

## APOCALYPTIC VISION AND THE AMERICAN CHARACTER\*

GEORGE SEBOUHIAN

*State University College, Fredonia*

If you had to select the one most representative photograph from among those at the exhibit in Katowice, "Images of America", which one would it be? The photograph of New York City's closed spaces and tall buildings? The face of the Indian or the face of the cowboy? The stoic old man or the weeping youngster? The stock exchange or the farm? The problem I put to myself this evening is analogous to choosing one photograph from among many, choosing the single most inclusive image of the American; an effort seemingly doomed to failure, but not wholly doomed, for one of the most distinguishing characteristics of the American is to do just that, to make the effort to divine some fundamental characteristic of the American. Virtually every history of the American people devotes an entire chapter to the subject of the American character. Most Americans, whether they write history or not, become obsessed with the question at one time or another; but it is the intellectual, the cultural critic, and the artist who — perhaps more than anyone else — live with the question exercising their imaginations almost daily. The subject of this lecture is founded on that question, and, drawing from several representative works of the American imagination — where the writer allows himself space to speculate freely on who and what he is — I will place before you a tentative answer.

Let me say at once, and then take up the rest of my time with the evidence: The American character is founded on the sacramental view of the world: the American sees himself in terms of extremes; he is a unique person, independent of all others, including other Americans; he feels that he has a special

---

\* Lecture delivered by George Sebouhian, Fulbright Professor, Uniwersytet Śląski, Sosnowiec, March 15, 1977, as part of a cultural program featuring a photographic exhibit in Katowice, "Images of America".

mission, that he is chosen to act in a drama of cosmic importance; often he fails to live up to expectations; he sins and acknowledges his sin, but he also believes that even his failures are successes, because they are signs of sincere effort worthy of respectful recognition; his vision is sacramental because he assumes that everything has a significance in relation to him, and that that significance touches on sources transcendental. His basic myth is that of Biblical ultimates, drawn at times from the symbolism of the Garden of Eden before the fall and after the fall; from the characterizations of Adam, Eve, tempter, and redeemer; and from the symbols of judgment and the end of the world. He thinks of his ordinary activities, his everyday existence — unlike the classical Greeks, who thought themselves unworthy of the sympathetic attention of their gods — he thinks of this life as taking place on a stage of enormous meanings, even if he is ignorant of what those meanings are. Thus he thrills to ideas and language that promise to reveal those meanings to him. The great appeal of the film "2001" could be explained in terms of this cosmic, or as I call it in this lecture, the apocalyptic sense of self. But he is equally drawn to the darker side of this self, as evidenced by the horror in the immensely popular film and novel, *Jaws*; by the Satanism in the film "Rosemary's baby", and by the simple presentation of physical catastrophe as in "The towering inferno".

My main focus is not, however, on the popular arts, nor on how the average American is affected by them, it is on those who reflect and create the apocalyptic images of the whole people, the thinkers, writers, and artists. Although the word "apocalyptic" has had a revival recently among cultural commentators, it is not a new mode in which the American conceives of himself. The roots of the apocalyptic vision are firmly embedded among the American Puritans. It was they who saw their journey from the old world to the new as prefigured in the first great journey by the Jews released from Egyptian bondage and led by Jehovah to the Promised Land. Thus they named their new Jerusalem Salem — to assert the Biblical significance; and thus they thought of their colonies as "plantations", planted in the fertile ground as the seed of God which would provide Him the rich harvest of souls promised in the Old Testament. Their cities were indeed thought of as God's city, witness John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, announcing to the new inhabitants that "we must consider ourselves that we shall be as a City upon a Hill" (Miller 1956:83), the city of God on Earth at last a reality. Governor Winthrop was also the first to refer to the land as "God's Country" (Miller 1956:83), a phrase which has remained a cliché in American English to this day. A descendant of these Puritans, Ralph Waldo Emerson, in full appreciation of the enormity of their vision, said that "the weight of the Universe held them... to their place" (Whicher 1957:331). In his personal life the Puritan exercised the sternest discipline in order to keep his observa-

tional powers at their keenest; he measured every nuance in his own emotions or thoughts, took care to note every expression in others, and searched diligently through natural phenomena for some hint of a divine message. Thus the most trivial incident could be a shadow of a heavenly communication. This need for knowledge about one's relationship to the absolute pervaded the everyday existence of the Puritan; he was constantly responding to the challenge to bridge the space between himself and God.

This apocalyptic mode of thought almost gave way to the 18th century enlightenment with its emphasis on the secular view that man is a creature of reason whose "proper study" is man. But the Transcendentalists, led by Ralph Waldo Emerson, gave new life to the apocalyptic vision. In addition, the political events of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, such as the successful outcome of the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, along with the great geographic expansion westward occasioned by the purchase of the Louisiana Territory, contributed to the deepening sense of American independence from Europe and to the feeling that the Americans were a favored people, indeed, were fulfilling a "Manifest Destiny". What occurred on the popular level, however, was an easy acceptance of "progressivism", that doctrine that guarantees the future will be better than the past; that in some inevitable manner the American would never lose his way. Ortega y Gasset (1968:191) wisely noted that progressivism "anaesthetized... the American to the basic feeling of risk which is the substance of man", and thereby marked the tense dichotomy developing between the "progressivist" popular mind and that of the thinkers and artists, a split that has continued to the present day, albeit much modified of late. In response to the dichotomy, or as part of it, the writer has often chosen the role of prophet, to warn and cajole the audience in much the same manner as the Puritan preachers of old who felt it their duty to constantly remind their congregations of the danger of slipping out of the hands of God, of becoming lost in the great empty spaces beyond self, and of falling into the hands of Satan. Emerson, for instance, devoted his life to turning his listeners away from what Kierkegaard has called the quotidian, and toward the quiddity of life. Emerson once said of himself: "I unsettle all things. No facts are to me sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker with no Past at my back" (Whicher 1957:426—427), and thereby declared himself an enemy of all dogma, progressivist or otherwise. Almost every lecture, essay and poem of his was a challenge to the settled and secure; consider the problem he presents us in one of his most provocative poems, "Uriel", about an angel of that name who manages to confound the cosmos:

This was the lapse of Uriel

.....  
The young deities discussed

Laws of form, and meter just,  
.....

One, with low tones that decide,  
Gave his sentiment divine  
Against the being of a line.  
"Line in nature is not found;  
Unit and universe are round;  
In vain produced, all rays return;  
Evil will bless, and ice will burn."

.....  
A shudder ran around the sky;  
.....

The balance-beam of Fate was bent;  
The bonds of good and ill were rent;  
Strong Hades could not keep his own,  
But all slid to confusion.

(Whicher 1957: 426-427)

Of course Uriel is Emerson, and his lapse is unsettling indeed. "Evil will bless and ice will burn" echoes the epistemological problem that bedeviled the Puritans, the inaccessibility of divine certitude; man could interpret the divine signs, but no matter how fine his discipline, he could never be sure of his judgment. But he must live somehow with the risk that all will slide "to confusion", for as Emerson says in his essay "Fate", "Every jet of chaos which threatens to exterminate us is convertible by the intellect into wholesome force" (Whicher 1957:344); the risk, in other words, is necessary to life.

There is hardly a writer or thinker in America today who takes up his pen or typewriter without some sense of this immanent chaos. It is somewhat surprising, though, that the 19th century, without benefit of mass communication, shared the view that man was forever teetering on the very edge of existence. We are all familiar with Poe's "The fall of the house of Usher" and its image of utter destruction at the end. We may be less familiar with Hawthorne's "The ambitious guest" in which an avalanche fatally frustrates all rational attempts to avoid it. There is the well-known ending of *Moby Dick* in which the waters of the Pacific roll calmly over the final scene of tragic destruction just as they rolled over the same spot for thousands of indifferent years before. And then there is the apocalyptically self-conscious ending of Melville's *The confidence man*, in which the main character, God or the Devil (perhaps both; we cannot determine, for all has slid into confusion) turns out what is metaphorically the cosmic light, plunging the world into annihilating darkness.

Of course there were great differences between the Transcendentalists and the non-transcendentalists. Hawthorne and Melville, for instance, often thought of as anti-transcendentalist in their work, depicted the tortured soul frustrated by the limits of a fallen world; whereas Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman depicted the triumphant soul transcending his limits. The most important

difference for my purposes is that the Transcendentalists did not see the ego, the self, as a particularized bundle of set characteristics. Hawthorne and Melville emphasized the ambiguous nature of the external world, whereas the Transcendentalists emphasized the ambiguous nature of the self, the internal world, what Robert Penn Warren recently termed the "fictive self".<sup>1</sup> Emerson, for instance, always insisted on the ultimate mystery of self, on that "residuum unknown, unanalyzable" (Whicher 1957:171), and on the flow of experience, the unfixed, the fluid fact, the metamorphosis of things and thoughts. In his most famous work, *Nature*, he emphasizes process and relation, not being. Whitman also gives voice to this fictive dimension of the self, nowhere more resoundingly than in his notorious brag from "Song of myself", "Do I contradict myself?/ Very well then, I contradict myself;/ (I am very large — I contain multitudes.)" We shall see that this definition of the self becomes of crucial importance in the 20th century.

A psychic crisis of major proportions was beginning to build up in the second half of the 19th century; the United States saw the end of its first hundred years of nationhood, the end of a powerful cultural stimulus (the frontier no longer officially existed after 1890), the end of a sense of experimentation in government (the Constitution had survived the Civil War). We were settling into the mold of our reality, so it was a time for retrospection and introspection, for passing judgment on what we had done and for speculating about what we should do. The end of the century, then, touched on the sensitive metaphor of apocalypse; we were approaching an end and a beginning. The most strident voice responding to this imminent eschaton was that of Mark Twain, who, reacting with horror to the possible abuses of the machine age, concludes his book *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's court* with his Yankee hero killing off in a chaos of carnage 25,000 of the best knights of England, thereby bringing an end to King Arthur's world through a man-made apocalypse of machine-created fire and flood. By implication, the way in which Twain has Arthur's world end presages the end of the modern world, which, like all those preceding it, is not expected to learn how to administer justice except through self-annihilating violence. In another work, less bloody, but more chilling, *The mysterious stranger*, Twain suggests that the world and the ego are locked in a solipsistic prison, each being the dream of the other, and that this reality behind the appearance undermines all other realities, dissolves the world of human relationships, removes all moral values, and leaves man in utter cosmic loneliness. This is nihilism absolute! Henry Adams' response to the imminent eschaton was not far removed from Twain's nihilism, though his version was more intellectual. He saw man and his world moving

<sup>1</sup> "The bearers of bad tidings: writers and the American dream", *The New York review of books* (March 20, 1975), p. 17. Although unflattering on the Transcendentalists, there are some useful contrasts made between them and non-Transcendentalists.

inexorably from the coherent faith in the unity of self, society, God, and nature, to incoherent physical multiplicity that denies all human values; he was overwhelmed by the process, this "law" of entropy in nature, and foresaw a complete collapse of all forms into chaos. In his greatest work, *The education of Henry Adams*, he is quite deliberately direct when he says "Chaos was the law of nature; order was the dream of man" (Adams 1946:451). Whereas the responses of Twain and Adams to the end of their century promised an end with no beginning, William James, the founder of American psychology, apparently heir to the thought of his New England forebearers, discovered in the extinction of the substantive self within and the substantive world without, a new way of conceiving self and world. In what is called his "radical empiricism", we find him saying "Consciousness connotes a kind of external relation, and does not denote a special stuff or way of being" (James 1951:156). The key word is "relation", which in effect replaces the word "consciousness", and thereby denies the existence of a substantive, stable, individual self. This marks an end to the way in which we have conceived the world, and an end to Cartesian dualism, an end to ego; and marks an official beginning for the kind of fictive self adumbrated in the writings of Emerson and Whitman.

This new view of the ego was consonant with characterization in narrative fiction as it was being developed during the turn of the century in Henry James's novels for example; and it was consonant with the apocalyptic vision itself. An American critic, Earl Rovit, in an article entitled "On the contemporary apocalyptic imagination", provides a way of seeing the relationship between this new self and the apocalyptic mode of perception. Rovit says that the concept of the apocalyptic self represents a departure from narrative characterization of the past (including those most usually thought of as apocalyptic, inhabiting the work of Poe) and defines an apocalyptic structure (applicable to the form of and the characters appearing in a narrative) as that which has a "circumferential" structure, without being "circular", or enclosing, or being held by a "crucifixional center", and cites as examples Robert Lowell's collection of poems in *Life studies*, Norman O. Brown's speculative, experimental work, *Love's body*, Picasso's "Guernica", Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome, and group therapy (as opposed to individual psychoanalysis). He characterizes the apocalyptic as "Messianic", as going "beyond art", and culminating in "some variety of religious experience" (Rovit 1968:464-465). Though Rovit does not explain what he means by going "beyond art", or by "Messianic", or by "religious experience", the point is that he is moved to invoke the language of apocalypse explicitly in responding to contemporary art. Further, his definition of the self agrees with that of William James: he sees the ego as part of a connecting grid — not separating — and that this kind of centerless connecting of internal and external spaces culminates in an experience that defies form and established categories of under-

standing. It is this unfixed, circumferential — earlier called the fictive — self and fictional structure that become more and more prominent in 20th century literature.

The greatest writer of apocalyptic fiction before World War II was Nathaniel West, whose narrative structures and characterizations suggest those discussed by Rovit. The validity of identity and art is questioned in his first novel, *The dream life of Balso Snell*, through a series of comic surrealist episodes. His second novel, *Cool million*, is less surrealist, but more grotesque in its shattering analysis of the innocent Horatio Alger (or Candide) type who is progressively dismembered (hence, loses his identity) as he continues to fall prey to one power-hungry villain after another. His well-known novel, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, features another dimension of the identity theme wherein his main character, a man, writes a daily newspaper column under the guise of a woman, Miss Lonelyhearts, offering advice to his readers who in effect represent the suffering human condition. Things go wrong when Miss Lonelyhearts decides to take seriously the Christian injunction of love. In assuming the Messianic mission of saving others through love, he is ironically, yet appropriately, shot to death by an enraged reader. His last and perhaps most well-known novel, *The day of the locust*, which has been made into a film, is his most evidently apocalyptic work. The central image of the book is the painting being done by the main character Tod (for death?) Hackett, depicting the "Burning of Los Angeles" in a holocaust of immense proportions that destroys the city and presumably everything it symbolizes, death in life, empty hollow forms, diseased emotions and warped appetites; a Sodom and Gomorrah in America. It is clearly implied that the fire is solely destructive, not purgative, an end with no beginning. The very fact that the painting does not remain as a concept in the mind of the artist, but fuses with the narrative reality during the murderous scene at the end in which Tod's friend is literally torn to pieces by the frenzied mob, suggests that the prophetic intention to arouse, to warn is futile. Destruction appears to win out as the artist hero, overwhelmed by his own vision at the end of the novel, is reduced to one long helpless scream, which is then annihilated by the wail of the police siren. Thus West continues the negative view we first saw in Twain of apocalypse as final catastrophe.

It is post-World War II literature, however, that most fully — much of it self-consciously — becomes apocalyptic. The war itself with its incredible destruction of human life and property suggests the apocalypse. As critic Ihab Hassan (1971:139) put it: "After the six million comes continuous genocide, and the world's body itself, earth, water, space, threatens us with the fire next time. Literature responds to the threat of apocalypse, responds diversely, encompassing the full range of human possibilities under impossible stress". Contributing to the vision of a threatened hell on earth was the devel-

opment and use of the atomic bomb, the ultimate weapon. The first test explosion was described by a *New York Times* correspondent in the Biblical language of Revelation: "It was as though the earth had opened and the skies had split".<sup>2</sup> In view of the great social upheavals caused by the War, it should not be surprising that Afro-American literature came to full birth in the 1950's with images of the apocalypse abounding. Most notable is Ralph Ellison's *Invisible man*, featuring a black who has gone underground — literally — after a holocaust and flood sweep through Harlem during a race riot. Toward the end of the novel, while the main character is still above ground, wandering dazed through the streets of destruction, a person unknown to him runs by screaming in a "hallucinated cry" sounding "as through he had run for days, for years",

Time's flying  
Souls dying  
The Coming of the Lord  
Draweth niiiight!

(Ellison 1952: 479)

As the runner promises, though the "Souls dying", the "Lord draweth nigh" and thus there is a promise of rebirth. Indeed the main character (unnamed throughout the novel) goes underground with the expectation that he will rise again out of his self-entombment and help make a new, better world. The literature of the grotesque also emerges during the 1950's in Flannery O'Connor's tortured portraits of characters hungering after God, looking for the apocalypse in the present. Her short story, *The river*, summarizes in its brevity the major themes of the American experience: the quest journey for an absolute, transcendental experience that tries to transform Emerson's "jet of chaos" into the promised "Wholesome force", but O'Connor leaves us with a narrative without resolution, that really has no ending except insofar as it has joined in uneasy union the ultimates of human fear and desire. Consider this excerpt where the young protagonist, whose hunger for another world has been awakened by one of those full-immersion baptisms still practised by certain fundamentalist sects in the United States: he "intended not to fool with preachers any more but to baptize himself and to keep on going this time until he found the kingdom of Christ in the river"; which is what he does, and at the very end of the tale we are told: "He plunged under once and this time, the waiting current caught him like a long gentle hand and pulled him swiftly forward and down. For an instant he was overcome with surprise; then since he was moving quickly and knew that he was getting somewhere, all his fury and fear left him" (O'Connor 1964: 159). Though the story ends with the death of the

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in William Manchester, *The glory and the dream: a narrative history of America, 1932-1972* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), p. 378.

boy, the reader is forced to judge between his choice, his passionate hunger for something transcendental, and that of his agnostic parents, sophisticated, bored, hungry for nothing except the alcohol and partying that induce a spiritual anaesthesia. Another development of the 1950's is that of the Beat Movement, a revolution of poets against middle class values. Allen Ginsberg's voice sounds a Whitmanian barbaric yawp for the group — more in protest, however, than in ecstasy — as we hear it in his early poem "Howl", which opens with the apocalyptic lines: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving, hysterical naked... Angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection" (in Allen 1960: 182).

It is the 1960's, however, that can be seen as the peak apocalyptic decade in the American imagination. During these years the words "postmodern" and "apocalyptic" come into fashion, and we hear of the "new" literature of "Silence". In his attempt to define postmodern world literature, the American critic Ihab Hassan lists ten characteristics of Silence, which I add in abbreviated form here in order to contrast these characteristics with what remains peculiarly American: Silence

1. is in the tradition of anti-literature from Sade to Beckett
2. implies alienation from reason, society, and history ("silence resists and even disrupts human systems")
3. is separation from nature, perversion of erotic and vital forces (misogyny and necrophilia)
4. is anti-art
5. is anti-art forms (unlike anything man-made)
6. is anti-language
7. involves extreme mental states (madness, rage, ecstasy)
8. "de-realizes" the world
9. continuously repeats "solipsist drama of self and anti-self"
10. presupposes, at times, apocalypse, the dissolution of the known world, its history and persistence, and sustains a millennial vision of non-human perfection. Thus the total accusation of life may yield to its opposite, and the affluence of being flood the abyss (Hassan 1971: 13-14).

Many of the "anti's" above probably apply to recent American literature (anti-art, anti-language, etc.), but there are two important distinctions to be made between the European literature of Silence and the American: (1) the American is not in the tradition from Sade to Genet and Beckett (the closest we have is William Burroughs and he insists that his works are profoundly moral); (2) almost all the emphasis should be on characteristic number 10, for the millennial vision haunts much of American literature even if it does not appear explicitly in the narrative. This vision especially haunts American life; in fact it is during the 1960's that the popular mind and the artistic imagination were jolted together by a failure of the millennial vision occurring on a scale never before so widely experienced. The decade was one of violence and confrontation for the United States, both politically and militarily, inter-

nally and in its foreign relations. This is the decade that began with Camelot promises for a "New Frontier", as President John F. Kennedy described it, and ended with four students lying dead on the campus at Kent State University. In between were sensational murders and incredible events: the assassinations of the two Kennedy brothers and of Martin Luther King; the beginning of the Vietnam War; the Woodstock Festival at which 400,000 young people gathered to assert the triumph of flower power and music; the murders by the Manson Family in California during which one of the killers testified to feeling sexual excitement each time her knife penetrated the body of her pregnant victim; and finally, the landing on the moon. One might indeed look for ways to endure this nightmare of oppositions and violence, to find some means to understand it, and so to rescue ourselves from the despair that hate and guilt threatened to drive us to.

The work that attempts to do just this, and which seems to exemplify Hassan's characteristic ten concerning the apocalyptic dimension of the literature of Silence, is Norman Mailer's *Of a fire on the moon*. Mailer had made a reputation with his World War II novel, *The naked and the dead*, but he quickly moved away from the conventional style that marks the narrative, and has since become experimental, and at times, highly controversial. His essay, "The white Negro", which appeared — exploded might be a more accurate description — toward the end of the 1950's, sets forth a credo of the American apocalyptic character. Mailer argues that one faces death, either literally from atomic warfare or figuratively through conformity to the State. One lives only by denying the social self and by creating fictive selves; one must exist without roots and be guided by the rebellious imperative; as Mailer (1959:283—284) phrased it, one must be "a frontiersman in the Wild West of American night life". As socially hostile as this sounds, Mailer tries to provide a moral ground for action; he insists that a sense of purpose be retained, that one have faith in the ultimate good of one's acts. He also suggests a religious dimension through the invocation of such terms as "grace", "God", and the yogi's "Prana" (Mailer 1959:295). It is almost as if Mailer were trying to reconcile those two ultimates in human action, destruction and creation; or what Hassan refers to as the apocalyptic "dissolution of the known world" and the "millennial vision" operating side by side, complementing and energizing each other. Mailer doesn't leave all this as abstract theory, however; for he locates the new apocalyptic character in the "hipster" whom he identifies as a socially real group, an amalgam of juvenile delinquent, Bohemian, and Negro (Mailer 1959:285), who made his presence felt during the 1950's and who was central to the Beat movement of the same decade. It is, however, in his journalistic quasi-autobiographical book on the moon landing that he brings his apocalyptic lense into focus — most sharply and most anxiously — on American life in general. He speaks of the moon shot in only slightly less

hyperbolic terms than did President Nixon, who, upon greeting the astronauts after the moon walk, said, "This is the greatest week in the history of the world since the Creation" (Mailer 1970:452). Mailer's book is a meditation on what he thinks must be one of the most significant events ever achieved by man, and he wants to come to terms with its American significance in some measurable, communicable way. He speculates that as a consequence of man setting foot on the moon, "Nothing in the future might ever be the same" (Mailer 1970:140), that man's penetration of space awakened some deep archetypal force signifying a new dimension of existence into which man was now being born, a new babe in a new world. Mailer was not alone in equating the exploration of space with the discovery of a new world and hence with the earlier explorations of the planet. We are all familiar with the names "Discoverer", "Explorer", and "Pioneer", for the artificial satellites launched by the United States, and with "Columbia" as the name of the command vessel of Apollo 11 which went to the moon. These parallels are extremely important to Mailer for he revives all the questions originally associated with the founding and settling of the New World. Most significant is his question that appears like a refrain throughout the book, about the morality of landing on the moon; like the Puritan of old he pursues his query relentlessly, looking into the personalities of each astronaut, hunting through mountainous details of data, trying to discover the signs that would tell him whether the voyage to the new world (now outer space and the moon) was inspired by God or by the Devil. Mailer is not being ironic in this pursuit, nor is he merely engaging in rhetorical theatrics; all his work attests to his belief in a Manichaean split between cosmic forces of good and evil. He even mentions having experienced an insight into the nature of God, whom he cryptically describes as an "embattled vision of existence at war with other visions in the universe". More specifically, he explains that man is the imperfect instrument of God's will just as the cells of the body are imperfect instruments of the individual's human will; and that God is dependent on man for His own development and survival. Mailer then raises this question concerning the consequences of the moon shot: what if this relationship between God and man required a "sensuous communication" between man and nature, now possibly shattered by the triumphs of technology, specifically by the cancer of communication, electronics, which mitigates against sensuous relationships? (Mailer 1970:468).

What complicates the whole problem for Mailer is that now, more than ten years after his rallying support of the Hipster's romantic sensuousness, of his rebellious imperative over the Square's intellectualism and institutional authority, he is forced to find fault with his own. He says: "Yes, there was a wild nihilism in his own army... regurgitating the horrors of the centuries looking to slip the course out of their seed and into the air... [but] on the other side, heroes or monsters, the Wasps [White Anglo-Saxon protestants, synony-

mous with the American middle class and with the word "Square"] had put their nihilisms into the laser and computer, they were out to savage or save the rest of the world, and were they God's intended?" (Mailer 1970:441). So the Hipster is no longer assumed to be God's elect. That the pursuit of this question results in real anguished reappraisal of himself and his world is obvious in much of the book. Perhaps nowhere is it summed up more succinctly than when Mailer recounts turning to a friend, a quasi-member of the Hipster army now shown to be so far removed from the apocalyptic event, and says, accusingly, "You've been drunk all summer... and *they* have taken the moon". Mailer finally concludes that "we must applaud the feat and honor the astronauts... for technology had penetrated the modern mind to such a depth that voyages in space might have become the last way to discover the metaphysical pits of that world of technique which choked the pores of modern consciousness"; then he waxes poetic: "Yes, we might have to go out into space until the mystery of new discovery would force us to regard the world once again as poets, behold it as savages who knew that if the universe were a lock, its key was metaphor rather than measure" (Mailer 1970:471). Thus he manages — through the torturous ambiguity of his praise — to reconcile dichotomies, to envision a world that will transcend both Wasp and Hipster.

I have spent this much time on Mailer not because he is our best writer or our best thinker, but because, like Walt Whitman, he assumes the American voice; he tries to be the American psyche and report on what he sees as it happens to the American. I also consider his *Of a fire on the moon* an important attempt to parallel and even act as a corrective for Henry Adams' great work in which that writer fails to come to terms with the amoral world of force and power for which he is unprepared by training or temperament, and so condemns himself, his century, and the future. Mailer, on the contrary, in spite of his ambivalence, and though he frequently echoes Henry Adams on being unprepared for the new world, insists on the positive apocalypse, and thereby opts to continue the tradition of affirmative transformation made at the very edge of the abyss. Finally, the entire work must be seen not only as a way of reconciling the terrorizing oppositions opening up in American life during the 1960's, but also as a way of offering a creative corollary to the ominous entry of the ultimate weapon into our history in 1945.

Although it has not been my purpose in this lecture to cite all the current examples of the apocalyptic in American writing, I would be remiss not to mention a few besides Norman Mailer. John Barth comes first to mind, for he is almost a textbook example of the apocalyptic. His characters are all on journeys of self-discovery and recovery, in that what they all discover sooner or later is the elusiveness of identity, the Protean-like character of character. In spite of the mystery of the self, Barth frequently dramatizes the connection of self to self, most notably in his lengthy novel, *The sot-weed*

*factor*. There is a scene, for example, in which the main character, Ebenezer Cook, tied to a stake in an Indian village, awaits his death musing on identity and history. He reaches through a torturous maze of thought the astonishing conclusion that he as victim is also Indian victimizer and that the Indian is also himself, the intended victim; thus all humanity, relieved of static time-place identity, are revealed in all their humanistic connections. In fact, both the form of the novel and the characterization are what Rovit called circumferential. Although other writers, like John Updike and Saul Bellow, continue to use conventional novel forms, their themes and conflicts are apocalyptic. Almost all of John Updike's novels have to do with retaining one's sense of the divine in a world where even religion is profane. Saul Bellow remains very much concerned about the moral center of human personality. In *Mr. Sammler's planet* we have an aging intellectual who appears to be the sole civilized survivor from an age of human dignity, now thrown among the barbarians in the last days. Evidence that the apocalyptic in literature may be just beginning a new phase is provided in the monumental novel by Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's rainbow*, published in 1973, replete with all the characteristics of postmodern fiction. This novel has received more respectful attention than any other since its publication, and has earned the greatest number of apocalyptic adjectives.

My main purpose in this lecture has been to establish a fact, to select one image from among many, and to demonstrate its broad validity. I did not analyze closely the image itself; that would require much more time than I have; thus I have grouped together writers who are clearly saying different things and have omitted altogether some who are saying some very important things. This lecture has, then, been my representative photograph of the American imagination. I could have chosen some other perhaps. I don't pretend that anything as complex as a national characteristic can be contained within the frame of a single image. But I would argue that it is impossible to talk about the American's consciousness without touching on the ways in which he has portrayed himself: separate from the European, from the past, even from other Americans; yet connected to the land, to nature, to all creatures in some quasi-human, quasi-mystical way; moving from extreme to extreme, conquering space or being conquered by it; one of God's saved or one of the Devil's damned; questing restlessly, and always squinting, looking hard to see through things; and even when dreams become catastrophes he continues to squint, looking for the revelation that transcends him and justifies him at the same time. Is this apocalyptic? Yes, I think it is.

## REFERENCES

- Adams, H. 1946. *The education of Henry Adams*. Boston: Houghton.
- Allen, D. M. (ed.). 1960. *The new American poetry*. New York: Grove.
- Ellison, R. 1952. *Invisible man*. New York: The New American Library.
- Fisch, M. H. (ed.). 1951. *Classic American philosophers*. New York: Appleton.
- Hassan, I. 1971. *The dismemberment of Orpheus: toward a postmodern literature*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- James, W. 1951. "Does consciousness exist?" In Fisch, M. H. (ed.). 1951. 148-160.
- Mailer, N. 1959. *Advertisements for myself*. London: Deutsch.
- Mailer, N. 1970. *Of a fire on the moon*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Miller, P. (ed.). 1956. *The American Puritan*. New York: Doubleday.
- O'Connor, F. 1964. *Three*. New York: The New American Library.
- Ortega y Gasset, J. 1968. *The dehumanization of art and other essays on art, culture, and literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Rovit, E. 1968. "On the contemporary apocalyptic imagination". *The American scholar* 37.
- Whicher, P. (ed.). 1957. *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Boston: Houghton. 453-468.