Wilde Dreyfuss Disaster!: On The Sense Of A Cultural Ending[1]

For Gustavo Pérez Firmat

Enrico Mario Santí
University of Kentucky

The imagination is always at the end of an era.
Wallace Stevens

The end is near, or so it would seem from our dwindling calendars, not to mention the latest news out of Washington. Last October, the front page of the Sunday *New York Times* carried a fascinating report on the phenomenal commercial success of "Left Behind," a series of four apocalyptic thrillers with a born-again Christian theme that has already sold millions of copies and whose popularity demonstrates, according to the *Times*, "the public's fixation on the approaching millennium and the widespread anticipation that the year 2000 portends some earth-shattering event." Indeed, the signs of the impending apocalypse appear to be everywhere, beginning with our own computer screens. "Y2K," the fear that computers that use two digits to indicate the year may mistakenly interpret the number "2000" as "1900" and thereby plunge us all into technological chaos, very well could, according to an evangelical minister quoted in the same *Times* article, "trigger a financial meltdown leading to an international depression, which would make it possible for the Antichrist or his emissaries to establish a one-world currency...".[2]

Visions of the end are the staple of our film culture, to mention just one branch of the vernacular, from *Titanic* and *Armageddon* to *Deep Impact* and *Godzilla*. Yet support for our culture's obsession with such visions of the end derives ultimately from real terminal events that we have all experienced recently: the demise of the Soviet empire; Princess Diana's fatal accident; the economic collapse of foreign markets, from Asia to Eastern Europe and Latin America; and

even that mysterious meteorological disturbance known as "El Niño"— which we all know will soon be followed by the infinitely more terrible "La Niña." Nuclear holocaust, so feared during the Cold War interregnum, today has given way to ecological holocaust within the New World Order. Little wonder that the swift succession of such catastrophic events toward the end of the century, the last of this millennium, would carry the cumulative effect of making us question what the world is coming to as we rendezvous with 2000. All the more reason to reflect upon the significance of the end in our cultural constructions and on the way that these constructions affect, often imperceptibly and against our better judgments, our most basic assumptions.

That our contemporary panic about doomsday is actually old news I have tried to evoke in my title, with its multiple allusions to historical events at the end of the last century, and to the title of Frank Kermode's classic study, *The Sense of an Ending* (1967). Like Kermode's, my own subject is the fictions of the end and the ways in which we use them in order to bridge obscure origins and unknown fates, all the while using them while living in what Kermode calls "the middest," a perpetual middle age or middle ground marked by perplexity and the desire for absolute knowledge. Unlike Kermode, however, I am interested in one species of ending, what I will call the utopian impulse, and in particular how that drive conditions a peculiar cultural vision. I shall cite examples derived from Latin America, the tradition I know best, though I would venture that my premises apply equally as well to many contemporary samples of our common culture. My critique, I confess, is directed at certain habits, both of literary creation and of cultural criticism, which I view as naively destructive but which, for reasons that we might not be able to exhaust in this light piece, remain mysteriously unexamined.

2

Kermode himself reflects, in his chapter on "The Modern Apocalypse," how at the end of the last century there was an outbreak of *fin de siècle* phenomena redolent with "apocalyptic feeling." He mentions, among these, "the revival of imperial mythologies both in England and Germany," and "the `decadence' which became a literary category," while noting that such phenomena amply illustrate the thesis once claimed by Henri Focillon (author of the 1952 classic *L'an mil*) that "we project our existential anxieties on to history;" that is, that "there is a real correlation between the ends of centuries and the peculiarity of our imagination, that it always chooses to be at the end of an era." That such a correlation does exist Kermode confirms by pointing to events that took place in the exact year of 1900, when the 20th century began literally, as opposed to 1914, often claimed to be the symbolic end of the 19th, or at least of its culture. "In 1900," he wrote, "Nietzsche dies; Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams*; 1900 was the date of Husserl's *Logic* and... with an exquisite sense of timing [Max] Planck published his quantum hypothesis in the very last days of the century, December 1900. Thus within a few months, were published works which transformed or transvalued spirituality, the relation of language to knowing, and to the very locus of human uncertainty." Kermode admits readily, in the search for a satisfying pattern, that such a "sense of an ending" provides that "the anxiety reflected by the *fin de siècle* is perpetual, and people don't wait for centuries to end before they express it." Yet for all its conceptual accuracy, the remark begs the question, for Kermode never does describe, or even speculate about, those specific events at the end of the last century that could have expressed the anxiety of the end, or indeed the crisis of an imminent beginning.

Was it by chance, I wonder, that between 1895 and 1900 all three of the historical events to which my title alludes—the 1895 trials of Oscar Wilde, the Dreyfus Affair between 1895 and 1899, and the 1898 Spanish-Cuban-American War—plunged a good portion of Europe into a series of crises from which it was not entirely to recover? (Similar analogous events could be invoked in the cases of other European countries, like Italy and Germany, I am sure; but I choose to concentrate on these three for the sake of simplicity.) But let us not oversimplify. Each of these events had its own origin and individual national significance—the rupture of moral cohesion in late Victorian society, nationalism and the conflicts of modernity in France, the resounding political failures of the Spanish monarchy—but all three could collectively be viewed as symptoms of a deep-seated European anxiety regarding the sense of a cultural ending. Each event expressed this anxiety, I submit, through judicial and military processes that were designed literally to arrest the flow of history and inevitable change. To call such change "progress" is perhaps to idealize History. Suffice it to say that each event meant a

reaction to change as it was anchored by the powerful myth of the imminent end of the century along with all of its eschatological implications.

It was perhaps no accident that each of these events was framed within a judicial and military process. The institutional frames that both the courts and the army provided in England, France and Spain, respectively, became formidable aids in a repression directed not at the average male bourgeois citizen, whose authority was now being questioned, but rather at the three marginal or minority figures that were at stake in each of the conflicts—the homosexual aesthete, in the case of Wilde; the Jew, in the case of Dreyfuss; and the colonial subaltern, in the case of Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippine Islands. Each of these marginal figures threatened, at the end of the century, to become an agent for change. Each event embodied a reaction against this agency by attempting to repress, by means of the courts and the army, judicial and military means, the contagion threatened by each of these figures. We can safely say today, with the aid of hindsight, that none of these attempts at repression worked. And yet, to ignore their long-term effect would constitute a flagrant distortion of the way history is constructed, not to mention written.

I have shown elsewhere, for example, that Spain's humiliating defeat in the 1898 Spanish-Cuban American War at the hands of the United States—what in Spain is called by the neurotic name of *El Desastre*—made Spaniards build up a psychic defense against the loss of its former colonies, particularly Cuba, the richest and allegedly the most loyal. The Spanish "inability to mourn" that loss—as expressed, among other things, in the popular cry of "*Más se perdió en Cuba*" (Much more was lost in Cuba)— resulted in Spain's emptying-out of Cuban history, to the point that many in Spain today, including many in the current Aznar government, hold on to the fantasy that Cuba remains a dependent colony, or at least that the 1959 Cuban Revolution, which rejected United States tutelage, reaffirmed implicitly Spanish hegemony in the island. The truth is, however, that Spain never actually mourned the loss of Cuba and its former colonies in 1898; that, as such, it continues to deny the facts of history; and that its renewed neocolonial presence in the island is anchored on this very strange reading of history.[3]

I would venture that the uncanny creation of such ideological spectres out of the denial of historical reality in Spain has close parallels in the cases of Britain and France, with its repressions of homosexuals and Jews, as expressed in the trials of Wilde and Dreyfuss, respectively. What one could rightly call the "return of the repressed" of these two marginal figures that we witness throughout the 20th century in Britain and France, takes place precisely because of the reactionary policies, the failed institutional attempts to repress them at the end of the previous century. Such historical repressions are not, I might add, simply the denial of objects—homosexuals in the case of the British, Jews in the case of France, or Cubans, Puerto Ricans and Filipinos in the case of Spain—but rather a psychic mutilation within the historical subject, a self-mutilation which prevents, in turn and in the long run, the development of that historical subject. To play on the metaphor of the prisoner that I invoked earlier: the arrest of the homosexual, the Jew and the colonized at the end of the last century causes in turn the arrest of the anxiety-ridden judge and policeman who perpetrates, under the pressure of the end of time, the original institutional injustice. I should underscore, finally, that these are not merely convenient metaphors of cultural history that illustrate broad historical trends. They were and are, quite literally, historical subjects who were either put on trial and put away as showcases, as Wilde and Dreyfuss certainly were, or who, instead, were murdered, as in the case of the half a million Cuban civilians (at the time one-fourth of the island's population) who died in Spanish concentration camps during the 1895 Cuban War of Independence.

3

I confess my fascination before the persistence of these apocalyptic patterns in contemporary culture, even as I am also appalled at the ethical blindness underlying many of such creative and critical urges. Latin American culture, or so the stereotype goes, fulfills the wish for such an apocalyptic scene, with its frequent earthquakes and revolutions, as destructive as they are unexpected, endemic economic crises and latter-day prophets. What I have called "Latinamericanism," the institutional exploitation of such stereotypes, particularly within the American university, feeds upon this seemingly-vast reservoir of cultural images and historical expectations.[4] What may be less evident, to my mind at least, is how the creative literature produced in so-called Latin America, particularly as

the pressures of the end of the century and the millennium begin to be felt, plays into this apocalyptic pattern. In other words, rather than a simple model whereby cultural criticism identifies or concocts apocalyptic patterns in the literature, we actually have a dialectical relationship between culture and its promotion, literature and its criticism, if you will, or between writer and reader. It is a dialectic of mutual convenience: it carves itself a niche within the cultural marketplace; for the writer it provides a practical literary model, and for the reader, wherever she may be, it satisfies a curiosity, perhaps even a demand, for an intelligible screen used in the acquisition of knowledge regarding a culture that happens to be varied, complex, and, ultimately, resistant to simple consumption.

Many such texts could be invoked: Neruda's *Canto General;* Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude*; Borges' *The Aleph*, Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World*. All four, one may add, were written around 1950, as if responding commonly to the anxiety of life at mid-century and in the wake of that Western conflagration known as World War II. Yet the litmus test for the persistence of apocalypse in our age remains, I think, one work in particular, García Márquez' s best-selling *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, both as a sample of creative literature and as an instance of the dialectic between cultural production and criticism to which I have just referred. The novel was not published until 1967, but for purposes of my argument now it seems less important to prove a specific correlation between calendar and text than to identify a persistent pattern. Leaving aside García Márquez's personal affiliations or political opinions, my interest centers on his novel's virtually legendary use of an apocalyptic pattern in its famous last pages. This is, I dare say, the one feature of our reading of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* we remember best: the dazzling and dizzying manner in which the narrator wraps up the century-long Buendía saga by creating a simultaneous vision, such that an apocalyptic wind blows away the entire pathetic scene of the last surviving family while the last of the Buendía heirs reads out the Book that contains the family history. The end of the family is also the simultaneous end of reading— the character's, the novel's and the reader's.[5]

I need not summarize the praise which the critical canon has poured upon this particular ending, thus evoking parallels and models as far-flung as *The Thousand and One Nights,* the Bible, Borges and *Don Quixote*. Suffice it to remind ourselves, perhaps painfully, that our thrill as readers of the final pages posits a fascination with death, the death of others and our own. We participate, that is, in the voyeuristic pleasure of witnessing, as well as participating, in total annihilation, as in the violent wind's wiping-out of the Buendías's threadbare encampment. We participate in this annihilation not just vicariously, that is, by witnessing a description of this genocide, from a distance, as we would in a realistic novel, but rather by literally consuming the lines that contain it, as well as self-consuming our own roles as readers in a dazzling *mîse en abime*. The reader of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* becomes an actual accomplice, if not the actual producer, of the holocaust that takes place at the end of the novel.[6]

I don't rightly know if anyone has noticed this particular thanatotic, death-obsessed, ending of García Márquez's novel, or, for that matter, of all his work. What interests me is not only the presence of this apocalyptic pattern but how we, as readers, are literally seduced into accepting its naturalness. Call it the seduction of a master prose-writer or the effects of so-called Magical Realism, the truth is that, caught in the dazzling chaos of an apocalyptic pattern, the reader either forgets or represses her participation in or production of that mutual annihilation. It's too bad, in fact, that Frank Kermode was not able to take *One Hundred Years of Solitude* into account before writing *The Sense of an Ending*, for the novel would have provided Kermode with a limit case of post-modernist apocalyptic fiction, not to mention a coda to Kermode's view that in the modern apocalypse "the nightmare of history is part of our condition, part of their material." Yet what strikes me most is a paradox: how little of the critical canon reflects the complicity between text and reader in the creation of that mutual apocalypse and the extent to which the obsession with death and destruction motivates praise for both the novel and its author.

In the final essay of his *Some Write to the Future*, a book of essays on contemporary Latin American fiction that also purports to offer a statement about the continent's culture, Ariel Dorfman, for example, focuses repeatedly on the novel's persistent use of apocalyptic imagery, such as the Deluge, and goes on to note how in the last scene of the book "for an instant, the last instant, we are the Buendías—except that we as readers survive in order to change the way we live, to tell and live, one would hope our existence in a different manner." Dorfman's thesis, in this 1990 essay and throughout

his book, is that Latin American fiction contributes to the "reader's liberation," as an earlier book of the same title had pressed. Dorfman is obviously sympathetic to, yet appears unbothered by, the reader's production of this apocalypse. In fact, judging from further statements in the same essay, it thrills him: "As for the hurricane that sweeps Macondo away, one can sadly read in it the disappearance of these southern lands from the globe, their insignificance and irrelevance in the grand design of history. Perhaps it is a foreshadowing of an apocalypse that awaits our entire species, just as the original days of Macondo, when everything was so new that it hardly had a name...". "This sense of doom," he states elsewhere, "therefore arises quite naturally from their dependent and secondary status in the world, living on its periphery, left outside modernity, and is expressed, at the literary level, in the feeling that these men and women are poor underdeveloped incarnations of faraway resonances of biblical or Greek classic myths, pale imitations of archetypes created elsewhere."

Neither the fact of collective annihilation nor the sense of doom stemming from a resigned underdevelopment appears to move Dorfman into reflecting on García Márquez's treatment of apocalyptic patterns, or this writer's obsession with violence and death. Instead, he views both arising "quite naturally" from colonial dependence. Dorfman's underlying model appears, in this case at least, to be utopian. Utopia justifies any measure, including, apparently collective annihilation, so long as "some write to the future," the precise title of the last essay and the book's. After all, the aim of his readings, he reminds us in his Introduction, is "to play in the liberation of the people of Latin America" and to conceive of the reader in a more respectful way, as if she were a citizen of the future." The future, then, not the present, or perhaps a past that would be open to judgment and criticism, is Dorfman's chosen time-frame.

Dorfman's utopian gesture, geared towards a future that appears indifferent to annihilation, including the reader's complicity in such symbolic crime, is therefore consonant with, though certainly not identical to, García Márquez's seductive apocalyptic pattern. So consonant is this critical utopia with that apocalypse that it naturalizes the obsession with death as part of an objective state of things— a Book that *has already been* written and will forever be written "to the future"— as opposed to one *being written in the present* and therefore subject to critique and correction.

One wonders about the underlying relationship between such utopian impulses and the obsession with death while further reading Mr. Dorfman's latest book, his memoir *Heading South, Looking North*, published this past year. Divided into sixteen chapters, eight of which are devoted to his relationship to "life and language" and another eight to "death," all dramatically focused on September 11, 1973 (the date of Pinochet's coup against Chilean President Allende), it describes, in heavily turgid prose, the author's life up to his escape from Chile to Argentina and an eventual long exile. Granted that the dialectic between language and death is a structural principle of this particular memoir, I am nevertheless struck by the images of self and collective destruction that pervade the last chapter, and even the "Acknowledgments" section, whose final line is devoted to the death of Mr. Dorfman's mother. Peering into the future, Dorfman assumes the prophetic mantle and writes how upon leaving Argentina, "I could see how I would be one of the victims of this massacre, I told my Argentine friends that we were heading for a calamity... I could recognize death as I saw it approaching." Later, as he boards the plane that takes him far from South America, Dorfman reflects how "On that plane, high above the pampas, I told myself that I would be back, I told myself that nothing could stop me from returning to my land... Look at me there, above the clouds, above a Latin America where death is spreading, poisoning the waters of the Argentine city of my birth...." And so forth.

If we simply cannot keep a straight face while reading this prose it may be not entirely because of the melodramatic tone of this death-obsessed memoir. I at least react to its perhaps unwitting echo of its model— Pablo Neruda's *Canto General*, whose dramatic core is the Chilean poet's flight from Santiago in 1948, at one of the heights of the Cold War, while escaping the police-force of then-President González Videla. Neruda was then in the midst of writing what is perhaps the most famous book in the history of modern Chilean literature, and so, similarly, Dorfman is then writing *Hard Rain*, a novel in which, he reminds us, "I prophesied that we would overcome and that Chile would be free." The difference, of course, is that Neruda crossed the Andes—the same Andes about which he had written earlier in *Heights of Macchu Picchu*— on horseback, while Dorfman soared above the clouds in a jet plane bound for Europe.[7]

4

The persistence of apocalyptic patterns in contemporary culture, of which García Márquez's and Dorfman's are but two examples, does not therefore mean that it always works. Our age of approaching millennium is also our postmodern age of irony and parody. The latter, as we know, undercut not only the need for apocalypse, but the very possibility of representing it. I find one exemplary instance of this denial of apocalyptic closure in Gustavo Pérez Firmat's 1995 memoir *Next year in Cuba*, a book which is fast becoming a classic of Cuban-American writing. In a fast-paced, witty narrative, Pérez Firmat's memoir, whose title is already a parody of Jewish eschatology, describes the vicissitudes of the Cuban exile community awaiting deliverance from exile and bondage, yet falling prey to the delivery of Cuban *cantinas*. In one of its many comical passages, Pérez Firmat describes one of these scenes from the Egypt of Miami's *calle ocho* and its political rituals:

> For better and for worse, Cubans face hardship lightly. Confronted with difficult times, we fall back on *relajo* or *choteo*, a type of humor that deals with life's adversities by mocking them. I'm sure you've heard the proverb, if life gives you lemons, learn to make lemonade. As soon as we Cubans arrived in Miami, we started making lemonades in industrial quantities. A spoonful of *choteo* made the Spam steak go down. The *carne del Refugio* became the subject of endless jokes and stories, as did the *factorías* where many people had to work for subsistence wages. Just as my mother and her friends exchanged recipes for Spam and powdered milk, my father and his friends traded jokes about Fidel or life in exile. The Miami buses, notoriously untimely, became *la aspirina*—you took one every three hours. As *relajo* relaxed us, the town began to fill up with colorful characters. One man who had been a sergeant in Batista's army liked to walk the streets of Little Havana holding up a signed photograph of the ex-dictator; he became known as *el hombre del cuadro* the man with the picture. A transvestite who hung out on Eighth Street was dubbed *La engañadora*, the deceiver: after the title of a fifties cha cha. A woman nicknamed Beba de Cuba was famous for holding wild parties every May 20 to celebrate Cuba's day of independence. For the party Beba wrapped herself in a Cuban flag and tied her hands and feet. At around midnight, when Beba was good and tipsy, the partygoers would start the chant, "Beba, break the chains; break the chains Beba". Beba would start to shake and shimmy and shudder until not only the chains but part of her clothing came off, symbolizing the liberation of Cuba.

As we can see, the sense of a cultural ending can also be funny. Humor may well be a healthy alternative to the pain of exile. Pérez Firmat's Cuban exile was and is in fact no less tragic or costly than Dorfman's, his approach no less symbolic, as his treatment of *carne del Refugio*, Cuban exile Spam, demonstrates. Indeed, it is an irony not to be forgotten that since 1990, Chilean exiles, including the most critical of the military regime, have been able to return to their native land without incident, while Cuba remains off limits to many exiles, particularly those who have dared criticize the ongoing regime. Humor and irony may yet be the best way to endure the bondage of a seemingly endless exile, or its imminent destruction.

It is said that at the height of Oscar Wilde's first trial, questioned by the British District Attorney about a compromising statement in a certain letter where he stated "I quite admit that I adored you madly," he was asked if he had ever had that feeling. Wilde answered, without missing a beat: "I have never given admiration to any person except myself. The expression was, I regret to say, borrowed from Shakespeare." To which one can only react by rejoining: What a way to go!

• NOTES

[1] Keynote address before the 48th Annual Mountain Interstate Foreign Language Conference at Virginia Polytechnic and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia, in October, 1998. I thank to my good friend, Professor Justo C. Ulloa, for this invitation and his hospitality.

[2] Fast-selling Thrillers Depict Prophetic View of Final Days," *New York Times*, Oct. 4, 1998, A-1, 20.

[3] See my "Cuba, Spain and 98: Narcissism, Melancholy and the Crisis of

Historical Memory," *Cuban Studies*, 28 (1998), forthcoming.

[4] See my "Latinamericanism and Restitution," *Latin American Literary Review*,40 (1992), 88-96.

[5] For such a classic reading see Emir Rodríguez Monegal, "The Last Three Pages," *Books Abroad*, 47 (1973), 485-89.

[6] Mario Vargas Llosa was one of the first to remark García Márquez's fascination with Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* as he wrote *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. "Like the inhabitants of London in that particular fiction, the people of Macondo... live a history that is natural cataclysm or divine punishment, a superior force that breaks in to the community and sweeps it away." My translation from *García Márquez: Historia de un deicidio* (Barcelona: Barral editores, 1971), 191.

[7] For the details of Neruda's escape from Chile see my edition of *Canto General* (Madrid: Ediciones Catedra, 1990).

A Study of Two Potential Sources for the Aljamiado-Morisco Legend of Alexander the Great: the *Rrekontamiento del rrey Alisandre*

Z. David Zuwiyya
Auburn University

Among the texts translated from Arabic into Aragonese and Castilian and written with Arabic characters during the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries are many legends that narrate episodes from the lives of the prophets. We are referring to Aljamiado-Morisco[1] stories about the Biblical prophets such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, etc. and figures more specific to Islam such as Muhammad, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib,[2] Salih, the king Tabi'u al-awal (i.e., the First Follower), and Alexander the Great,[3] among others. In contrast to Aljamiado works on Islamic law and Quranic exegesis, whose texts have been dated and sources identified, the origin and mode of transmission of the Aljamiado legendary material relating the lives of these important Islamic personages remains largely unknown. It is not certain whether the Arabic originals for Morisco texts like the *Rrekontamiento del rrey andre* were of Andalusian authorship or were imported from North Africa and the Middle East. Nor is it clear to what extent the texts circulated orally before being written down or to what literary genre they belonged. To begin to answer these questions Hispanists and Arabists must work towards identifying the Arabic originals for Aljamiado legendary works —such as the one studied here.[4] We shall see that the search for the roots of the *Rrekontamiento del rrey Alisandre* leads out of Arab Spain to North Africa and the Middle East in the first two centuries of Islam, that is, from the Prophet's death in 632 to the middle of the ninth-century A.D.[5]

The Aljamiado-Morisco Alexander legend was first transcribed from Arabic into Roman characters and published in 1888 in Zaragoza along with an Aljamiado version of the story of Joseph by Francisco Guillén Robles under the title, *Leyendas de José hijo de*