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0521582539 - The Usable Past: The Imagination of History in Recent Fiction of the Americas

Lois Parkinson Zamora

Excerpt

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## PART ONE

## ANXIETY OF ORIGINS

If Death and Liberty  
Can be personified,  
Why not History?

It's got to be a fat old man  
In faded overalls  
Outside a house trailer  
On a muddy road to some place  
called Pittsfield or Babylon.

He draws the magic circle  
So the chickens can't get out,  
Then he hobbles to the kitchen  
For the knife and pail.

Today he's back carrying  
A sack of yellow corn.  
You can hear the hens cluck,  
The young cocks strut their stuff.  
Charles Simic, "Severe Figures"

THAT FAT OLD MAN in faded overalls is well suited to introduce this study of the historical imagination in U.S. and Latin American fiction. History has indeed been one of the severest figures of the America's collective imagination. The barnyard fairly reeks of that familiar historical anxiety, the motivation and theme of so much of our fiction. There he goes now, clutching his instruments, terrorizing those dumb clucks whose collective fate he seals. Then again, he's fickle, so tomorrow we may get corn. But what's this? History hobbles? Or is he hobbled by the writers who created him? After all, they too travel along that apocalyptic road to Pittsfield, Babylon. We might easily mistake Charles Simic's old man for the eighth deadly sin in some medieval morality play, ready to take the stage with the

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likes of gluttony and lust and avarice. But no. He is, in fact, the first deadly sin of the novel.

So I begin by recalling that the rise of the novel coincided with the impact of the idea of history upon modern consciousness. The reading and writing of history were prominent features of the culture of eighteenth-century Europe. Voltaire's *History of Charles XII* and Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* were international best-sellers, as were the forged histories of Macpherson and Chatterton. About England, Hume would declare, "I believe this to be the historical age and this the historical nation," an assertion that might well have been made about France and Germany as well.<sup>1</sup> In London, the Society of Antiquaries was founded in 1718, but the startling innovation that was to become characteristic of all modern philosophies of history did not occur till the last third of the eighteenth century, and departed distinctly from the historical thinking of Voltaire, Gibbon, and Hume. The idea that the meaning of history resides and reveals itself in the historical process itself, rather than in isolated events, has its roots in the historiographic thinking of Hobbes and Vico, but it found its culminating expression in Hegel's philosophy. Hannah Arendt asserts that the central concept in all of Hegel's metaphysics is history: "This alone places it in the sharpest possible opposition to all previous metaphysics, which since Plato had looked for truth and the revelation of eternal Being everywhere except in the realm of human affairs – of which Plato speaks with such contempt precisely because no permanence could be found in it and therefore it could not be expected to disclose truth."<sup>2</sup> The revolutionary idea that the particular occurrence derives its intelligibility from the process of history as a whole strongly influenced the developing genre of the novel. In his classic exposition of the connection, Georg Lukács refers specifically to the Hegelian foundations of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century historical novel, and much of what he says can be related to the development of the genre in general.<sup>3</sup>

Lukács is concerned with novelistic representation that is radically and uniquely historical; he associates the development of the historical novel directly with the first generalized (i.e. modern) European war. If the *idea* of history had been revolutionized in the late eighteenth century, the *experience* of history was soon to change as well. Lukács describes the "mass experience of history" occasioned by the French Revolution and the subsequent Napoleonic wars, when for the first time the individual was confronted with the direct reality of world history. The advent of mass conscriptions and unlimited geographical warfare made people think globally, and historically. They realized that similar upheavals were taking place elsewhere, a realization, Lukács posits, that must have "enormously strengthen[ed] the feeling first that there is such a thing as history, second that it [was] an uninterrupted process of changes and finally that it [had] a direct effect upon the life of every individual." (20) The generalized conflict also awakened national sensibilities in Europe. There were altogether new

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appeals to national character and national history, to past greatness and past dishonors – in short, to the particularities of ethnic and cultural heritage. Thus, communities as well as individuals were being made aware of their relationship to world history, a relationship in which change was increasingly viewed qualitatively as well as quantitatively. This nascent ideology of progress found expression in Hegel's philosophy, specifically in his vision of the "world spirit" embodied in the dialectics of historical development. Lukács links this Hegelian idea directly to the development of the novel: "According to the new interpretation, the reasonableness of human progress develops ever increasingly out of the inner conflict of social forces in history itself; according to this interpretation history itself is the bearer and realizer of human progress" (25). In a critical discussion too well known to need reiteration here, Lukács makes us aware of the ways in which the basic generic conditions and characteristics of the novel developed alongside the Hegelian concept of the historical character of existence.

If in the mid to late eighteenth century the development of modern historical consciousness and the development of the novel impinge and intersect, I would have to say that they *parallel* the emergence of independent national identities in the Americas. Lukács completely ignores the possible influence of the Americas on European historiography and historical fiction, and Hegel makes of America an exception to his theory of historical dialectics. In his lectures collected in *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel first refers generally to the New World, then contrasts English and Spanish America, and finally returns to generalize about America's lack of a usable past: "It is for America to abandon the ground on which hitherto the History of the World has developed itself. What has taken place in the New World up to the present time is only an echo of the Old World – the expression of a foreign Life; and as the Land of the Future, it has no interest for us here, for . . . our concern must be with that which has been and that which is."<sup>4</sup> To participate in the dialectical movement of history, a nation must assimilate and preserve its past by negating it, a process that allows a nation to free itself of its past while at the same time making it an integral part of the present continuity of existence. For Hegel, America had no assimilated past, hence no possibility of historical continuity or national identity: Does not the very term "New World" contain and confirm this fact? Hegel concludes: "America is therefore the land of the future, where, in the ages that lie before us, the burden of the World's History shall reveal itself – perhaps in a contest between North and South America" (86).

I will overlook Hegel's blindness to America's indigenous cultural past – there were, after all, innumerable historical cultures in America even as Hegel wrote – and observe instead that he correctly foresaw what would become a principal theme of literature in the Americas: the question of historical identity. He also foresaw, however unconsciously, that America's historical anxiety would be intimately related to the New

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World's uses of its Old World predecessors, that is, to the historical processes of colonialism and independence in this hemisphere. For though the European concepts of history and nationality to which I have referred evolved without substantial reference to America, the reverse is certainly not true. America's ideas about history and its own historical identity are, of course, profoundly rooted in European philosophy: Almost two hundred years have been added to the history of the Americas since Hegel's assertion, but the relation of American identity to European cultural models continues to be problematic. Indeed, I will suggest presently that Hegel himself has proved one of the most challenging of our European precursors to negate and assimilate.

Still one more relevant idea coincides with the historical developments I have touched on here by way of introduction, namely, the idea of comparative literature. The growing sense of the relation of historical process to national identity in Europe raised questions about how to define national culture and how to interpret differences among cultures. During the last quarter of the eighteenth century (primarily in Germany), Herder, the Schlegels, and other critics developed influential theories that conceived of literature as the voice of a nation or culture – even as a power that shaped it – and they promoted the comparative discussion of literature by epoch and ethnicity in these terms. A growing appreciation of various folk literatures, and the comparative study of ancient, Eastern, and modern foreign literatures contributed to the idea of literature as a privileged expression of a given culture. Although questions of national and cultural identity are now relatively rare in comparative studies of Western European literatures, they are current in areas where national identity is in more formative stages of development, as it is in Latin America, and where it is undergoing deep and historic diversification, as in the U.S. In these regions, literary criticism is effectively redefining concepts of canonicity and collective identity; indeed, postcolonial theorists questioning the very possibility of collective identity have repeatedly taken cultural practices in the Americas as their testing ground.<sup>5</sup>

My own comparative project is to expand the territory of comparative literary inquiry from its original national parameters in Europe to hemispheric ones in the Americas. I have said that I will refer to “American” literature in this larger sense; I will use “New World” to specify a particular set of literary attitudes toward American contexts. The newness of the New World is specious, of course, but it is one of our oldest collective traditions. The writers whom I discuss are unanimous in rejecting this New World myth that Americans are free of the burdens of history because they are free to create their own. On the contrary, they dramatize the fact that history may be more burdensome – and more meaningful – when one must create it, a circumstance as likely in the New World as inheriting a history from a known family or community. It is when cultural traditions are

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disjunctive or destroyed, and the potential for historical projection apparently endless, that history becomes problematic and literature instrumental. What Jorge Luis Borges says about Argentine writers is applicable to many American writers: “. . . he observado que en nuestro país, precisamente por ser un país nuevo, hay un gran sentido del tiempo.”<sup>6</sup> (“I have observed that in our country, precisely because it is a new country, we have a great sense of time.”)<sup>7</sup> And more specifically, a great sense of *American* time: “la expresión americana” has been thematic in Latin American literature since the colonial period, and has become so in literary criticism in the past two decades.<sup>8</sup> U.S. writers, too, have long engaged in processes of historical self-definition that are consistently distinguishable from those of European writers. In various ways that my comparative approach will illuminate, these writers posit history not only as background and cause, but also as the generative condition of their fiction.

Does the imagination of history in this literature have recognizably American features? Having just proposed that it does, I will be looking at a number of such features in the following chapters. Underlying them all is a shared condition that I call “anxiety of origins,” a phrase that echoes Harold Bloom’s anxiety of influence. Bloom’s formulation signals both a historical process and a cultural attitude toward one’s precursors, as does my own, but Bloom’s concept is inferred entirely from European sources – Hegelian historicism, Nietzschean philosophy, Freudian psychology – a Eurocentrism the more noticeable given Bloom’s initial reference to Borges.<sup>9</sup> Whereas Bloom’s argument underscores the modern European writer’s resistance to a past increasingly experienced as oppressive and, more specifically, as a block to the singular creativity of the psychologized self, my own phrase signals a countervailing tendency on the part of American writers. I consistently find that an anxiety about origins impels American writers to search *for* precursors (in the name of community) rather than escape *from* them (in the name of individuation); to connect *to* traditions and histories (in the name of a usable past) rather than dissociate *from* them (in the name of originality). Obviously, this anxiety, like Bloom’s, also contests earlier narratives: to imagine and include acceptable precursors is often to overturn or supplant less acceptable ones. But the anxiety of origins is contestatory in ways that are dialogical (multiple and coexisting) rather than competitive (singular and successive); its textual symptoms are not caution or constraint, as one might expect, but rather narrative complexity and linguistic exuberance – energies that I will eventually describe in terms of the New World Baroque. This American anxiety generates literary structures that are inclusive, relative, heterogeneous, synchronic. These structures reject the hegemony of the most recent.

Anxiety of origins: by “origins,” then, I mean acceptable sources of cultural authority, communal coherence, and individual agency; by “anxiety,” I mean the efforts of American writers to establish such sources by

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various strategies of research, restitution, revaluation, renovation, and resistance. This litany of “re’s” is meant to emphasize the obvious: by anxiety of origins, I do not mean some vague longing for originary mythic unity, though the romance dynamics of voyage/return and separation/reunion may accompany it. Nor is anxiety of origins limited to what Djelal Kadir has correctly identified as the “quest for beginnings” in much recent Latin American fiction, because my term implies the displacement of hegemonies and hierarchies that would sustain any singular version of that quest, or those beginnings.<sup>10</sup> The “re’s” stand for the intertextual impulse of the American writers I discuss: their sometimes-virtuosic interplay of texts and traditions may create an aura of (originary) myth, but it also encodes the historical interactions of sign systems and social formations. Their intertextual strategies self-consciously propose that origins are multiple and indeterminate, never fixed or fully decided.

This intertextual response to American historical anxiety obviously transcends mere “modernist nostalgia for origins,” a formulation used by several European poststructuralists to characterize (and condemn) such efforts of cultural and historical (re)construction; nor does it conform to the other side of the questionable dichotomy proposed by these theorists – the “postmodernist dismissal of any kind of continuity.”<sup>11</sup> Though I will recognize a number of narrative strategies and philosophical positions that may tentatively be described as modernist and/or postmodernist, the work of contemporary Latin American writers does not easily fall into such categories. Nor, for that matter, does the work of the contemporary U.S. writers I discuss: like their Latin American counterparts, they also seek to validate American cultural communities. Take, for example, Toni Morrison’s historical reconstructions in *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*, or Sandra Cisneros’ interpenetrating cultural traditions in *Woman Hollering Creek*. Surely they are impelled neither by a “modernist nostalgia for origins” nor by a postmodernist dismissal of “any kind of continuity,” but by the need to locate usable historical precursors and precedents. Their search for origins may be ironic and at the same time “authentic,” simultaneously self-doubting and subversive. What it is *not* is ahistorical: this literature does not reflect “the disappearance of a sense of history,” a distinguishing feature of postmodern cultural artifacts, according to Fredric Jameson’s influential argument.<sup>12</sup> My point is this: the challenge for the comparatist of American literature is to apply the proliferating taxonomies of modernism and postmodernism sparingly and selectively so as to emphasize the ideological implications of these writers’ historicizing activities. Their anxiety of origins corresponds not to generalizing critical categories but to particular cultural imperatives.

At issue, then, are received ideas about the structure of the past and the potential uses of those structures in the present. So Julio Cortázar’s narrator in *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*) celebrates jazz with a litany of “re’s,” describing a historical process as American as the musician to whom he pays

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## PART I. ANXIETY OF ORIGINS

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homage, Louis Armstrong: “. . . con su don de ubicuidad . . . es una nube sin fronteras . . . algo de antes, de abajo, que *reconcilia* mexicanos con noruegos y rusos y españoles, los *reincorpora* al oscuro fuego central olvidado, torpe y mal y precariamente los *devuelve a un origen traicionado* . . .” (“. . . with his gift of ubiquity. . . is a cloud without boundaries . . . something from before, from below, that *reconciles* Mexicans with Norwegians and Russians and Spaniards, *reincorporates* them into that obscure and forgotten central flame, clumsily and badly and precariously *returns them to a betrayed origin* . . .”).<sup>13</sup> Cortázar describes Satchmo’s music and his own literary aims and processes, as well as the inevitable difficulties that attend the American artist’s performance of this project (“clumsily and badly and precariously”).

Cortázar’s homage to Sachmo’s techniques of return, reconciliation, and inclusion underscores the difference between Bloom’s anxiety of influence and American writers’ anxiety of origins. Bloom does not effectively differentiate between writers in *colonized* cultures, whose relation to their cultural fathers is radically different from that of writers working in *colonizing* cultures (these latter in some sense the fathers of the former, whatever filial burdens they may also bear).<sup>14</sup> Bloom worries about an oppressively continuous Western tradition, a worry that is itself a European tradition going back at least to Shakespeare, who wondered whether repetition implied sterility, and who lamented “the second burden of a former child.”<sup>15</sup> But writers in colonized cultures know that former children may as often disappear as return, that their traditions are as likely to be oppressively *discontinuous* as oppressively ongoing. Whereas Bloom’s history, grounded in Hegel, is progressive and agonistic, assuming that cultures will actively produce (and privilege) the new, the colonized history of the New World is often otherwise.<sup>16</sup> Though Hegelian assumptions certainly operate in the Americas – their operations are the subject of my first chapter and are touched upon in my second chapter – cultures nonetheless differ from one another in their appreciation of innovation and their understanding of tradition as such. Some cultures are more traditional than others, hence less devoted to originality than the Bloomian model assumes, and certainly less committed to the assumption that the new is preferable to the known. (Indeed, some cultures might find the binary incomprehensible.) In contrast to Bloom’s model, the American writers I discuss do not subvert or shun influence but engage and interrogate it; their anxiety is a response not to the danger of inadequate imaginative individuation but rather to the knowledge that legitimate sources of communal identity have been destroyed or are unevenly available.

For my comparative purposes, the Heideggerian distinction between fear and anxiety is relevant. Whereas fear has a specific object, anxiety has none: fear implies fear *of* something, while anxiety is rooted in the perception of absence, of not being. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger writes: “Anxiety is anxious in the face of the ‘nothing’ of the world.”<sup>17</sup> Following this

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definition, Bloom's construction of anxiety is, in fact, not anxiety but fear. Bloom posits the fear of known precursors and a Freudian/Nietzschean resistance to them, whereas my construction supposes the obscurity or absence of precursors and a historicizing urge to identify and include them. Contemporary Latin American writers are inheritors of imposed cultural and linguistic traditions from which they are variously distanced and skeptical, but their resistance is often motivated less by the desire to abolish what has been imposed than to identify what is originary in both a historical and a mythic sense. This does not mean that they are not fully aware of the ideological mystifications of utopian desire, and fully in command of postcolonial and poststructural strategies to unmask such mystifications. Nonetheless, in contemporary Latin American literature the emphasis is as often on displaced or vanished sources of cultural legitimacy as on inherited illegitimacies. Carlos Fuentes, in his essay on "eccentric writing," proposes that "the role of marginal cultures is that of guardians of memory. A memory of what the West sacrificed in other cultures through imperialist expansion and what it sacrificed within its own culture."<sup>18</sup> Writers from colonized cultures must imagine what has been sacrificed. They must write about what is *not*.

My intention is not to present a systematic revision of Bloom's model of tradition-formation or other similar models,<sup>19</sup> for to do so might say more about the intergenerational strife of academic critics than about attitudes toward origins and influence in American literature. In any case, a number of critics have already challenged Bloom's universalization of European modernity, with its hypervaluation of individuality and originality and its unacknowledged investment in patriarchy.<sup>20</sup> My own point here is more obvious: origins are often distant or occluded or contradictory or contaminated or otherwise unsatisfying or unavailable in America, a fact that has tended to make American writers' anxiety of origins all the more compelling, and their narrative strategies for encompassing multiple origins or imagining absent ones the more inventive.

D. Emily Hicks has recognized this historical anxiety in her metaphor of "border writing," a formulation that refers to literature and literary processes in multicultural contexts. Her examples are drawn primarily from Hispanic America, but she argues that "what makes border writing a world literature with a 'universal' appeal is its emphasis upon the multiplicity of languages within any single language; by choosing a strategy of translation rather than representation, border writers ultimately *undermine* the distinction between original and alien culture."<sup>21</sup> In this statement, Hicks emphasizes the displacement of antinomies ("original and alien culture") by narrative strategies that "translate" multiple cultural and linguistic codes in the work itself. Although her critical project is allied to my own, my emphasis will be on unresolved antinomies. I will argue that many Latin American writers explicitly refuse the historical and



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cultural integration that “translation” implies, emphasizing instead the coexistence of discrete, contradictory, and equally necessary semiotic systems. These coexisting codes are placed in narrative structures that foreground (rather than undermine) the antinomies of Latin America’s multiple histories and traditions. Not the least of these antinomies is that “origins” are themselves oftentimes “alien.”

For Fuentes and many other American writers, the problem of origins is linked to the primal gesture of naming, which they see as a profoundly American act. “History,” Fuentes argues in an essay on García Márquez, “is most explicitly linked to language in America.”<sup>22</sup> But to which language(s)? Turning to his own country – to Mexico – he writes: “The passage of the language of the Aztec nation into a silence resembling death – or nature – and the passage of the Spanish language into a politically victorious yet culturally suspect and tainted condition not only is the foundation of the civilization of the New World: it perpetually questions it as it repeats a history that becomes a myth” (188). Creating one’s precursors requires that one (re)create the very language of those precursors so they may speak (to us). The American modernist poet William Carlos Williams shared this perception: “Americans have never recognized themselves. How can they? It is impossible until someone invent the ORIGINAL terms. As long as we are content to be called by somebody else’s terms, we are incapable of being anything but our own dupes.”<sup>23</sup> Williams’ “ORIGINAL terms” can speak of origins, can grasp past cultural meanings and include them in present cultural formations. This is consonant with the argument presented by Fuentes, who goes on to describe the Latin American anxiety of origins as a speechless terror: “Suddenly, here, in the vast reaches of the Amazonian jungle, the Andean heights, or the Patagonian plains, we are again in the very emptiness of terror that Hölderlin spoke of: the terror that strikes us when we feel . . . deprived of speech and identity” (187). Hölderlinian terror replaces Heideggerian anxiety; the metaphor changes but the response does not. Both authors describe their American intuition of deprivation (Fuentes says “emptiness,” Williams says “dupes”) and the resulting impulse to create or discover usable origins and influences.

In his widely published 1983 Harvard commencement address, Fuentes again insists upon the problematic historical positioning of Latin America with respect to Europe, noting that Latin America “received the legacy of the West in an incomplete fashion” and, worse, embraced it uncritically: “Latin America has tried to find solutions to its old problems by exhausting the successive ideologies of the West: liberalism, positivism, and Marxism. Today we are on the verge of transcending this dilemma by recasting it as an opportunity, at last, to be ourselves – *societies neither new nor old*, but simply, authentically, Latin American, as we sort out . . . the benefits and the disadvantages of a tradition that now seems richer and more

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PART I. ANXIETY OF ORIGINS

acceptable than it did one hundred years of solitude ago . . . ."<sup>24</sup> This statement honors García Márquez, of course, and also echoes Octavio Paz, who made a similar observation almost a half century ago: "The question of origins, then, is the central secret of our anxiety and anguish. It is worth studying the significance of this fact."<sup>25</sup> Paz himself has repeatedly returned to this point: "The history of Mexico is the history of a man seeking his parentage, his origins. He has been influenced at one time or another by France, Spain, the United States and the militant indigenists of his own country, and he crosses history like a jade comet, now and then giving off flashes of lightning. What is he pursuing in his eccentric course?" (20) The writers I treat in the following chapters dramatize the pursuit, without exhausting Paz's question. They, like Paz, signal the digressive and diverted history of influence in Latin America, which Paz has elsewhere called Latin America's "tradición de la ruptura" (tradition of/as rupture.)<sup>26</sup>

These are versions of American historical awareness, and they embody the concomitant impulse to reconstitute America's multiple histories in usable/useful (Fuentes' word is "authentic") ways. Fuentes and Paz are well aware that "authenticity" and "origins" are ideological constructs and that to use them uncritically is to repeat the errors of the European colonizers. But for the U.S. critic to dismiss as naïve the historicizing impulse encoded in these constructs is to risk imposing a poststructuralist position inappropriate to contexts where the historical (re)construction of foundational narratives is still considered by writers to be an urgent and necessary task. It is also to undervalue these writers' self-conscious connection of "authenticity" and "origins" to literary creation.<sup>27</sup>

Because the processes of colonization have been more onerous and obvious in many parts of Latin America than in the U.S., and for a number of other reasons that I will touch upon in the following chapters, the issue of cultural origins and authority has traditionally been more compelling to Latin American writers. But U.S. writers have also had their historical anxieties. Indeed, the U.S. may be unique in having occupied simultaneously a dual and deeply contradictory position as colonizer and colonized during this century. Certainly it has replaced Europe as the primary economic and political colonizer of Latin America, and yet has itself remained deeply colonized by European cultural traditions and forms of expression. Walt Whitman was the first to recognize this double bind, a fact not lost on Latin American writers, for whom Whitman (along with Faulkner) is universally acknowledged as an essential American precursor. In a speech delivered in 1972, a year before his death, Pablo Neruda said of Whitman: "The bard complained of the all-powerful European influence that continued to dominate the literature of his time. In fact, it was he, Walt Whitman, in the persona of a specific geography, who for the first time in history brought honor to an American name."<sup>28</sup> More recently and in quite another register, Don-