*American Studies in Scandinavia, Vol. 13,* 1981:1–16

# Visions of *No* End:
# The Anti-Apocalyptic Novels of Ellison, Barth, and Coover

By
Douglas Robinson
University *of* Jyvaskyla

The apocalypse is without question one of the West's most powerful cultural myths. Along with our central myths of sin and redemptive sacrifice, of sex, race, and success, the notion of a final worldwide holocaust bringing the history of man to a close and ushering in a paradise on earth figures prominently in our profoundest beliefs about the nature of existence. Is ours the final generation? If we destroy ourselves through nuclear war or environmental carelessness, does paradise await us? What troubles our sleep, also stalks through our art: in Europe and America, the visual and literary imagination of calamity and renewal is most significantly shaped and colored by Christianity's two canonical apocalypses, the Book of Daniel and St. John's Revelation.

In America, where writers have perennially been drawn to gothic visions of terror, literary fascination with the images of apocalypse is particularly marked. This American predilection for the darker paths of romance has led some myth critics to make rather extravagant claims for an organic link between America and apocalypse; David Ketterer, for example, writes that "Although all apocalyptic writers might be said to inhabit an America of the mind, the central tradition clings to American soil."[1] And in recent studies of the American apocalyptic novel, to which I shall return briefly below, this association of apocalypse with America is made to work both ways: if all apocalyptists thus become honorary Americans, so also do all American writers become honorary apocalyptists. In the handful of critical studies written since World War II on the apocalyptic novel in America, virtually every major

writer in the history of American literature has, in one context or another, been described as "apocalyptic."

What I would like to suggest in this paper is that, due to definitional vagueness, the putative lists of American apocalyptic novelists offered by recent critics are misleadingly long. All too frequently, the use of a few apocalyptic images has sufficed to qualify a novel as apocalyptic, whether or not the novel is apocalyptic in structure or vision – much as if one were to describe *Ulysses* as a "Homeric" novel on the grounds that Joyce drew on images and plot patterns from the Odyssey. In order that distinctions might better be drawn between apocalyptic writers and those who use apocalyptic imagery for other purposes, then, my first task will be to examine the concept of apocalypse itself, seeking to define it in a more rigorous and thus critically more useful way.

Having offered a definition of apocalyptic fiction, and eliminated from my present concerns those novels which contain too few apocalyptic elements to be discussed under the apocalyptic heading at all, I would like to turn to a third group of writers, who do make central and significant use of apocalyptic imagery, but with fictive intentions that render the apocalyptic rubric entirely inappropriate. These writers, I shall argue, allude to the apocalypse with the explicit purpose of rejecting the apocalyptic vision; they evoke the threat of cosmic ends in order to deny their likelihood, and project in place of conclusions a vision of historical continuity. This vision of no end, which I shall call "anti-apocalyptic," plays an important role in much contemporary American fiction; and I propose to consider its operation in the novels of Ralph Ellison, John Barth, and Robert Coover.[2]

Apocalypse is a concept originally derived from Bible studies, and is a relatively recent coinage. For many centuries, the Book of Revelation formed a controversial part of the New Testament canon, receiving open opposition from some quarters, a discreet neglect from others. Up until a century ago, theologians almost universally regarded it as "the quintessence of what is 'eschatologically' improper,"[3] and tended to classify it as *sui generis*, the black sheep of the New Testament. The term "apocalyptic" was not coined until a number of Jewish and Christian works resembling St. John's Apocalypse were discovered, forcing Bible scholars to recognize the existence of an entire genre of these writings; the genre was subsequently named after the Book of Revelation, and its members came to be called "apocalypses."[4]

Membership in the apocalyptic genre has traditionally been strictly limited. The definitive criterion for an apocalyptic work is a similarity to the Book of Revelation on all significant levels, including the type of language or imagery used, the structural pattern of societal death and rebirth, and the vision of an imminent, final, and predestined end leading to a spiritual transfiguration. A biblical work containing only a few of these elements peripherally, such as the books of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Haggai, are not therefore to be characterized as apocalyptic.[5] Apocalyptic proper, including the books of Daniel and Revelation as well as some fifteen noncanonical works, must be apocalyptically informed on all three definitive levels: imagery, structure, and vision.

Recent literary-critical uses of this theological term have been less rigorous in its application, perhaps in the fear that too strict a definition of apocalyptic would rule out its use in literary studies altogether. Headed by R. W. B. Lewis in his seminal study, "Days of Wrath and Laughter" (1965),[6] apocalyptic myth critics have accepted as their sole criterion for apocalyptic fiction the presence of any one apocalyptic element, whether it be imagery, mood, or structure. Thus John R. May, in Toward a New Earth: Apocalypse in the American *Novel* (1972), includes in his apocalyptic category novels in which the only apocalyptic element is a Satan figure (Twain's Mysterious Stranger) or the imagery of flood and fire (Faulkner's As I Lay Dying).' And David Ketterer, in New Worlds for Old: The Apocalyptic Imagination, Science Fiction, and American Literature (1974), defines apocalypse philosophically to mean "dying" to an old vision of reality and being "reborn" to a new by learning something about the world. Because this roughly parallels the death-rebirth structure of apocalypse, Ketterer claims that a novel in which something is learned may be described as apocalyptic.[8] The weakness inherent in this inflative approach is clear: if simple learning or a stray apocalyptic image is enough to make a novel apocalyptic, most of the novels ever written are apocalyptic. A definition requires exclusiveness as well as inclusiveness to be useful, and the apocalyptic definitions offered by myth critics in recent years are too indiscriminately inclusive to be of much critical value.

A corrective for this myth-critical approach to apocalyptic fiction, I suggest, might be grounded in what theologians would call the form-critical method, or what literary theorists might call, in a broad sense of the term, formalism. A viable approach to the

apocalypse in literature, that is, must not only consider its presence in imagery or structure, but must define the scope and nature of apocalyptic elements on all narrative levels: imagery, structure, and vision. Through a formalistic analysis of specific works of fiction, we should be able to determine that some novels contain a few apocalyptic images but are not apocalyptic in either structure or vision; others – far fewer – are apocalyptic in both imagery and structure but not in vision (Vonnegut's Cut's Cradle, for example); and still others are indeed informed apocalyptically on all three levels, and may thus be described as apocalyptic.[9]

Viewed from this perspective, the body of literature which draws on the apocalypse begins to take on meaningful shape. At least three distinct types may be discerned among literary uses of the apocalypse, which I propose to call traditional *apocalyptic*, skeptical *apocalyptic*, and anti-apocalyptic. Traditional apocalyptic is the orthodox biblical form, which sees the events described in the Book of Revelation as literal truth, an actual model of history which will be realized in the very near future. That many contemporary writers – including the three I shall be discussing below – have been attacked precisely as traditional apocalyptists is indeed ironic; for while common in the Colonial period, this approach is virtually nonexistent in American fiction since 1800.[10] Largely restricted in modern times to religious tracts, traditional apocalyptic appears only in a few American novels whose central purpose is moral suasion, most notably among them Uncle Tom's Cabin. This conspicuous absence of traditional apocalypse from our best literature is not difficult to explain: in a secularized world, even the thoughtful Christian writer will feel uncomfortable with literal apocalypse, and for the secular writer literal belief in the myth is unthinkable.

And yet, secularization or no, the attraction of the apocalypse remains strong; and alongside traditional apocalyptic we may discern a skeptical use of apocalyptic imagery in American fiction, entailing a deliberate suspension of disbelief in order to experiment with the applicability of apocalyptic patterns to reality. Moving through skepticism to tentative belief, this approach constantly entertains the possibility of disconfirmation, and thus can never wholeheartedly embrace the coming upheaval. By postulating this skeptical form of apocalyptic, we ensure the applicability of the apocalyptic rubric to American literature, for the predilection of our writers for gothic visions and unresolved contradictions guaran-

tees skeptical apocalyptic a secure place; and indeed we find important skeptical apocalypses in the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Ambrose Bierce, Nathanael West, and Thomas Pynchon. The continuing vitality of this apocalyptic approach is illustrated by the appearance in 1973 of perhaps the finest skeptical apocalypse in the history of American fiction, Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow. Skeptical apocalyptic will continue to appeal, for the ironic tenor of its provisional faith allows for both intellectual credibility and profound mythic hope – or, barring that, the slim comfort of total despair.

In traditional and skeptical apocalyptic, the imagery of apocalypse is invoked to convey a vision of the end that is, however equivocally, still recognizably apocalyptic. But there is a third use of apocalyptic imagery in American fiction in which apocalyptic images become the vehicle for a vision of no end. This I have called "anti-apocalyptic," thus distinguishing it from fiction that rejects the apocalypse by simply ignoring it, which might then be called "unapocalyptic."[11] It is my contention that when our major writers do draw on the myth of apocalypse in their fiction, they most frequently do so in precisely this anti-apocalyptic fashion; and that the apocalyptic critics, by failing to distinguish between imagery and vision, have therefore drawn a picture of "apocalyptic" American fiction that is entirely misleading. So far from predicting an apocalyptic end, American anti-apocalyptists explicitly deny the validity of the Book of Revelation to our time. Striving to understand the future, they move through the apocalyptic myth, appropriate its images, and turn them upside down in order to envision a future extending far beyond the lifespan of a single person, a single society, or a single civilization. Firmly rejecting the notion of a final end, they – hopefully, fearfully, ambivalently – project the idea of historical continuity; they suggest that life is likely to go on much *as* it has until now, with the joys and the sorrows that make up the human condition, but the extremes of neither: no heaven, no hell. Whether they see hope for the future or despair in man's ability to improve his existence, these writers are joined by their shared belief that reality cannot and should not be understood in terms of the myth of apocalypse.

A considerable number of our best writers have at one point or another written anti-apocalyptic fiction; some, like William Faulkner, wrote virtually nothing else. Among classic American literature of the nineteenth century, Hawthorne's The *House* of the Seven Gables

and The Blithedale Romance may be considered anti-apocalyptic, as may Melville's *Moby-Dick*, whose narrator escapes the apocalypse and learns the lesson of its avoidability. Much of Twain's fiction borders on the anti-apocalyptic, and A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court is a brilliant anti-apocalypse. In the modernist period, the work of Fitzgerald and Hemingway, largely unapocalyptic, contains certain significant hints of anti-apocalypse; and Faulkner is centrally anti-apocalyptic, especially in his greatest works, The Sound and the Fury, Light in August, and Absalom, Absalom! After World War II, Norman Mailer in *An* American Dream and Why Are We in Vietnam? reflects anti-apocalyptic concerns, as does Kurt Vonnegut in *Cat's* Cradle and *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The contemporary writers who have most centrally concerned themselves with anti-apocalypse, however, are Ralph Ellison, John Barth, and Robert Coover.

Before turning to look at the work of these writers, however, it will be useful to postulate some common structures and visions found in all anti-apocalyptic fiction. When a writer seeks to reject the apocalyptic vision through the use of apocalyptic imagery, he tends to do so in certain patterns. He tends, for example, to replace the apocalyptic structure of societal death-and-rebirth with a plot structure conducive to visions of historical continuity. This frequently involves the use of a biblical myth other than the apocalypse, one in which a symbolic cataclysm leads not to the end of the world but to continuity within the historical realm. Thus, for example, the tragically-minded writer may structure his narrative on the myth of the Fall of Man, in which Adam and Eve do not die (as God had threatened), but merely become mortal. The comically-oriented writer, on the other hand, may use the myth of Christ's redemptive death, in which the death of God does not end the world (as the disciples feared) but simply makes possible a marriage between God and man. A third possibility is the myth of Job, in which Job undergoes an apocalyptic nightmare-sequence and, awakening from it with everything magically restored, gains insight into the nature of man and God.[12] The corresponding visions to these myths – the tragic, the comic, and what Murray Krieger calls the "classic" vision of paradox[13] – may or may not be attached to the appropriate myth in a given narrative; and the myths themselves may be mixed and shuffled in specific cases. Analysis of individual novels will reveal the complex combinatory matrices of these structures and visions that make up the respective narratives.

What is important to stress at this point is that in the anti-apocalyptic novel, both structure and vision will most commonly adhere to one or more of these patterns; where an apocalyptic structure is used, as it is in Vonnegut's *Cat's* Cradle, the vision of the novel will override the structure with a radically anti-apocalyptic understanding.

The first writer whose work I propose to discuss within the anti-apocalyptic category is Ralph Ellison, whose *Invisible* Man (1952) directly confronts the possibility of apocalyptic conflagration at every crucial point in the narrative. Violent societal conflict fraught with overtones of the end of the world is Ellison's most powerful metaphor for contemporary reality, as his narrator finds himself thrust again and again into the midst of battle between forces arrayed, however arbitrarily, in mortal opposition to one another.

Structurally, Ellison's novel is a pilgrimage punctuated by apocalypse. The cataclysmic events throughout the novel serve as symbolic Stations of the Cross in the narrator's passage from South to industrial North and from blindfolded innocence to sighted maturity, both reflecting and directing his progress toward his ultimate destination, the discovery of identity. Horrific imitations of the apocalypse recur at every turning point in the invisible man's quest, always accompanied or precipitated by characters modeled on the Antichrist or the Whore of Babylon: the battle royal in Chapter 1, staged by the leading citizens in town and featuring a beautiful white stripper; the Golden Day tavern, where chaos erupts in reaction to the presence of the rich white man, Norton, and as an indirect result of the power-greed of Bledsoe, the president of the Negro college; the boiler room at the Optic White paint factory, a smoky abyss which explodes through the negligence of its demonic sovereign, Lucius Brockway; and the Harlem riot, engineered by the narrator himself through the manipulation of Brother Jack, and fleshed out against the apocalyptic background of the Reverend Bliss P. Rinehart, Ras the Exhorter-become-Destroyer, the drunken Sybil, and the beer-drinking fat lady perched atop a Borden's milk wagon.

R. W. B. Lewis's interpretation of this obsession with the apocalypse in Ellison's novel is straightforward; he simply equates apocalyptic imagery with apocalyptic vision:

> The chaos is total and ubiquitous. It represents the considered program, as it were, of the agents of Antichrist for drawing the world onward to the great catastrophe – with the manifest intention of seizing power in the post-catastrophic

wreckage. For Ellison has elevated his political theme, the familiar authoritarian strategy of making disaster serve the ends of conquest, into universal apocalyptic significance.[14]

But what, after all, is "universal apocalyptic significance"? It can only mean the total destruction of the world and all its inhabitants; a partial or temporary destruction and conquest can surely have no *universal* significance as an apocalyptic end. And in fact Ellison does not posit a final catastrophe. His endtime promises no end at all – merely a continuing series of seemingly apocalyptic conflagrations, none of which, however, will bring the relief of oblivion. No decisive and lasting victory will ever be achieved by the Communist Party, Ras and his followers, or any other of the novel's power conglomerations; instead, the world will remain in bewildering conflict between arbitrary and shadowy foes bearing no resemblance to moral values, but operating on a purely pragmatic level in the all-consuming quest for power. This, clearly, is the condition not of the apocalypse but of Adam and Eve after the Fall, where Satan remains dominant but not permanently victorious, and man inhabits a confusingly compromised environment. To the extent that the main body of Ellison's narrative constitutes the novel's vision of life, that vision may be seen as tragic, perhaps ironic, but clearly not apocalyptic.

The validity of the apocalyptic reading of Ellison's novel becomes even more questionable when we examine its narrative frame, i.e., the prologue and epilogue describing the narrator's underground haunt. The invisible man's growth from battle royal to Harlem riot is not the novel's only action; a significant development also occurs in the process of telling the story of his life, a development which revolves around the insight he gains by artistically distancing the apocalyptic events that drove him underground. In terms of his pilgrimage, the invisible man undergoes two spiritual changes: one above ground in the realm of history, the other below ground in the realm of art, in the writing of the novel. And the lessons learned in the two pilgrimages are different in important ways: above ground, the narrator learns a good deal but achieves no comprehensive understanding; below ground, his new ability to read his life as a parable teaches him a wider understanding of paradox, of the comedy and the tragedy, the black and the white, of life. Thus it is that while in his prologue the narrator denied responsibility to his fellow man, in the epilogue, after telling and coming to understand the story of his life, he reaches a new decision:

I'm shaking off the old skin and I'll leave it here in the hole. I'm coming out, no less invisible without it, but coming out nevertheless. And I suppose it's damn well time. Even hibernations can be overdone, come to think of it. Perhaps that's my greatest social crime, I've overstayed my hibernation, since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play.[15]

Here we move out of the myth of Adam and into that of Job: the apocalyptic (here ironic) dream-play over, Job returns to his responsible social role with a new paradoxical insight into the complex reality he inhabits. Tentatively, equivocally, the novel moves beyond ironic tragedy toward Murray Krieger's notion of a classic vision, an Olympian serenity in extremity, harmony in conflict, that may be attained only through the broader perspective yielded by a temporary withdrawal from the bafflements of history. Ralph Ellison's novel, then, is not apocalyptic but complexly anti-apocalyptic.

Like Ellison, John Barth also confronts the possibility of apocalyptic destruction throughout his fiction, both microcosmically, in The Floating Opera (1956), The End of the Road (1958), and The Sot-Weed Factor (1960), and macrocosmically, in Giles Goat-Boy (1966) and LETTERS (1979). While all of Barth's fiction offers fruitful material for the examination of anti-apocalyptic forms, perhaps the most comprehensive rejection of the apocalypse comes in his fourth novel, Giles *Goat-Boy*.[16] Based on the universal myth of the world-redeeming hero, the novel presents us with our own apocalyptic anxiety, fed by the threat of nuclear annihilation, as the societal need which motivates the hero's task: to save his society, he must defuse the Bomb, represented allegorically in the novel by a computer programmed to destroy men's minds, and establish a realm of peace and love for all mankind. George Giles, raised as a goat, comes to believe he is the hero that society so desperately needs, and with the impetuosity of youth rushes off to do battle with dragons, figurative and otherwise, rescue damsels in distress, and generally reap glory both worldly and divine.

In attempting to comprehend his paradoxical reality, however, George comes to understand the falsity of his romantic dreams. This understanding is driven home by the cosmic repercussions of his misguided actions: no modern anti-hero, George actively influences his environment, and when he makes a mistake (and he makes many) the effect is magnified a thousand times, with disastrous results. Seeking to solve the Boundary Dispute between East and West Campus (our Eastern and Western hemispheres, headed

by the Soviet Union and the United States), George persuades the Chancellor of New Tammany College (the U.S. President, modeled on John F. Kennedy) first to sever all relations with the enemy, then to embrace him with open arms. The result of both counsels is the same: hostilities flare up, and both sides prepare for all-out war. By rashly and ignorantly seeking to save mankind from what appears to be imminent apocalypse, George nearly causes the apocalypse himself. It is not until he has failed twice in his self-appointed task that he realizes he has misconceived it. Apocalypse, lie discovers, is not the predetermined end to history which will save righteous mankind from evil; it is the kind of chance accident that may occur when man lives by childish romantic dreams. To avoid the apocalypse, man needs only grow up. Having himself grown up, George still perceives that the rest of mankind, in its immaturity, may yet commit mass suicide; but, as his mentor Max Spielman predicts, chances are the human race will survive, and one day perhaps reach maturity.[17] Knowing in advance the tragic fate of reformers, George nevertheless assumes the task of teaching man the path to maturity; and his teaching becomes the main narrative of the novel.

Like Invisible Man, however, Giles *Goat-Boy* is a frame-tale in which the outer frame qualifies the import of the framed inner narrative. Thus the story of George's path to tragic understanding – which, Barth tells us, he himself shares[18] – is sandwiched in between glosses supplied by one "J. B.," a comic persona of Barth, who claims to be an avid convert to "Gilesianism," an apocalyptic religion George Giles himself rejects; and J. B.'s remarks are themselves framed by notes from the "Publisher," questioning their validity. Having put behind childish notions of apocalypse, George Giles sees his vision of tragic humanism transformed into the foundation for an apocalyptic cult; outside the story of George's life, the reader sees the apocalyptic cult, espoused by J.B. himself, dourly dismissed by realistic businessmen. What truth is left? Those critics who have thought to solve Barth's paradoxes by naming the novel a vast and ill-conceived hoax have essentially mistaken metafictional qualification for metaphysical negation.[19] Reality, for Barth, is too complex, and fiction too false, to admit of a single novelistic truth; that the reader not seize upon the novel's tragic view as bare Truth, therefore, Barth reminds him of its artifice, its presence in a novel, a tissue of fictive lies. And yet, Barth says, as far as fictional visions go, tragedy is a better choice than apoc-

alypse – more reasonable, more useful, more conducive to a mature and meaningful life. Tragedy, in Giles *Goat-Boy*, supercedes apocalypse; and, even ironically qualified, tragedy remains the novel's tentative approximation of metaphysical truth.

Robert Coover, a writer who has risen to prominence in the 1970's, is in many ways even more centrally concerned with the apocalypse than either Ellison or Barth. Where Ellison shifted from the apocalyptic to the classic, however, and Barth from the apocalyptic to the tragic, Coover consistently moves in his work from the threat of apocalypse to comedy. "I tend to think," he once said, "of tragedy as a kind of adolescent reponse to the universe – the higher truth is a comic response ... there is a kind of humor extremity which is even more mature than the tragic response" (ellipsis in original). [20] Coover's penchant for mythological stories leads him to structure this comic vision on the pattern of Christ's sacrificial death, which, together with the apocalypse, appears almost obsessively in all three of his novels and many of his short stories.

Coover's first novel, The Origin of the *Brunists* (1966), describes the birth of an apocalyptic cult and the farcically catastrophic disconfirmation of their prediction for the end of the world. The protagonist of the story is a skeptical newspaperman who infiltrates the cult to get a story, and is nearly made their sacrificial lamb when they discover his betrayal. Presumed dead, he is resurrected with explicit allusions to Christ, and, just as Christ's resurrection effected the comic marriage of God to man, he marries his nurse.

In Coover's second novel, The Universal Baseball Association, *Inc.*, *J.* Henry Waugh, Prop. (1968), the apocalypse becomes no more than a fleeting threat, and the comic marriage is replaced with a ritual of sacrificial conflict. J. Henry Waugh (JHWH, the tetragrammaton of the Old Testament Yahweh) is an accountant who invents a baseball parlor game based on tosses of the dice, and, by giving his players names and life histories, creates an entire imaginary world. As he becomes increasingly involved emotionally with his creatures, there comes a time when the dice – fate, inevitability – defy his will. His first impulse is to destroy the game (the threat of apocalypse); instead, he sticks his divine finger into history by nudging the dice to produce the eventuality lie desires, sacrificing a player named Jock Casey (J.C.) just as the biblical God sacrificed his son of the same initials. At this point Waugh drops out of the novel altogether, and the story concludes inside the baseball world he created, as the

players enact an annual ritual of sacrifice and wonder whether there really is a Creator.

Coover's most powerfully anti-apocalyptic novel, however, is his most recent, The Public ***Burning*** (1977), which tells the story of the execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg in June, 1953, for "stealing" the secret of the atomic bomb and giving it to the Soviet Union. Coover gives the American political mythology of the 1950's definitive fictional form by depicting the United States, led by Uncle Sam, as the Sons of Light, and the Soviet Union, led by the Phantom, as the Sons of Darkness, who would destroy all goodness and purity in the name of evil. Alternate chapters are narrated by Richard Nixon, who is satirically – but also seriously – portrayed as the one government leader who can't understand why the atom-spies must be burned. Uncle Sam, a comic-book hero incarnate in President Eisenhower who assumes his true form in times of crisis, is Nixon's mentor in his quest to understand and thereby come to partake in the mythology; and what he seeks to teach Nixon is that they are engaged in an apocalyptic fight to the finish, which the Phantom has *a* fair chance of winning. Uncle Sam hopes to win the present skirmish by sacrificing two scapegoats, the Rosenbergs, but there is a good chance that his sacrifice will not work, and the end will come. The attendant dread of imminent cataclysm permeates the mood of the novel; as Nixon expresses it:

> Was this it, then? Of course, I knew it could happen, we all knew it could happen any day, we talked about it all the time, Rockefeller had his bomb-shelter business in high gear, we were already counting out the holy remnant – but now, so close, so sudden? Was this the bloody condition, the perilous fight, the evil hour? Had Uncle Sam not announced, long ago, an uproarious tumult, **a** time of tribulation but a redemption which shall last forever? Was this more than a mere symbolic expiation? Were the Rosenbergs in fact the very trigger – living high-explosive lenses, as it were – for the ultimate holocaust?[21]

But it is not the end. Uncle Sam wins the showdown, and life continues as before, shifting both structure and vision from apocalypse to comedy. The execution, especially of Ethel, is explicitly described in terms of the Passion of Christ, and afterwards Uncle Sam enacts a parody of the comic marriage by buggering Nixon, apparently as a token that he will someday be President. As Uncle Sam flies out the window, Nixon blurts out his comic confession: "*I . . . I love you,* Uncle Sam*!*"[22]

The apocalypse, in its postulation of a final end to history and man's translation onto a spiritual plane of existence, is pessimistic

in regard to the future of the world as we know it. All must be destroyed; hope lies only in the promise of heaven. The comic myth, which Coover offers in place of the apocalypse, is optimistic: it suggests that the world might not only survive, but actually improve. Thus the public burning of the two atom-spies not only fails to bring on the final upheaval; it promises Nixon, the novel's Everyman, a Golden Age to come when he shall himself steer the ship of state.

But, like Ellison and Barth, Coover refuses to offer a single myth as a model for our complex reality. Just as Ellison introduces into his ironic gloom a glimmer of hope, and Barth qualifies his tragic resignation with the ironic seeds of doubt, Coover balances his comic vision against a profoundly realistic awareness of human weakness, man's vulnerability and fallibility, the very condition that must inevitably doom comic societies to failure. Kathryn Hume aptly terms this ironic element in Coover's fiction the "naked," for Coover's characters are always most vulnerable when they are naked.[23] So also Nixon, whose multiple humiliations in The *Public* Burning lead, by way of reader identification, past the simplicities of political satire to an appreciation of man's "nakedness" in the world. Nixon caught masturbating, Nixon thrust bare-assed into Times Square, Nixon anally raped by Uncle Sam is not mere gratuitous farce, but a deeply serious reminder of man's condition in an unmythic reality – the inevitability of pain, suffering, defeat, decay, and death. Uncle Sam's promise to Nixon is the comic marriage with the American people that is his greatest desire; but Coover intends us to perceive that comic fulfillment from a 1970's point of view, recalling not only Nixon's election in 1968 but also his forced resignation – his "divorce" from the comic marriage – in 1974. For just as Nixon must accept love with excruciating pain, so also must he accept comic victory with ironic defeat. In Coover's paradoxical vision, man is sustained by the hope of comedy, but defeated by the inevitabilities of irony; but this also means that, confronted with certain failure, man can assert his imaginative freedom by conceiving a better world, and striving against all odds to attain it.

And, in the end, it is this paradoxical vision of man trapped by reality but liberated by the imaginative power of *story,* especially as a means to understanding, that joins the anti-apocalyptic novels of Ellison, Barth, and Coover. In their profound concern with the predicament of man in a bewildering reality, all three writers reject

the vision of an apocalyptic end and insist upon the unrelieved continuity of history, in order to emphasize the need for man to achieve a balanced, mature understanding of life. For only thus can he transcend the ineluctable limitations of his existence and charge his life with meaning – and perhaps joy.

## NOTES

1 David Ketterer, *New Worlds for Old: The Apocalyptic Imagination, Science Fiction, and American Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974), p. 332.

2 In fact I believe the whole of classic American literature might fruitfully be considered in terms of anti-apocalypse; and this article forms part of a larger study of the anti-apocalyptic novels of Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, Faulkner, and the three authors discussed here. The paper was originally presented at the Nordic Association for American Studies seminar on contemporary American literature held October 4–5, 1980, at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

3 G. Sauter, quoted in Klaus Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic* (London: SCM Press, 1972; tr. Margaret Kohl), p. 18.

4 A concise history of the term "apocalyptic" may be found in Koch, pp. 18–34. As some critics, understanding "apocalypse" in its Greek etymological sense, have tended to see any revelation, vision, or epiphany as apocalyptic, it may be useful to quote Koch's discussion briefly here: "The adjective apocalyptic is not directly derived from the general theological term *apokalypsis*, in the sense of revelation, at all; it comes from a second and narrower use of the word, also documented in the ancient church, as the title of literary compositions which resemble the Book of Revelation, i.e., secret divine disclosures about the end of the world and the heavenly state. The word apocalypse has become the usual term for this type of text" (p. 18).

5 See for example Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology* (Philadelphia: Fortune Press, 1975), esp. chapters 2 (Isaiah), 3 (Ezekiel, Haggai), and 4 (Zechariah).

6 Lewis's lengthy article appeared in his essay collection, *Trials of the Word* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), pp. 184–235.

7 John R. May, *Toward a New Earth: Apocalypse in the American Novel* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972), e.g. pp. 74-91 (Twain) and 93-114 (Faulkner). In fact, May states that to qualify as apocalyptic a novel must contain the imagery of both catastrophe and judgment; but inasmuch as "judgment" for May need be no more than a moral stance (i.e., the author indicates his disapproval of a character or action within the novel), a not particularly apocalyptic feature of fiction, his apocalyptic interpretations truly stand upon shaky foundations.

8 Ketterer, esp. Part III.

9 Important steps in this direction have in fact been taken by Martha Banta, in her recent study of American thought, *Failure and Success in America: A Literary Debate* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978). While Banta's study is on the face of it more impressionistic than formalist, she rigorously allows American writers the full complexity of their ideas on all significant levels. Like Lewis, who is briefly (and uncritically) cited once, Banta pro-

mises in her introduction to survey "certain apocalyptic visions which American imaginations have offered as a way out of personal and national failure" (p. 4); but, happily, her actual discussion belies this claim. For there (see Part V) she is concerned not only with visions of the end, but with the many varied visions – of cessation, perfection, and continuation – for which apocalyptic imagery and structure have served as vehicle. See also Banta's article, "American Apocalypses: Excrement and Ennui," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* Vol. vii, No. 1 (Spring 1974), pp. 1-30.

10 See for example Robert Alter's remarks in "The Apocalyptic Temper," *Commentary* 41 (June 1966), p. 63: "There is no room for real people in apocalypses, for *when a writer chooses to see men as huddled masses waiting to be thrown into sulphurous pits, he hardly needs to look at individual faces;* and so it is not surprising that recent comic-apocalyptic novelists should fill their worlds with the rattling skeletons of satiric hypotheses in place of fully fleshed characters" (italics mine). Like Alter, Bernard Bergonzi also uses Lewis's comic-apocalyptic interpretation as a handy weapon in a dubious battle against postmodcrn writing; see *The Situation of the Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 98-120. Another tack is taken by Nathan A. Scott, Jr., in his "'New Heav'ns, New Earth' – The Landscape of Contemporary Apocalypse," *Journal of Religion* 53 (January 1973), esp. pp. 24-7. Scott claims that contemporary writers draw on the traditional apocalyptic idea of an imminent end (which he claims is not the *true* Christian apocalyptic vision) out of a fear-fed longing for oblivion, and calls for a return to the original Christian responsibility in history.

11 This would also rule out novels that attack the apocalyptic myth in passing but do not confront the myth on its own ground, through the use of apocalyptic imagery. Perhaps the best example of this sort of novel is Saul Bellow's *Herzog*, which contains a much-quoted criticism of the apocalyptic imagination: "We must get it out of our heads that this is a doomed time, that we are waiting for the end, and the rest of it . . . We love apocalypses too much" (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965, p. 324; see also Lewis, pp. 234-5, Alter, p. 61, Bergonzi, p. 120, and Scott, p. 24). Though anti-apocalyptic in spirit, *Herzog* lacks apocalyptic imagery, and thus is unapocalyptic in form.

12 My conception of the Book of Job is based on Victor White's theological answer to Jung's *Answer to Job* in "Jung on Job," Appendix V to *Soul and Psyche* (London: Collins and Harvill Press, 1960), pp. 233-40; and J.R. Kahn's psychoanalytical study, *Job's Illness: Loss, Grief, Integration: A Psychological Interpretation* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1975).

13 See Murray Krieger, *The Classic Vision* (Baltimore:Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), esp. Chapter 1, "Theoretical: The Tragic Vision and the Classic Vision."

14 Lewis, p. 219; see also May, pp. 147-55.

15 *Invisible Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 468.

16 For a more detailed discussion of the anti-apocalyptic in Barth's fiction, see my *John Barth's Giles Goat-Boy: A Study* (Jyvaskyla Studies in the Arts no. 15, Jyvaskyla, Finland, 1980), esp. Chapter 3 of Part III, "The Present: Lucius Rexford and the Boundary Dispute."

17 See *Giles Goat-Boy* (New York: Fawcett, 1966), pp. 300-2.

18 See for example Alan Prince, "An Interview with John Barth," *Prism* (Sir George Williams University, Spring 1968), p. 58; the unpublished second half of Barth's *Book Week* essay, "Muse, Spare Me," quoted in David Morrell, *John Barth: An Introduction* (University Park: the Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), pp. 133-4; and the remarks of another fictional persona of Barth, "The Author" in *LETTERS* (New York: Putnam, 1979), p. 431.

19 See for example Beverly Gross, "The Anti-Novels of John Barth," *Chicago Review* 20 (November 1968), pp. 95-109; Richard Poirier, "The Politics of Self-Parody," *Partisan Review* 35 (Summer 1968), pp. 339-53; and Tony Tanner, "The Hoax That Joke Bilked," *Partisan Revzew* 34 (Winter 1967), pp. 102-9.

20 Interview included in Leo J. Hertzel, "What's Wrong With The Christians?" *Critique* 11, No. 3 (1969), p. 28.

21 *The Public Burning* (New York: Bantam, 1978), p. 417.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 661.

23 Kathryn Hume, "Robert Coover's Fiction: The Naked and the Mythic," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* Vol 12, No. 2 (Winter 1979), pp. 127-48.