

## ◆ Afterword

### Strategies of Writing and Reading; Or, The Tense of an Ending

*Edward H. Friedman*

“Write the afterword to a volume on the apocalypse?  
Well, your favorite trope is irony.”

—The author, to himself

In Part 1, chapter 22, of *Don Quixote*, the galley slave Ginés de Pasamonte brags about the autobiography that he is writing, which he claims will surpass *Lazarillo de Tormes* and other narratives of that ilk. Readers have noted that, in 1605, there is, thus, via no less notable a commentator than Miguel de Cervantes, a consciousness of the incipient picaresque genre or subgenre. When asked if he has finished the text, Pasamonte makes the point that his work cannot be completed as long as he is living. As if to emphasize the contention, Cervantes brings the character into the second part of *Don Quixote*, of 1615, as Maese Pedro. Ginés de Pasamonte accentuates the problem with endings, which always seem to be anticipated, always deferred in one way or another. Endings in literature have been associated with the concept, or concepts, of the apocalypse and with a pronounced movement—within an uninterrupted dialectical relation—from utopian to dystopian underpinnings. The very title *Writing in the End Times* captures both the apocalyptic tone of the texts and other objects under scrutiny and the dissonant tenor of current discourse. Our present moment has been indelibly inflected by the presidency of Donald Trump, and a number of the essays included in the volume draw attention to links between the past and almost daily doses of apocalyptic visions and allusions.

**Writing in the End Times: Apocalyptic Imagination in the Hispanic World**

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Everything old is new again, so they say. Perhaps, but that which is renewed—*re-newed*—is recast and, perforce, recontextualized and, if you will, retemporalized. This is one of the messages of Jorge Luis Borges's short story "Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*." Borges highlights that everything that builds upon its precedents is simultaneously a vehicle of continuity and of change. The term *apocalypse* refers to prophetic harbingers of the end of the world, signs that reveal or uncover what is to come, but there is, like the dénouement of Ginés de Pasamonte's life story, a missing time and space from the projection of an ending to the ending itself. Closure is an intricate notion, as illustrated most superbly in the essays of this collection, which could be called—paradoxically, to be sure—open. The openness may indicate flexibility or adaptability, as in "open to interpretation," or deferral of signification, as in Jacques Derrida's *différance*, a major construct of poststructuralism. Each of the essays is an act of interpretation that draws from perceptions of the apocalypse, as defined and redefined through multiple sources and juxtapositions and through a substantial range of exempla.

When I teach seminars on theory, I begin by underscoring two analytical elements from classical antiquity: poetics and rhetoric. A poetics offers prescriptions for writing, but it generally is based on existing models, such as Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* as Aristotle's model for tragic drama. The system is decidedly polemical in terms of order; a "chicken versus egg" circumstance is patently on display. Which came first, the rule or the example? Would Sophocles have seconded Aristotle's argument in every respect? Aristotle engages in an act of interpretation and thereby asserts himself into the critical equation. Guidelines, in turn, may be accepted as rigid or adjustable, as mandates or suggestions. Rhetoric takes a somewhat different route. Initially labeled the art of persuasion, rhetoric grew from describing the means of providing a convincing line of reasoning to transforming the figures of persuasion to forms of linguistic and poetic embellishment. Rhetorical figures do double duty; they beautify the poetic landscape, and they help to plead cases. Today's discourse analysis, political spin, and the like take rhetoric back to its roots, which clearly favor subjective strategies over what may be construed as a myth of objectivity. Ideologues must be skillful debaters, capable of disputing either side and of advancing toward predetermined conclusions. In this regard, bullying has lost some of its negative cast. Being loud, combatively consistent, and even self-contradictory can have positive repercussions. The art of the deal has morphed into the art of speaking with conviction and with the internal logic that an audience will buy. Accordingly, the thesis of an argument becomes less important than the tactics employed to make the argument and a sense of how the listener will process the data. Relentless self-possession is the sine qua non of this agenda. The political scenario of the Trump era serves

to demonstrate the power of rhetoric, not necessarily through new modes of speech but in a uniquely pronounced and egregious form.

Some years ago, in a study titled *The Antiheroine's Voice*, I looked at the narrative structure of the picaresque by focusing on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century female rogues, or *pícaras*, and their successors over the centuries and in a range of national literatures. I wanted to explore the interplay of narrator and *implied author* (a much-discussed coinage of Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*) in texts designated as picaresque.<sup>1</sup> My rhetorical strategy, as it were, was to foreground a set of works in which the distinction between the narrator and the author, the literary invention and the creator of the discourse—the ventriloquist of sorts—was especially prominent. The particular rhetoric of the antiheroines' stories allowed me to combine a consideration of issues linked to narrative, genre, gender, intertextuality, and reader response.<sup>2</sup> The picaresque posits a supplement (v. poststructuralism) to traditional autobiography by adding a discursive level to what is already a subjective, selective, and manipulative enterprise, oriented more conspicuously to a self-serving purpose than to the exposure of truth. Truth and truth content are constantly under investigation in the news. In baroque Spanish life, culture, and art, there is a tendency to transpose reality and appearance, a phenomenon that challenges the eye and the mind. What is needed is not a reckoning with absolute truth, but rather a willingness to confirm a proposed truth. Truth can be hidden or unconcealed, yet it is forever susceptible to re-fashioning. The dictum that seeing is believing was dealt a serious blow (to be repeated) when the videotaped 1991 assault on the African American Rodney King by four Caucasian police officers did not deter an acquittal, a judgment that led to riots and civil unrest in Los Angeles and beyond. Likewise, in order to be effective, the categorization of a report as “fake news” need not have truth-value or moral authority, only adherents. Among the tools of this trade, to cite a single example, are what may be identified as “expedient renaming” and “recontextualization,” precisely the classifications that George A. Shipley applies to the stratagems employed by the narrator of *Lazarillo de Tormes* in the essay “The Critic as Witness for the Prosecution: Making the Case against Lázaro de Tormes.” The narrator maneuvers the segments of the story, risking exposure but counting on a receptive audience. One does not have to strain to find common denominators.

The discursive complexity of the picaresque narratives appears to have been recognized and intensified by Cervantes, who in *Don Quixote* enlists a corps of narrators and informants to chronicle the adventures of the anachronistic knight errant, as well as to gather the materials that comprise the story, or self-proclaimed “true history.” From chapter 1 of Part 1, *Don Quixote* addresses the themes of truth, truthfulness, and objectivity. Shortly thereaf-

ter, at the end of chapter 8, the lacunae have become overwhelming, up to the serendipitous discovery of a manuscript in Arabic by the historian Cide Hamete Benengeli. The provenance and the “something lost in translation” quality would seem to contest the validity of the historical artifact, yet Cervantes leaves the sorting of facts and the detection of markers of subversion to the individual reader. His audacity matches that of his protagonist, and *Don Quixote* evinces an extraordinary mixture of brazenness and subtlety of presentation. The master trope of *Don Quixote* is irony, and a stroke of irony that radically reconfigures the role of history in the narrative emanates from the pseudonymous Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda, author of a spurious sequel published in 1614. Cervantes’s second part, of 1615, forces the writer to reassess his inscription of truth and of history in the narrative. Things change. Things remain the same. Nothing is stable but instability. History repeats itself, but under altered conditions. Cide Hamete Benengeli becomes the ally of Cervantes and his alter egos. Having had to cope with the Avellaneda intrusion, Cervantes announces in the prologue to Part 2 that he will leave Don Quixote “dead and buried” so as to preempt further sequels, but irony strikes once more in the afterlives of the protagonist and of the text(s). The imposed ending becomes moot, as Alonso Quijano the Good dies a laudable Christian death and Don Quixote, defying history, survives. Within Cervantes’s rhetoric of fiction, revisionist history is the order of the day. Avellaneda, whose real name still eludes scholars, affects the representation of history in—and the ending of—Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*. The “false” *Quixote* also modifies the status of Cervantes as the controlling agent of story and discourse.

*Don Quixote* becomes an allegory of literature’s—and life’s—resistance to closure. Cervantes, for his own intentions but like the authors of chivalric romance, where lineage was a crucial factor, stresses the openness of narrative and, internally and externally, its “progressive” nature. Promises of more to come produce variations of deferral. Significantly, a type of forced resolution prompted by the Avellaneda sequel fails to comply with the *revelation* divulged at the end of the “legitimate” second part. The death foretold is fittingly ambiguous, as is the death itself. The last chapter of Part 2 of *Don Quixote* is—risking redundancy—abundantly overdetermined, packed with illness, events *ex machina*, disillusionment, a demise that does not coordinate seamlessly with the allusion in the prologue, a last will and testament, reactions of characters, and a final statement from the pen of Cide Hamete Benengeli. The metonymical writing instrument unites authors, narrators, and intertextual (and future) collaborators in an elliptical field with greater ties to disclosure—*dis*-closure—than to an incontrovertible conclusion. Over four hundred years after its publication, the chronicle of *Don Quixote* does not seem to be over. Idealism and realism encompass, and are encompassed by, metanarrative. Fic-

tion and history are conflated to show the reciprocity and “constructedness” of each and to probe subjectivity, relativity, and the inseparability of art and life. Cervantes makes art the macrocosm as his book goes out into the world and the world comes into his book. The rhetorical foundations of *Don Quixote* are everywhere apparent. Less obvious, perchance, but equally strong, is its worth as a poetics of narrative, or of the novel, and as a precocious—likely prescient—exponent of theory through praxis. Through an assembly of writers and historians, and through Don Quixote and other readers, fictional and “real,” Cervantes generates ideas, polemics, and intersections that hardly could be exhausted.

*Don Quixote* is a paradigm of the dual face of intertextuality. Cervantes incorporates the literary past into the narrative as he establishes new directions. This movement toward re-creation pushes literature forward in a manner that signals infinite options. One may distinguish between shared intertexts—for example, presupposition of the influence of Catholic theology and the code of honor in early modern Spain—and writing that breaks away from conventional recourses to enter uncharted territory. Comparative approaches may use intertextuality in chronological or achronological order, with an emphasis on interrelations rather than on sources per se. The latest texts can inspire fresh readings of their predecessors. Death and expiration are unremittingly on the table, yet blocked by an impulse—creative, instinctive, or otherwise—to avoid closure. The intertext of idealism in *Don Quixote*, it could be argued, invokes death only to devise ploys to delay the inevitable. The romances of chivalry replace a hero with his heirs; genealogy triumphs over time. Pastoral and sentimental romance more often than not choose to portray death rhetorically, metaphorically—as in dying for love, or a loss that can make one think that the world is ending—but only in the rarest of exceptions does real death occur, and, when that happens, life unyieldingly goes on. *Don Quixote* satirizes, though neither callously nor thoroughly, the unconditional idealism of the protagonist. The text places the reader in the antithetical yet complementary realms of realism and metafiction, where pragmatism and artistry cohabit. The utopian mind-set of Don Quixote, whose thoughts are on the Golden Age and on an unblemished image of chivalry, is offset by reality principles that lead not to dystopia but to a brand of cynicism, frequently denoted here as disenchantment, through which society operates. Never-ending adventures find a correlative in literary, ideological, and theoretical divagations that occupy, and integrate, the inside and the outside of the narrative. If *Don Quixote* has much to do with the development of the novel, as many have professed, it is poetically just that the “novel” pays homage to the old and the new, and with the implicit assumption that the novelty of the present will be revamped in the future.

When fictional characters face death, their authors must come to terms with what might be dubbed the broader scheme of things. Don Quixote's death is meaningful from numerous angles, literary and extraliterary. So is the death of the inhabitants of Numantia in Cervantes's play. Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda and the anxiety of influence aid in shaping the course of Don Quixote and of *Don Quixote*, as do classical tragedy and imperial Spain with respect to *La Numancia*. Miguel de Unamuno "immortalizes" the death of his "nivolesque" protagonist Augusto Pérez in *Niebla (Mist)* by entering the fiction to spar over narrative and spiritual jurisdictions. In a gambit that is clever and desperate, Unamuno nicely broaches all eventualities, as if his literary renown and his soul were at stake. It is undeniable that writers who fictionalize themselves penetrate or flee the confines of the text for a reason. Nothing is out of bounds, for confusion disrupts boundaries. Whenever characters in the stream of media outlets fear extinction, referents rise from the singular to the plural. Polysemy is a promoter of deferral and, hence, a comrade of the literary scholar and an adversary of the apocalypse.

I realize that the lexicon of poststructuralism has informed my perspective on apocalyptic matters, since I have concentrated on questions of deconstruction, mediation, and deferral.<sup>3</sup> The acknowledgment of a space between awareness and/or fear of what seems to be imminent and a catastrophic episode results in postponement, which becomes a creative space, or *the* creative space, between start and finish. This creative space functions in tandem with critical and theoretical space, a domain of self-reflection and self-referentiality in which the *meta-* prefix predominates. Because writing is fluid, every reading frames a portion of the text, to be countered by alternate framing techniques. Comparative studies, by virtue of their gamut of connections and interconnections, attest to the unrestricted scope of literary and cultural analysis. Instability becomes an asset, not a hindrance, to academic inquiry. The unapologetic self-consciousness of structuralism and poststructuralism—ultimately an energizing feature and a boon to the sphere of rhetoric—raises the stock of criticism and theory, which become, to a degree at least, performance arts. The adjustment seems to be that critics and theorists revere (or revile) authors without taking a backseat to them; the objects of study certainly have profited from the shift and from increased interdisciplinarity and advances in theory. The "old order," understood in several ways, is broken, or refurbished, as an outcome of temporal and spatial fluctuations. The aims and methodologies of literary scholarship have escalated immensely, in part because "literary" has branched into the more comprehensive "textual," "cultural," and so forth. The objectives of criticism have been—if not blurred—expanded in recent decades, I would submit, to everyone's advantage. The multidirectional and multidimensional aspects of critical commentary enrich our understand-

ing of texts, semiotic systems, and the world around us. In the growing array of associations, thinking and rethinking go hand in hand, and apposition can supplant opposition. Between a signifier and a signified, there is an area of mediation, and this area is where criticism and theory have found a comfort zone and where the relative does not have to pass as the absolute.

The essays in this volume are fascinating individually and collectively with regard to content and approach. Naturally, one can identify common denominators, including references to the Iberian Peninsula and Latin America, history, literary history, religion, philosophy, science, social class and agency, battles for authority, the trials of authorship, politics past and present, feminism, film, music, and, of course, apocalypse and dystopia. Each thesis is aligned with an interpretive, or rhetorical, strategy, and each has a comparative thrust. The pairings and junctions are thrilling to behold and to contemplate. The parade of names and titles can be dazzling, with not only the usual (canonical) suspects but also, bearing in mind the subject and the inclusionary impetus, the to-be-expected unexpected. A random sample: Kathy Acker, Baldassare Castiglione, the Marquis de Sade, the pre-Columbian Nahuas of central Mexico, Frank Kermode, apocalyptic satirists, *las Laurencias*, the Portuguese cobbler-poet Gonçalo Anes Bandarra, Agustín García Calvo, Neil Postman, and zombies. There is a “post-” poststructuralist (for want of a better term) pattern to the approaches to time in the essays, a reliance on or faith in the future. The troubles and traumas of the present—the building up and tearing down of walls literal and figurative, and spin doctoring that keeps our heads spinning—permit us to ponder, monitor, and attempt to manage texts and events of the past. We compare, we rethink, we reposition, we recontextualize, we contrast the big picture with substantive details, and we invert priorities, messages, protocols, and orthodoxies. We read “against the grain” because there may be no other way of reading. We forestall endings because we cannot comment on endings at the very end. We treat texts as the puzzles that they prove to be, and we learn not to rush closure, because that could take us out of the business of teaching, learning, and flexing our interpretive muscles. As specialists in the humanities, Doctors of Philosophy, we cannot cure physical illnesses, but let us endeavor to sharpen minds (our own and those of others) to make them alert, sensitive, and empathic. Our goal is to educate, to get to *a* truth. Difference, evidenced through byzantine renderings, becomes a central motif, a marker within a marker. When prophetic wisdom is lacking—and when “doublespeak” has moved to *triplespeak* or further along the discursive spectrum—it is to be hoped that our services as guides in the wilderness will be welcome, in humanities circles and elsewhere.

## Notes

1. Over the years, narratologists and narrative theorists have passed judgment on the term. See also Booth, "Resurrection."
2. For additional commentary on the implied author in Spanish narrative, see, for example, Friedman, *Cervantes in the Middle*.
3. For a review of poststructuralist terminology, see, among other options, Belsey.

## Works Cited

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