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

Lois Parkinson Zamora

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The Usable Past presents a comparative discussion of American literary modes of historical imagining. Taking America in its hemispheric sense, Lois Parkinson Zamora presents a broad-ranging discussion of essential American voices – among them Borges, Hawthorne, Emerson, Williams, Paz, Carpentier, Cather, Fuentes, Cortázar, Rulfo, Cisneros, Puig, Vargas Llosa, Morrison, García Márquez. These writers dramatize the convergences and divergences of history and fiction as they question the nature of both. Zamora argues that they are impelled by a peculiarly American energy – what she calls an “anxiety of origins” – to search for precursors and connect to (or invent) usable traditions and histories. They conceive of originality not as novelty but as a complicated and enriched relation to their cultural traditions. How American writers thematize usable American pasts, and how their work itself becomes part of the usable past, is Zamora’s overarching concern.

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Angelus Novus, Paul Klee, 1920. Courtesy of the Israel Museum.

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University of Houston



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For Kathleen Haney
friend and guide

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I have realized as I grow older that history,
in the end, has more imagination than oneself.

Gabriel García Márquez

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Preface

THE USABLE PAST began as I was writing a book on apocalyptic historicism in contemporary U.S. and Latin American fiction. As I worked on that project, I found that I was persistently drawn to investigate other attitudes toward history and literary tradition besides the apocalyptic, in part to test my hypotheses about American apocalypticism and in part, no doubt, to counterbalance the peculiar intensities of that mode. As I strayed from Armageddon, I repeatedly encountered a contrasting impulse to create precursors rather than cancel them. This other impulse involved a characteristic historical awareness – what I call an anxiety of origins – with respect to New World cultural histories and traditions. In my introduction I establish connections between this anxiety and the narrative energies that constitute usable histories and traditions. How these energies operate in selected works of U.S. and Latin American fiction is the subject of the chapters that follow.

My title is drawn from Van Wyck Brooks' essay, "On Creating a Usable Past," and signals the ambivalence (often ironic) of history in a "new" world.¹ "Usable" implies the active engagement of a user or users, through whose agency collective and personal histories are constituted. The term thus obviates the possibility of innocent history, but not the possibility of authentic history when it is actively imagined by its user(s). What is deemed usable is valuable; what is valuable is constituted according to specific cultural and personal needs and desires. How such judgments of value are made, and how they operate to form literary texts and traditions in the Americas, are essential features of my discussion.

Still, one might worry that "usable" risks a kind of single-minded functionalism belying the polysemic nature of both history and literature. In which case, I would suggest its more prospective analogue, the "useful" past. What is usable – a culture's available artifacts – will be useful when it corresponds to the desires and directions of users. This dialectic between historical determinations and literary intentions characterizes the fiction that interests me here.

Other metaphors are also woven into my discussion. "Anxiety of (about) origins" is consonant with "the usable past" in referring to the particular

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tensions of historical awareness in a “new” world. Borges’ Aleph, Walter Benjamin’s “aura” and his “Angelus Novus” will provide metaphoric access to the American urge to express historical disjunction and/or absence. Roberto González Echevarría incites me to propose a metaphor to complement his own for the motivating force of the Latin American literary tradition: to his Archival impulse, I will add what I feel to be the stronger operations of an Ancestral impulse. Frank Kermode’s sense of an ending suggests the complementary American sense of openness and endlessness – hence the sense of a sequel. Borges’ “modest history,” along with Fuentes’ “eccentric history,” encode recognizably American forms of resistance to imported historical hierarchies. I conclude my study by proposing that the baroque is a useful (and heretofore under-used) metaphor for these literary imaginings of New World history.

In short, metaphors abound in the following chapters, as they tend to in discussions of historical consciousness. Because what we call history is a complex of interpretive structures, metaphors are inevitable, whether they happen to be spatial (history as linear, circular, spiraling), conceptual (history as eschatological, dialectical, material, mythic), or existential (Borges’ Aleph, Benjamin’s Angelus Novus, Charles Simic’s fat old man in faded overalls). I engage these metaphors and others as I go along, the better to direct my reader toward a comparative consideration of my overarching metaphor, the American historical imagination.

These figural formulations will have, I hope, the collective effect of suggesting that my critical concerns are larger and more various than those usually implied by the term “historical fiction.” The writers whom I discuss here *do* write historical fiction, but not in any ordinary sense. Seymour Menton, in a study of the “new historical novel” in Latin America, limits his critical parameters to novels that depict “action . . . in a period previous to the author’s.”² This is, of course, the traditional definition of historical fiction, but I will need to complicate the category considerably in order to discuss the work of Fuentes, Borges, Hawthorne, Goyen, García Márquez, Vargas Llosa, Cisneros, and others. These writers may base their fictions, or parts of them, on the recorded histories of nations and individuals, but not always, or not always explicitly. They recognize that the concept of history must itself be located historically, whether they write in the past tense, the present, the future or, for that matter, the retrospective future – as in García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 1967) and *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* (*Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, 1981). They also recognize that the work of literature is itself a historical agent and artifact, itself a historical event conditioned by historical circumstances and also conditioning them. So the work may become an event in the history it interprets: *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is clearly an additional event in the inordinate Colombian history that unfolds in Macondo. As García Márquez’s novel so clearly illustrates,

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the recuperation of historical events and personages is only one dimension of these novelists' literary enterprise.

I have organized my discussion into two parts. Part I, "Anxiety of Origins," addresses the divergent dimensions of American history *in* selected works of fiction. In Part II, "Intertextuality and Tradition," it is the history of literature and literary form that interests me. To the extent that content can be separated from form, I would say that the chapters in Part I deal with history as subject, and the chapters in Part II with formal structures and strategies that are themselves historicizing devices. But both parts are animated by the common conviction that works of literature are privileged bearers of a culture's history.

In Chapters 1 and 3 I explore the uses of European and indigenous conceptions of history in American traditions of literary realism and counter-realism, respectively. Two pairings – Carlos Fuentes and Willa Cather, and Jorge Luis Borges and Nathaniel Hawthorne – allow me to contrast the historiographic traditions impelling literary realism in the first chapter and, in the third chapter, to compare Latin American magical realism and the U.S. romance tradition. Chapter 2 serves as a bridge between these discussions. Here, I analyze texts that juxtapose conceptions of "fact" and "fiction" in order to test the capacity of novelistic narrative to represent historical realities. Using Linda Hutcheon's term, this fiction is "historiographic metafiction" in that it questions the nature of history as such, the capacity (and limitations) of narrative media to represent it, and the processes by which readers interpret textual histories in the midst of their own on-going experience of history.³ How can we know the past? How can we speak of it in literary forms? Why should we want to?

R. B. Kershner has noted that the historian is oriented toward diachrony, the literary critic toward synchrony.⁴ In Part II, I am concerned with writers who themselves dramatize synchronic, decentered, and often conflictual cultural traditions, and who do so in intertextual narrative structures that include multiple mythic and real(istic) temporal orders. Chapters 4 and 5, "Synchronic Structures" and "Fragmentary Fictions," are paired in their discussion of such narrative strategies. Chapter 6, "Clichés and Community," addresses another intertextual element: clichés are already-used but (potentially) still-usable literary and linguistic structures, so their use (or not) provides a telling index of a writer's historical and cultural positioning. In each of the chapters of this second section, my aim is to uncover the historical operations of literary forms and languages, and trace the ways in which selected authors self-consciously participate in the construction of a usable American canon.

The chapters in Part II are more specific in their analysis of narrative techniques than those in Part I, and unequal in their comparative emphases. In them, I pay more attention to contemporary fiction in Spanish than in English for reasons that are themselves historical: contempo-

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rary Latin American writers have tended, to a greater extent than contemporary U.S. writers, to flaunt intertextual narrative strategies because they have felt more urgently the need to create their own precursors and traditions, and literature is widely considered a vehicle for doing so. My commitment in these chapters is nonetheless comparative. Even to make the preceding statement is to pose comparative questions: How do Latin American narrative strategies differ from those of U.S. writers in this regard, and why?

The relative scarcity of comparative studies of literature in the Americas suggests the difficulty of establishing appropriate bases for comparison. Literary production in the hemisphere is vast and various; its traditions and forms did not develop in tandem, nor are its political and social purposes parallel. Comparatists are likely to uncover critical grounds that are comparable but not equivalent, different but not symmetrically so. Thus, I will be exploring differences in order to recognize the outlines of identity, and weighing historical and cultural diversity against shared forms of literary expression. Differences, too, bring texts and writers and readers and cultures together, for in recognizing specific differences we also recognize the shared experience of difference as such – of finitude, limitation, locality.

Throughout, then, I use “American” in its broadest geographical and historical sense to refer to the different but related histories of the U.S. and Latin America, to their mutual but uneven influences North to South, and to their diverse literary manifestations. My grounds for comparison, as I have said, are American attitudes toward the past that condition literary modes of historical imagining. In all cases, I am drawn to writers who dramatize the convergences and divergences of history and fiction as they question the nature of both, and who do so in self-consciously American cultural contexts. I return with what may seem disproportionate frequency to certain essential American voices – Borges, Hawthorne, Emerson, Williams, Paz, Carpentier, Fuentes. I do so in order to establish literary contexts for other American writers of comparable historical imagination – Cather, García Márquez, Cortázar, Garro, Goyen, Rulfo, Cisneros, Puig, Sánchez, Vargas Llosa. The works of these writers are located (whether squarely or obliquely) in American time and space, locations that yield insight into American literary visions/versions of history. They engage American historical experiences thematically – colonization and independence, *mestizaje* and melting pot, domination and self-determination – and they also question how these historical experiences have created and fostered American literary forms and traditions. I am interested, then, in how these writers thematize usable American pasts, and how their work becomes part of those usable pasts.

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PORIONS OF *The Usable Past* have, indeed, been used in the past. I am grateful to Reynolds Smith for granting me permission to publish parts of two essays that have appeared in Duke University Press publications. An early version of Chapter One appeared in 1989 in *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?*, edited by Gustavo Pérez Firmat; some of Chapter Three appeared in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, which I coedited with Wendy B. Faris. *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, and *Comparative Literature Studies* have also granted me permission to range back over my own past and rethink my rethinking. How could I theorize a usable American critical tradition but by first discovering my own?