conviction. His predicament is to live from Wednesday to Wednesday, in the midst of history, without relation to a beginning or an end that would give meaning to the middle. His longing for the revelation of the secret of his life, symbolically and apocalyptically inferred in the awaited end of the world, is satisfied when, as he reaches a decisive moment towards the end of the second novel, a transcendent reality has begun to reveal itself. Will interprets the last words of a dying man for a Catholic priest who administers the first and last rites. At that point the sacred breaks into the secular and "inspires in Will a moment of eschatological insight" (Zamora 1989: 141). His attempt to transcend the world thus becomes the means of Will's reconciliation with the world. This complementarity of the immanent and transcendent is basic to apocalyptic narrative and as such suggests an optimism about the regenerative function of fiction.

Like Percy, the Mexican novelist and critic Carlos Fuentes also believes that "literature is the only utopia possible in a world which exists in the present, not the future, tense" (Zamora 1989: 147). Although he calls into question the future-oriented linearity of apocalyptic thinkers, he self-consciously invokes the historical vision and pattern of apocalypse. Many of his works – essays as well as fiction – are profoundly rooted in Mexican history. Zamora, however, chooses the novel *Terra Nostra* (1975) to illustrate Fuentes's inscription of the myth of apocalypse. The author himself called this novel "a vain attempt to absorb and express a total history" in a *Paris Review* interview in 1981. The novel, principally about the sixteenth-century Spanish

Catholic origins of Mexico, but also about the two thousand-year history of Western thought, is narrated from a determined period in the future – between July 1999 and 1 January 2000 – beyond the history it depicts and that of the reader's own history. Past and future are integrated into and mediated by the novel itself, which moves toward its apocalyptic ending not to portray the end of a fictional world, as in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, but rather "to evoke the mythic moment when history, the grounding fact of the narration, and the novel, its outcome, are one" (Zamora 1989: 151).

The novel's three divisions – "The Old World", "The New World" and "The Next World" – would seem to reiterate the sense of an historical mission. Fuentes, however, shows that Mexico's and Hispanic America's history is a series of subverted beginnings. At the same time, that history cannot be disregarded in the name of a better future: it must be incorporated, transformed and renewed by literature, by art. Perhaps nowhere other than in a literary work is it possible to have an overview of history which shifts from the theoretical realm to the realm of political action, without serving the ends of any single ideological system. *Terra Nostra* demonstrates the complex interaction between historical reality and a variety of visionary historical constructs and asserts that all forward movements or radical turns to a different future require an imaginative return to the past. The novel itself, according to Zamora, is a clear example of "this transformative process" (1989: 175).

3 Conclusions

In the final chapter of her book Zamora makes comparative generalizations about the different inscriptions of the myth of apocalypse in contemporary U.S. and Latin American fiction and, moving on to more slippery ground, suggests probable reasons for those differences. Hoping to ward of immediate criticism, she appropriates the irony inherent in apocalyptic fiction which explores finality without permitting a single, hence final reading of it. However, it could also be said here that she is simply adhering to most modern reading strategies in rejecting narrative closure.

In her conclusion Zamora reiterates the links between her chosen authors – their shared underlying desire to make connections between past, present and future, between the individual and the community, between the real and the ideal – and highlights again that they do not always express a conviction that literature may yet influence the outcome of individual and communal histories. What separates these fiction writers and, furthermore, accounts for the different visions of apocalypse in U.S. and Latin American fiction constitutes the principal focus of Zamora's attention in this last chapter, i.e. the notion of time, the awareness of crisis, the pressure of self-definition.

Recalling her commentary in the chapter on Thomas Pynchon, Zamora emphasizes here that time in U.S. fiction is conceived as mechanistic. The vision of crisis in terms of a technological apocalypse, more prevalent in contemporary U.S. than Latin American narrative, is interpreted by this critic to both reflect and reinforce the Anglo-American mechanistic conception of

time. Latin American time is conceived as more organic, enabling writers to bear witness both to the expectation of a different future brought about by modernization and technology and to the accompanying frustration of living in a present of continued poverty and injustice (Zamora 1989: 178). What Zamora neglects to say here is that a positivist, progressive notion of time did prevail in Latin America, from the period of Independence when European Enlightenment ideas were so influential. It was present in Latin American novels until after the Mexican Revolution. Its breakdown into what Zamora aptly calls organic time was the consequence of the experience of failure of linear time – the perfectability of human nature and human institutions. In Latin America it was first expressed by her poets – Gorostiza, Paz, Neruda, Lugones.

According to Zamora, the greatest difference between U.S. and Latin American visions of apocalypse lies in the concept of identity. Whereas these visions in U.S. fiction focus primarily on individual self-definition, they are most often used in Latin American fiction as a means of expressing the communal realities of historical identity (Zamora 1989: 179). In order to support this interpretation, Zamora seeks to root it in the historical and cultural beginnings of the U.S. and Latin America. Latin American emphasis on family and social relationships derives from the continuation in New Spain of Old World ideas and institutions. The celebration of rugged individualism in the U.S. emerges from the Puritans' aim to discontinue Old World models and create their own new ones in New England (Zamora 1989: 180). These initial circumstances are continued throughout the colonial period: English settlers wrote spiritual autobiographies and diaries; Spanish colonists wrote chronicles and communal histories (Zamora 1989: 182). Zamora problematizes this distinction unnecessarily in terms of contemporary U.S. and Latin American cultural attitudes by encompassing it in Fredric Jameson's provocative generalizations about the "radical split" between the private self, enshrined in capitalist first-world literature, and the public self, which is the domain of third-world culture and society (1989: 188–189).

The concern for the individual versus concern for the community which distinguishes U.S. and Latin American cultural attitudes is extended by Zamora into the area of politics and literature. She states that literary and political aims, which became separate in the U.S. at the turn of the century, continue to be conceived as complementary in Latin America, where the writer is expected to be politically committed, to respond to sociological and political imperatives as well as imaginative and aesthetic ones. In the U.S. the expectation is just the contrary. "The U.S. has fostered a postromantic conception of artists as separated from the political mainstream by their artistic sensibilities and esthetic priorities" (Zamora 1989: 184). The blame for much of this attitude in the U.S. is placed on the academe, specifically on the institutionalized literary theories and practices of New Criticism and Structuralism which have encouraged the dismissal of extratextual considerations and the growth of a postmodern literature which highlights aesthetic and psychological concerns rather than historical and social ones. Strangely, Zamora does not ask whether the rejection of such issues in U.S. literature

and literary practice has a political origin. In his essay on the New Americanists Donald Pease refers to the Cold War "liberal anticommunist consensus" which has informed the field of American studies since the 1950s (1990: 24). He points out the irony in the incomparable power of U.S. ideology to refute and absorb subversive cultural energies in order to persist in the belief that U.S. literary imagination transcends the realm of political ideology.

Lest the reader be unduly influenced by Zamora's obvious bias toward the Latin American consideration of politics and literature, it is as well to remember that, according to two of the region's foremost writers, more often than not this has produced "bad literature and bad politics" (Fuentes 1987: 148), an opinion previously expressed by García Márquez (Mendoza/Márquez 1983: 56).

In seeking an overall assessment of Zamora's book two questions come to mind. Has this book enriched our understanding of the literary manifestations of the myth of apocalypse? Has it contributed new ideas about contemporary U.S. and Latin American fiction? The answer to the first question is an unqualified yes! Zamora has ably demonstrated that apocalypse is a rich source of imagery and narrative structure particularly appropriate to fiction concerned with the flux of time, whether in the mechanistic or organic sense. The second question could receive a qualified affirmative. Certainly she has provided fresh insights into our reading of authors who focus on the fate of individuals and collectivities, the relations between autonomy and solidarity. However, the North-South comparisons of pairs of writers would have been even more elucidating had Zamora not included so many new comparative directions in her discussions of each author. While extensive and scholarly name-dropping may impress, it can lead to unpardonable gaffes, for example calling Augusto Roa Bastos a "Uruguayan novelist" (1989: 186) when in fact he is from Paraguay!

The repeated references throughout the book to the Latin American belief in the transformative power of literature viewed in contrast to the negative eschatology, the end of life and literature, portrayed in contemporary U.S. literature, would make even the most devoted Latin Americanist a trifle suspicious. Although Zamora limits this view to apocalyptic fiction, the reader nevertheless is left with the notion that there is no vitality in U.S. literature and that, furthermore, there has been scant cultural or literary bridging between the North-South divide. No less an author than Carlos Fuentes frequently remarks on the extremely vital and interesting literature of the U.S. and in addition refers to what he calls the "Latin Americanization of the world" (Fuentes 1986: 149): the recognition that a literary critique of failed social, political and economic models is the only critique to stand the test of time.

Despite the few reservations mentioned above, and the quite maddening editorial style of the book – end-notes without a Harvard-style bibliography – *Writing the Apocalypse* as critique of a literature which imaginatively probes the relationship of the individual, the community and narrative fiction itself to the process of history is both timely and also likely to stand the best test of timethe academe can offer: inspiration to others.

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