

# BARBARISM IN THE MUCK OF THE PRESENT

## Dystopia and the Postapocalyptic from Pinedo to Sarmiento

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*Abstract: In this article I consider the temporality of postapocalyptic narrative and use a contemporary postapocalyptic novel, Plop (2004), by the Argentine author Rafael Pinedo, to open up new considerations of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's classic Facundo: Civilización y barbarie (1845). Following the method proposed by Jorge Luis Borges (1966) in "Kafka and His Precursors," it is my position that Pinedo's novel invents a new, postapocalyptic Facundo, thus converting Sarmiento into one of the American continent's first postapocalyptic authors. Furthermore, Pinedo's novel re-frames the "civilization or barbarism" debate under the contemporary sign of ecological catastrophe, allowing the reader to arrive at new and startling conclusions about language, the environment, and disaster.*

The postapocalyptic temporality is a familiar one for literary critics: such novels are the germs and seeds of future catastrophes—the end of the world as we know it—and those catastrophes will be fully recognized only in retrospect. As readers and critics, we exist in a pre-post- moment: these narratives themselves tell the stories of catastrophes to come as if they had already happened. As a sub-genre of science fiction, postapocalyptic narratives reside at the peculiar crossroads of science fiction and sacred literature, between utopia and the definitive end of civilization. In the following pages, I give an account of the genre and then move to a concrete example of a postapocalyptic novel that arose from a specific moment of crisis: the political and economic turmoil in Argentina in late 2001 and early 2002. Rafael Pinedo's *Plop* creates a dystopian postapocalyptic universe that recapitulates and rehearses the classic binary of nineteenth-century Argentine political and cultural theory: the civilization-barbarism debate. Pinedo updates that debate for a neoliberal moment through a reconsideration of language and history in the wake of catastrophe. Reading *Plop* and *Facundo* with and against each other opens up a new space in which to consider the curious articulation of catastrophe, liberalism, and the end of the world as we know it.

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## AFTER THE POSTAPOCALYPSE

Postapocalyptic literature is situated at the intersection of two distinct genres: the apocalyptic narrative and utopia. The apocalypse—and its synonym, revelation—is a narrative mode supremely preoccupied with the end. Although it is not the original literary apocalypse, John of Patmos's text—alternatively called the book of Revelation or the Apocalypse of John—occupies a central position of reference in the Western tradition of apocalyptic literature. Lois Parkinson Zamora (1989, 2) has synthesized the general elements that make up an apocalyptic narrative:

In both the canonic Hebrew apocalyptic texts (Ezekiel, Daniel, Zachariah) and the Christian apocalypses (the thirteenth chapter of Mark, the twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew, the Second Epistle of Peter, the Revelation of John), the end of the world is described from the point of view of a narrator who is radically opposed to existing spiritual and political practices. Whether Jew or early Christian, his narrative reflects not only his opposition to existing practices but also his political powerlessness to change them. His is a subversive vision: He is outside the cultural and political mainstream (in John's case, literally in exile on the Greek island of Patmos), awaiting God's intervention in human history, when the corrupt world of the present will be supplanted by a new and transcendent realm. From a point ostensibly beyond the end of time, the apocalypticist surveys the whole of human history, focusing on its cataclysmic end. For him, the future is past: He states God's plan for the completion of history, alternately in the prophetic future, then as accomplished fact.

For Zamora, as for the majority of critics who study the apocalypse, the apocalyptic narrative is a genre that operates in a sacred register, but one that maintains strong links with its contemporary historical context. Zamora (1989, 11) proposes that the current renewed interest in the apocalypse is a predictable reaction to the social rupture and the temporal uncertainty of our time. In other words, the register must be sacred, but the apocalypse is still able to respond to the problems of more modern and secular societies.

Zamora, again in following with the majority of her colleagues, makes an effort to give a detailed account of the limits of the genre. And rightfully so: without a coherent theorization, the apocalypse becomes an empty form, without content, to be applied to any narrative with a definitive ending. Thus, for Zamora, an apocalyptic narrative must go beyond a mere vision of destruction; according to her, the apocalypse works in a mythic register, and the revelation it announces exists in a state of tension with the historical reality that operates as the starting point and the motor of the narrative.<sup>1</sup> The price that this demarcation carries is the loss of any nonsacred (in the Western sense) conceptualization of the apocalypse. It also

1. "The myth of apocalypse is, then, both a model of the conflictual nature of human history and a model of historical desire. This tension between transformation and completion, desire and satisfaction, has as much to do with fictional form as it does with historical vision. Though a given work of literature may emphasize one side of the myth or the other, when the tension disappears, when the vision is merely optimistic *or* pessimistic, we do not have apocalyptic literature but fantasy. Hence my distinction between mere visions of doom, to which the word apocalypse is commonly misapplied, and the more complex history envisioned in the myth itself. Apocalyptic literature is fundamentally concerned with our human relation to the changing forms of temporal reality, not with static simplifications" (Zamora 1989, 12–13).

proscribes (and this is a corollary of the previous loss) the conceptualization of a collision of worldviews beyond any interaction that does not recapitulate the confrontation between the early Christians and the Roman Empire. In other words, readings of the apocalypse that limit themselves to Judeo-Christian eschatology in a mythic register fall victim to a significant blind spot: narrative accounts of the actual, historical destruction—the cataclysmic end—of non-Judeo-Christian civilizations. I am specifically referring to indigenous accounts of the conquest of the American continent. Both *La visión de los vencidos* and Guaman Poma's *Nueva crónica y buen gobierno*—to name just two examples—coincide with most aspects of Zamora's generic definition. Furthermore, Rolena Adorno's (1986) celebrated reading of *Nueva crónica y buen gobierno* itself operates in an apocalyptic register, even if the author does not use the standard vocabulary of that tradition.<sup>2</sup>

It is possible that the American conquest is not the most appropriate moment for the formulation of a universal theory of apocalyptic literature, but that historical moment—or, more clearly, the conjunction of the so-called discovery of the New World and the subsequent conquest—is *fundamental* for utopian fiction.

Even if Thomas More's *Utopia* did not give birth to the genre of utopian fiction, he did name it and marked it definitively; the enduring trace of More's mark was the act of locating his island *at once* in the New World and in a nonplace. More published *Utopia* in 1516, a moment in between the so-called discovery of 1492 and the subsequent conquest of the New World. More knew of the Spanish presence on several Caribbean islands; he did not, however, know any details of the ongoing mainland conquest when he published the first edition of *Utopia*. More had read Amerigo Vespucci and Pedro Mártir, but not Bartolomé de las Casas. From here springs utopia.<sup>3</sup>

The genre that More named has since experienced a process of displacement. If More's precursors located their imaginary and perfect societies in an abstract philosophical space (Plato's *Republic*) or in a sacred eschatological time (Augustine's *City of God*), More himself gave it a concrete no-place: over there in the New World. More's successors, for their part, gradually lost the uncertainty implicit in the name, and, with greater and greater specificity, they began to locate the good place within a temporal horizon—thus, Charles Fourier's four historical movements

2. Adorno (1986, 33) says: "[Guaman Poma's] interpretation of the past supports his claims about the present; these, in turn, are articulated in ways to ensure the redress of grievances in the future. The moral and political implications of the past for the present are written into every line of the text, and the consistency of his effort makes it possible to argue that a coherence of intention underlies the entire work." She concludes her book about Guaman Poma in the following way: "Yet it is not merely a sense of the foreigners' smugness and superiority that Guaman Poma rejects in responding to this discourse. It is, more profoundly, the European concepts of history, religion, and justice that he finds wanting. . . . His failure to find . . . a possible resolution of the colonial situation, reflects the failure of European discourse itself to lay the foundations on which to build a just society in that brave, New World. Guaman Poma's book stands as a testimony of the real response of Americans to the utopian reality of America dreamed by others" (Adorno 1986, 143).

3. To further complicate the story, one Vasco de Quiroga, a Spanish *oidor* sent by the crown to the New World, landed in New Spain (Mexico) in 1531. Soon after his arrival, Bishop of Mexico Juan de Zumárraga's copy of More's 1518 Basel edition of *Utopia* found its way into Quiroga's library. Six years later, Quiroga founded a utopian community populated by the indigenous peoples of Michoacán. See Zavala's (1955) *Sir Thomas More in New Spain* and Quiroga's (1992) *La utopía en América*.

that ultimately give rise to the phalanxes, and the Boston year 2000 that Edward Bellamy described in 1887, all oriented toward the future. It is from this affinity with future society that the link between utopia and science fiction arises, which is in fact nothing more than a return to utopia's foundational moments, but now intergalactic spacecraft replace the *Niña*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa María*.

Perhaps as a reaction to the failed attempts to construct a utopia in the present moment, the late nineteenth century witnessed the birth of dystopia as a literary genre. Dystopias, on the whole, narrate the construction of a planned, total society, yet they present that society not as a harmonious organism attuned to human perfection but rather as a stifling, oppressive encroachment erected as a barrier to human flourishing. The root source of that oppression varied in the earliest historical manifestations, ranging from capitalism (H. G. Wells's early fiction) to gender inequality (Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, 1915), to oligarchy (Jack London's *The Iron Heel*, 1908), to Soviet communism (Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, 1924); later dystopias developed toward highlighting the utopian impulse itself as the source of oppression (as in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 1949).<sup>4</sup> Somewhere, sometime, the nightmare vision of a *total* future society crossed with the idea of the world's imminent end, and the postapocalyptic vision thus arose. A society's ruin, the remains after the Revelation, the most powerful nightmare of all—the end will not be a singular moment of terror, but rather an unending continuity of nothing, a never-ceasing “after” that signifies the impossibility of civilization.

When Argentina found itself immersed in an all-too-familiar scene of economic and political crisis in December 2001 and January 2002, consumers of Western culture already had a developed imaginary of postapocalyptic society based in large part on the Cold War and the constant threat of global nuclear annihilation.<sup>5</sup> The scenes of the so-called Crisis—the dissolution of civil society, the betrayal of economic promises, the *corralito*, the *cacerolazos*, state repression—were described and presented in apocalyptic terms.<sup>6</sup> It is not surprising, then, that in the search for how to best narrate the “after” of the Crisis, some authors felt the attraction of the postapocalyptic tradition.<sup>7</sup>

The postapocalyptic subgenre takes what is generally considered one of science fiction's weak points—its “incapacity to sever itself from the present,” as Daniel

4. In our contemporary moment the dystopian, especially in film, has become consolidated as spectacle; one need only ponder the number of films that attempt to imitate—both at the artistic and at the commercial level—the *Matrix*'s success.

5. The central Argentine reference would be the first two parts of Héctor Germán Oesterheld's *Eternauta* (1957–1959); this comic book's shadow touches the entire postapocalyptic tradition in Argentina.

6. The *corralito* was the derogatory nickname for the banking restrictions that forced citizens to watch idly as their peso-denominated bank accounts were devalued while their assets were frozen—corralled—within a collapsing banking system. The *cacerolazos* were the pot-and-pan-banging protests that arose in opposition to the *corralito* policies.

7. In addition to Pinedo's *Plop*, Pedro Mairal's *El año del desierto* (Buenos Aires: Interzona, 2005) would be another key example of postcrisis, postapocalyptic dystopia fiction. See Zac Zimmer, “A Year in Rewind, and Five Centuries of Continuity: *El año del desierto*'s Dialectical Image,” *MLN: Modern Language Notes* 128, no. 2 (March 2013: 371–381).

Link puts it<sup>8</sup>—and converts it into its fundamental referent. In the aftermath of the Crisis, several authors converted their contemporary after—post-Crisis—into the starting point for their fictional postapocalyptic narratives. For James Berger (1999, 6–7), this is precisely the operation of postapocalyptic fiction: “A disaster occurs of overwhelming, disorienting magnitude, and yet the world continues. And so writers imagine another catastrophe that is absolutely conclusive, that will end this world. The initial disaster, which distorts and disorients—which, in a sense, is not an apocalypse in that it does not reveal—requires imagining a second disaster that *is* an apocalypse and thereby gives the first disaster retrospective apocalyptic status.” But in the Argentina of early 2002, the disaster was not complete, and the only thing revealed by that apocalypse was the muck of the Pampas.

#### BARBARISM’S MUCK

“Argentina helps cultivate pessimism,” stated Rafael Pinedo in an interview about his novel *Plop* (Frieria 2006). Pinedo, born in Buenos Aires in 1954, was one of the most promising new voices in South American genre fiction before his untimely death in late 2006. As evidenced by the few stories and the two novels (one posthumous) he left behind, Pinedo was developing a unique literary voice characterized by an abrupt, stripped-down, almost fragmentary language in the service of images alternately perplexing, shocking, playful, and gruesome.<sup>9</sup> The postapocalyptic dystopia *Plop*—the only novel Pinedo published in his short literary lifetime—tells the story of Plop, so named because that is the sound his newborn body makes when it drops into the mud. Plop is a member of a nomadic band of survivors who call themselves “the Group.” The novel tells the story of Plop’s ascent through the ranks of the Group as they wander through a flat, barren wasteland. The novel is difficult to classify or summarize, primarily because of Pinedo’s unique language and his style of narration that itself approximates a postapocalyptic, postcivilization mode of storytelling. What is certain is that *Plop*, published in Argentina in 2004 after winning the Premio Casa de las Américas a few years earlier, is a novel of ruins. The origin of the savage world Pinedo presents remains opaque, but there are signs of an already-forgotten ecological disaster. The author’s anthropological attention to ritual highlights the primitive

8. “Una de las paradojas más interesantes de la ciencia ficción es su incapacidad para despegarse del presente: postulada la ficción como un relato del futuro, inscrita la instancia narrativa en un *como si* del futuro absoluto (o de la realidad alternativa, que para el caso es lo mismo), la especulación no llega nunca más allá que el conjunto de problemas imaginarios (ideológicos) que constituyen el presente de cada texto. Así, la ciencia ficción americana clásica es un conjunto de relatos alrededor de los terrores más típicos de los adolescentes varones: el éxito o el fracaso, el estar lejos de casa, encontrar el amor” (Link 2003, 135).

9. Besides *Plop*, Pinedo published three short stories during his life: “Mari,” “Desencuentro,” and “El laberinto” (“El laberinto” was originally published in *Revista Casa de las Américas* 232 and is currently available online at the Argentine science-fiction website Axxón Online, at [http:// axxon.com.ar](http://axxon.com.ar). *Frío*, a posthumous novel that continues Pinedo’s literary exploration of ecological catastrophe, was published by Salto de Página in 2011.

and savage kernel of a future society; in terms of space and time, this future is disturbingly close.

Like the vast plains where the novel takes place, the text itself appears to surge forth from the abyss. But as the mounds of plastic and rusted metal that rise from the omnipresent mud evoke an anterior cause, so too does Pinedo's text gesture toward its participation in a discourse that employs postapocalypse and dystopia to confront the paradoxes of globalization. As in any postapocalyptic narrative, *Plop* begins with an after. Pinedo presents a dual-layered after: Plop's personal after and the global after. The novel focuses on the filling in of the lacuna in Plop's personal after: the text opens with Plop deep inside a hole; soon shovels of dirt begin to fall on his head, and the first scoop—because there will be no madeleines after the apocalypse—sets the protagonist's memory into motion, and we move to the linear narration of Plop's life until we find ourselves once again in the hole that closes the novel.<sup>10</sup>

If Plop's personal "after" is clear, the novel's global after is much harder to pin down. The novel contains some future and plenty of the past. There are vague signs that point toward an ecological disaster—this would be a future vision from our present—but the spectacle of savage tribes wandering on the plain suggests a relationship to a particular historical vision: barbarism in the Argentine Pampas. To understand this strange novel, we must follow the thread that lies at the intersection of the environment, civilization, and barbarism. And we would not be wrong to do so: the Argentine Pampas, as sketched by its best-known critic, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, is the perfect background for the postapocalypse. Sarmiento's 1845 book *Facundo: Civilización o barbarie en las pampas argentinas* (*Facundo: Civilization or Barbarism*), which today might be classified as creative non-fiction, is the definitive nineteenth-century condemnation of strongman Latin American politics. The text uses the story of one such strongman, the caudillo Facundo Quiroga, to describe the struggle among power, modernization, geography, and culture in Argentina.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, one could even say that *Facundo*, with its civilization-barbarism opposition, is a sort of proto-postapocalyptic novel; Sarmiento, however, locates his vision not in time but rather in space: the opposition of the city and the Pampas.<sup>12</sup>

The spatial referent is central to Sarmiento's dystopia: the few cities that continue resisting the barbarian invasion are, in the well-known formulation, islands in the vast savage sea. The temporal result is the soon-to-be-definitive triumph

10. In several interviews Pinedo has described the centrality of the scoops of dirt to the novel's narrative structure: "Plop recuerda su vida con cada palada de tierra que le cae encima, y cada palada es una imagen" (Alonso 2004).

11. Sarmiento wrote the enigmatic *Facundo* while exiled in Chile; it was originally serialized in 1845, but it quickly found its way into book form. The text is a mixture of biography, protoethnography, and polemic; its publication clearly installed Sarmiento as a key figure in the struggle to establish a centralized Argentine republic. Sarmiento's main target, the dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas, maintained his power through a series of allegiances with local caudillos in the rural agricultural areas of the country; Facundo Quiroga was one such regional strongman. Sarmiento would eventually become president of the Argentine Republic (1868–1874).

12. I recognize that this binary simplification ignores the richness of the text, but what matters here is that Sarmiento's conception is more spatial than temporal.

of barbarism. Facundo Quiroga—and the continuation represented by mid-nineteenth-century Argentine dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas—is the “apocalypse now”: Sarmiento does not promise to reveal anything more than the actual state of Argentine reality. In this sense, the apocalypse has already occurred, and the Argentines find themselves in the midst of the postapocalypse.

Sarmiento’s geographic scene is, anachronistically, the perfect backdrop for postapocalyptic narratives. Sarmiento’s readers will be forgiven if they imagine themselves in front of the *Road Warrior* script: the sweeping desert, lacking any sign of civilization;<sup>13</sup> unification only through barbarism or slavery;<sup>14</sup> the stoic resignation to a violent death.<sup>15</sup> At the end of the first part of his description of the barbaric desert, Sarmiento concludes: “This is how, in Argentine daily life, these peculiarities came to dominate: the predominance of brutal force, the rule of the strongest, limitless and unaccountable authority, justice administered without form or debate.”<sup>16</sup>

Like the anti-Thomas More, Sarmiento writes from the island of civilization to describe the barbarism that surrounds him. More, writing from the barbarism of early sixteenth-century Europe, described an island located far away from the continent where a protosocialist civilization flourished.<sup>17</sup> But the very fact that Sarmiento is still able to write opens a temporal ellipsis between the barbarian invasion and the total loss of civilization. This may explain why Sarmiento dedicates part of his text to an ethnographic account supported by the then-current fads of European popular science, phrenology and physiographic description. In a last-ditch effort, Sarmiento composes a preamble to the mock last will and testament of civilized life in the Argentine Republic. It is as if Sarmiento wanted to record every detail of his native land before barbarism destroyed it all (yet to today’s reader, the phrenology especially reads like a pseudoscientific justification for the racial component of the civilization-barbarism binary).

Pinedo has a different project. If Sarmiento, in 1845, writes his version of civilization’s last battle, Pinedo is interested in taking the failure of that battle as his

13. “El mal que aqueja a la República Argentina es la extensión: el desierto la rodea por todas partes y se le insinúa en las entrañas; la soledad, el despoblado sin una habitación humana, son por lo general los límites incuestionables entre unas y otras provincias” (Sarmiento [1845] 1963, 59–60; all translations mine).

14. “Así es cómo en la vida argentina empieza a establecerse por estas peculiaridades el predominio de la fuerza brutal, la preponderancia del más fuerte, la autoridad sin límites y sin responsabilidad de los que mandan, la justicia administrada sin formas y sin debate” (Sarmiento [1845] 1963, 65).

15. “Esta inseguridad de la vida, que es habitual y permanente en las campañas, imprime, a mi parecer, en el carácter argentino cierta resignación estoica para la muerte violenta” (Sarmiento [1845] 1963, 60).

16. If we read on, it is hard not to think of the iconic images from Gibson’s film: “La tropa de carretas lleva, además armamento, un fusil o dos por carreta, y a veces un cañoncito giratorio en la que va a la delantera. Si los bárbaros la asaltan, forma un círculo atando unas carretas con otras, y casi siempre resisten victoriosamente a la codicia de los salvajes ávidos de sangre y de pillaje” (Sarmiento [1845] 1963, 65).

17. In an attention-grabbing coincidence, both authors were ignorant of the landscapes they were describing. As we saw earlier, all of More’s knowledge of the New World came to him secondhand; in the Losada edition of *Facundo*, the editors state: “Conviene recordar que Sarmiento no conocía la pampa cuando hace esta descripción. Tiene sí en cuenta la primera hecha por un autor argentino, la de Echeverría en *La cautiva*, que le sirve de antecedente” (Sarmiento [1845] 1963, 60n2).

starting point.<sup>18</sup> Sarmiento's text, thus, cannot be classified as postapocalyptic in strict terms. As James Berger (1999, 13) proposes, "If apocalypse in its most radical form were to actually occur, we would have no way even to recognize it, much less to record it."<sup>19</sup> Sarmiento uses the language of the end of civilization as a rhetorical strategy to give more weight to his political claims; he is far from putting into doubt language itself as the fundamental medium and the constitutive base of civilization. Sarmiento historicizes the origin of his "apocalypse now" through the life of Facundo Quiroga, and he names the event in the present moment: Juan Manuel de Rosas.

Pinedo, in contrast, writes after. Because of this, we do not find a narration of the apocalyptic event. Pinedo understands that to describe the postapocalypse, the "post" must be total. This implies the loss of culture, memory, and even language as we know it. It can be said that *Plop's* global after is after the anticipated battle between civilization and barbarism, with the barbarians emerging victorious. This victory is concretized in the omnipresence of mud and muck. It is crucial to read the novel as a restatement of the civilization-barbarism debate, but this reading is not without its contradictions and complications.

Pinedo's novel transcends a simple updating of Sarmiento's ideological scheme. As is well known, Sarmiento's language rapidly consolidated itself as a model (one model among many, but nonetheless a model that captured the attention of many readers) to speak about the process of modernization. In his anticipation of the dystopian genre that would fascinate twentieth-century readers, Sarmiento

18. At this point, it is worth mentioning that Pinedo's project dialogues with Oesterheld's *Eternauta*. Even if *Plop's* images appear to be the novelization of the drawings from the second, postapocalyptic part of the *Eternauta*, Pinedo attempts to resolve a tension that is present in the first part of Oesterheld's graphic novel. The first part of the comic shifts between a "state of nature" (every man for himself) and a community constituted against the invading forces. Pinedo denies his characters a common enemy and thus annihilates any concept of a "communal protagonist" that Oesterheld so often celebrated. If the *Eternauta's* invaders had never materialized, the societal degeneration that preceded the invasion would have increased until it completely erased any trace of communitarian triumph. Pinedo expands and enhances this social disintegration to its ultimate consequences; this is *Plop's* starting point. We can say that Oesterheld's communitarian concerns no longer seem plausible when the "invading forces" become neoliberal ideology itself: a valorization of free markets and individualism that undermines the very concept of community and cooperation.

19. Berger does not theorize the utopian side of the "post"; in his reading, any postapocalyptic text is, constitutively, an apocalyptic text (with the exceptions of Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* and Gore Vidal's *Kalki*, which are both purely and uniquely apocalyptic; see footnote 8 in Berger's second chapter). By affirming this, and thus negating the fundamental difference that underlines his study, Berger undermines his own work, supposedly on postapocalyptic texts. Furthermore, by turning his back on utopia (or, more relevant to the texts he discusses, on dystopia), he forecloses any possibility of a critical reading of the remains of a postcatastrophic society. He says: "The apocalypse would replace the moral and epistemological murkiness of life as it is with a post-apocalyptic world in which all identities and values are clear" (Berger 1999, 8). He confuses the clarity of the total critique of society that an apocalyptic narrative presents, on the one hand, with the ambiguity and confusion that postapocalyptic narratives like Pinedo's present, on the other hand. In other words, Berger proposes reading postapocalyptic texts as utopias (he says: "The post-apocalypse in fiction provides an occasion to go 'back to the basics' and to reveal what the writer considers to be truly of value"; Berger 1999, 8), but he does so using a theoretical apparatus applicable for apocalyptic narratives. Finally, the supposed equivalence between apocalyptic and postapocalyptic narratives does not leave any space for the analysis of the omission of any narration of the apocalyptic event; as I argue, this omission forms a central axis of Pinedo's text. I refer to this omission in more systematic fashion in the following section.



situated himself on the side of modernity and the city. The spatial dystopia that he created—the predominance of the rural, the wholesale destruction of culture, the triumph of a Hobbesian state of nature—does not coincide with the typical image of the temporal, urban-futuristic dystopia of the twentieth century. In effect, the triumph of the barbarian threat did not imply a totalitarian state of control and surveillance to the Argentine *letrado*; on the contrary, as we have seen, it represented something much closer to an approximation of a postapocalyptic state. A brief fragment suffices to demonstrate: “We in America are on the wrong path, and there are deep, traditional causes for this that we must break with if we don’t want to be swept away by decomposition, nothingness, dare I say barbarism, the inevitable mud into which the remains of dying peoples and races sink, like those hazy primitive creations left in the wake of a changing atmosphere.”<sup>20</sup>

To untangle Plop’s reimagining of the civilization-barbarism contradiction, we must begin at the most material level: the mud. Sarmiento above describes barbarism as the “inevitable mud into which the remains of dying people and races sink” (Ramos 1989, 20). There is no more accurate synthesis of Pinedo’s narrative world, with one exception: the author uses the word *barro* instead of *fango*. This becomes obvious when the narrator describes the landscape:

It rains. Always.

Sometimes lightly, like floating water. Other times, more often, it’s a liquid wall that pounds against your head.

You can only drink the rainwater. Once it hits the ground, it’s impure. The old people say “contaminated.”

You walk in the mud, between huge mounds of iron, rubble, plastic, rotting rags and rusted cans. . . .

You can find anything in the trash heaps. Most of it is iron and cement. But there is also a lot of wood. And plastic. Of all kinds. And cloth, always half-rotten.

And apparatuses. Nobody knows what they are for, or what they were for.

All the metal is rusted. All the wood, moldy.<sup>21</sup>

Mud, the remains of people and races—the coincidence between the two visions cannot be pure chance.

Pinedo’s language is startling. The fifty-eight chapters—none of which exceeds four pages—are full of short, declarative sentences. The descriptions never go beyond pure action: there are few adjectives and not a single interior monologue. Barbarism has won in the linguistic field, and within the Group—Plop’s name

20. “La idea de que vamos en América en el mal camino, y de que hay causas profundas, tradicionales, que es preciso romper, si no queremos dejarnos arrastrar a la descomposición, a la nada, y me atrevo decir a la barbarie, fango inevitable en que se sumen los restos de pueblos y razas que no pueden vivir, como aquellas primitivas cuanto informes creaciones que se han sucedido sobre la tierra, cuando la atmósfera se ha cambiado” (quoted in Ramos 1989, 20).

21. “Llueve. Siempre. / A veces muy poco, como agua que flotara. Otras, muchas, es una pared líquida que golpea la cabeza. / Sólo esa puede tomarse. Una vez que cayó, está impura. “Contaminada” es la palabra que usan los viejos. / Se camina sobre el barro, entre grandes pilas de hierros, escombros, plástico, trapos podridos y latas oxidadas. [ . . . ] / Entre las pilas de basura se encuentra de todo. La mayor parte es hierro y cemento. Pero hay mucha madera también. Y plástico. De todas las formas. Y tela, casi siempre medio podrida. / Y aparatos. Que nadie sabe para qué son, o fueron. / El óxido cubre todo el metal. El hongo, la madera” (Pinedo 2004, 20–21).

for his roving band of survivors—language serves only to command. Pinedo's linguistic economy only augments the horror, and the frigid account of violence reaffirms the reader's repulsion. For instance, the process of "recycling" cadavers, presented for the first time when we see the practice applied to Plop's mother: "They brought [Plop] to see the operation. The needle in the vertebrae, the flaying, the butchering. As he was her child, he was allowed to ask for a part: he chose a femur, to make a flute. He never made it."<sup>22</sup> The text, like the society it narrates, has no interest in anything not directly linked to survival. In the above fragment, the language does not even attempt to give a detailed account of the "recycling" process. We see only three images of the butchering, and then the abandoned attempt to make a musical instrument. Nothing more: from death to mourning in thirty-two words, without a single adjective.

Perhaps because of the impoverished language, the great expanse of post-apocalyptic wasteland—the Plain, as the Group calls it—also lacks history. Rites and rituals abound, but these have no justification, and there are few moments when the Group's members reflect on them. It seems as if the Group's strongest taboo has its origin in a refrain worthy of Sancho Panza: "Flies don't enter closed mouths!" screams the Brigade Secretary during Plop's initiation rights.<sup>23</sup> This is the only motivation given for the total prohibition (under penalty of death) against publicly showing one's tongue. The vacant transmission and the blind repetition of the taboos lend structure to the societies that inhabit the Plain; these minimal conditions for survival, however, are a far cry from a historical conception of society. When barbarism wins, history loses. But history does not disappear without leaving traces. Plop, in his rise to power, learns how to manage history. As we see further on, this is a fundamentally material management, given that the "history" Plop manages is a fragmentary piece of text (probably from an astronomy or physics textbook) fetishized by an illiterate society. In other words, even though language tries to barbarize itself and erase any link with pre-postapocalyptic memory, something of the past remains in the present, even the postapocalyptic present.

If we compile the clues, the traces, and the signs, we arrive at the inevitable conclusion: the elusive event was an ecological disaster. The description of standing water awakens our suspicion: "As soon as it touched the ground it went bad, black, and when it forms puddles it shined at night, and you had to keep your distance, so that the women wouldn't give birth to deformed children and balls of flesh wouldn't grow in peoples' insides."<sup>24</sup> Any doubt disappears as soon as we read about the instantaneous decomposition of a character who falls into a river.<sup>25</sup>

22. "Lo llevó a ver la operación. La aguja entre las cervicales, el despellejamiento, la carneada. Siendo el hijo, le correspondía pedir algo: eligió un fémur, para hacer una flauta. Nunca la hizo" (Pinedo 2004, 91).

23. "¡En boca cerrada no entran moscas!" (Pinedo 2004, 30).

24. "Que apenas tocaba la tierra se pudría, negra, y cuando se acumulaba brillaba en la noche, y había que alejarse, para que las mujeres no empezaran a parir hijos deformes y a la gente no le crecieran bolas de carne desde adentro" (Pinedo 2004, 101).

25. See Pinedo (2004, 83–84). In another point of contact with *Facundo*, Pinedo focuses on the toxicity of rivers and lakes. One of Sarmiento's central complaints is the gauchos' misuse of navigable rivers: "El

Nor can we ignore the Group's historical indifference or ignorance: it appears that there is no mythology,<sup>26</sup> only taboos; no history; and almost no written word. The sole sheet of paper, a fragment from a science textbook, mentions the "great extinction" connected with the big bang without any further comment or explanation (Pinedo 2004, 47).

But what gave rise to that other extinction, the one that brought an end to the civilization that produced the apparatuses that litter the Plain? We know very little. One of the few clues lies in one of the Group's refrains: "Each is the owner of his own death."<sup>27</sup> Beyond the arbitrary aphoristic taboos that rule the Group, this saying is the only sign of an anterior ethics, a remnant of the pre-postapocalyptic life. In it we find expressed the notion of property ("owner") and a concept of individuality. It appears to be a translation of the foundational idea of liberalism, possessive individualism, to the postapocalyptic environment (see Macpherson 1962). In a world filled with nothing more than rusted metal and toxic water, life is the only thing of value over which a human being can exercise dominion. The cynicism represented by this saying—the sole attempt to articulate a philosophy of the Plain, based on the annulment of the human organism as an immaterial possession—is frightening, but in it we can read the vestiges of the concept of personal liberty drawn out to its ultimate consequences. In other words, Pinedo's postapocalyptic dystopia has its basis, just like Sarmiento's dystopian Pampas, in its contemporary moment. Pinedo's novel, with its fleeting wink to the current-day crisis that lies at the crossroads of the neoliberal order and the global ecological problem, complicates the traditional forms of conceiving the problematic; Pinedo does this by creating a vision that looks toward the final social and ecological results of an uninhibited neoliberal logic of unlimited property rights and radical market solutions (Harvey 2003).

If pollution and environmental degradation are externalities to global capital,<sup>28</sup> it is fitting that the inhabitants of Pinedo's *reductio ad absurdum* of ecological catastrophe lack any language or concept to refer to the process that created the contemporary situation on the Plain. Pollution is vexing to an economic order that takes the individual as its fundamental unit of analysis and calculation, because pollution flows and spreads in ways that do not respect political borders or the rational choices of atomized actors. Hence pollution—along with immigration,

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hijo de los aventureros españoles que colonizaron el país detesta la navegación y se considera como apriisionado en los estrechos límites del bote o de la lancha. Cuando un gran río le ataja el paso, se desnuda tranquilamente, apresta su caballo y lo endilga nadando a algún islote que se divisa a lo lejos; arribado a él, descansan caballo y caballero, y de islote en islote se complete al fin la travesía. De este modo, el favor más grande que la Providencia depara a un pueblo, el gaucho argentino lo desdeña, viendo en él más bien un obstáculo opuesta a sus movimientos, que el medio más poderoso de facilitarlos" (Sarmiento [1845] 1963, 61–62). Pinedo carries this attitude to its ultimate consequences: an Argentina in which, far from enjoying "el favor más grande que la Providencia depara a un pueblo," rivers carry the promise of a quick and painful death.

26. With the exception of the Trec; see later in this article.

27. "Como decía el dicho: 'Cada uno es dueño de su muerte'" (Pinedo 2004, 63).

28. In economics, an "externality" names some kind of cost or benefit that a competitive market cannot immediately account for; environmental degradation is the classic example of a negative externality. In practical terms, this means that, for instance, the market price of fossil fuels does not reflect the long-term ecological costs of its use.

disease, and resource distribution—is a major stumbling block for neoliberal institutions of global governance: these problems cannot be thought in a properly global fashion within a framework that privileges possessive individuals and unregulated trade.

It is clear that the world that immediately preceded the Plain's catastrophic present failed to adequately address the perils of global ecological disaster. Thus, ecology as such no longer exists in Plop's universe. This, perhaps, is the most reasonable explanation for the total lack of consciousness among the characters regarding the event that created their nightmare. Nature has deteriorated to such an extent that the very concept of an environment has been reduced to one more external element against which the atomized individuals of the Group must struggle. In a literary inversion, Pinedo converts neoliberalism's most intractable externalities into a literal, purely negative, purely hostile environment. Pollution, then, is no longer something to be either denied or managed; rather, it is the dirty fabric of Plop's social existence. Life for Plop may be nasty, brutish, and short, but his is definitively not a state of nature: nature itself has ceased to exist.

Even so, the text does present two alternative social visions, even if only to dismantle each one systematically. The first is the myth of the Tree, a kind of minimalist mythology, a skeletal myth based around a tree (an uncommon thing on the Plain); the Guardians, who care for it and defend it; and the pilgrims who come to contemplate it. Structurally, the chapter on the Tree is one of the richest descriptions in the entire novel. In comparison to the other sections, the details about the Tree—the pure, uncontaminated mud that surrounds it, and the nearby gallows (so that no desperate soul hangs himself from the sacred Tree's delicate branches)—appear almost excessive (see Pinedo 2004, 68). It is a quasi-peaceful moment, until the revelation of the frequent battles between various groups during which blood soaks the mud. But this bitter detail cannot undermine the tree's inspirational weight to the Group. Plop's companions draw it in the dirt; they describe it—that is, it could be the gestation of an art or a literature of the Plain. Yet even if other members of the Group show the beginning stirrings of a new aesthetic consciousness, Plop cannot—because of either ignorance or stubbornness—imagine the Tree. He remains steadfastly excluded from any possible hope or beauty.

The Tree does not threaten Plop's power, for he simply ignores it. When a stranger arrives claiming to be the Messiah, however, Plop cannot afford the luxury of ignorance. The key question to be asked is, obviously, what can a Messiah offer after the apocalypse? According to Plop, not much. The novel sets up the confrontation as a challenge to Plop's dominance. As one would expect, the Messiah preaches about a promised land. His followers—who quickly grow in number—totally reject the Group's life. For Plop, the Plain allows no possibility for hope or rejection, no space for mythology: the Messiah's message is simply unthinkable. It goes against the Plain consensus and is thus intolerable.

Plop recognizes that a consensus occupies a weak position when faced with mythology; accordingly, his only option is to destroy the myth. Once resolved in his decision, the leader transposes the imminent confrontation with the Messiah from a metaphorical level to a material level. In a tribute to the literalness that runs

throughout the entire text, Plop tricks the Messiah. In a supremely rhetorical gesture, the visitor states that he would give his right hand to arrive to the "Healthy Land" (*Tierra Sana*).<sup>29</sup> Plop, with an efficiency that would impress a fundamentalist, takes charge: "The following morning, a pole with a right hand stuck on the point appeared in the middle of the Plaza."<sup>30</sup> In the aftermath, the Messiah simply disappears, neither martyr nor guide. He is not mentioned again.

The primary reason behind the so-called Messiah's unremarkable departure has to do with the vacuity of the concept of judgment in Pinedo's postapocalyptic world. Apocalyptic narratives are, of course, thoroughly tied to an act of judgment; Judgment Day and Revelation are nearly synonymous in the contemporary lexicon. Certain popular postapocalyptic narratives carry this preoccupation with judgment into the world of the postapocalypse. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* is a perfect example of this tendency (a tendency that, it should be clear, Pinedo rejects). *The Road*, McCarthy's novel published in 2006, tells the story of a father and child who rather aimlessly navigate an ash-strewn postapocalyptic wasteland. The other human beings they encounter are either treacherous or simply savage, and the child's constant inquiry into the moral nature of themselves and the others ("Are we the good guys? Are they good guys like us?") highlights the postcatastrophic reduction of morality to the simplest Manichaean binary. Yet even that binary—good guys and bad guys—carries too much of a pre-postapocalyptic connotation for Pinedo. In an apocalypse, judgment both moral and theological distinguishes the damned from the saved; in Pinedo's world, even *The Road's* simplistic division is too much. There are neither damned nor saved in *Plop*; there are only survivors. Amoral, postethical—we could name that world many things. Indeed, the Plain's postethical landscape may represent one more element of Pinedo's neoliberal *reductio ad absurdum*. After the absolute end of ideology, when "each man is the owner of his own death," survival itself becomes the only recognizable criterion for judgment.

Liberal utopia degenerates into postapocalyptic dystopia. Yet this shift should not be too surprising for readers of nineteenth-century utopias and twentieth-century dystopias. Between the two modes lies little more than a change of perspective. If we leave aside technology, the reader can ask, what are the material differences between a world such as More's *Utopia* or Bellamy's Boston in *Looking Backwards*, on the one hand, and Orwell's Big Brother nightmare, on the other hand? The majority of utopian texts take Plato's *Republic* as a model: control of the masses, be it by supposedly passive means as More and Bellamy propose (although these utopias exert their own violence and coercion), or by intrusive means such as brainwashing, propaganda, and total surveillance. No matter how it is presented, these are two sides of the same coin: a social vision directed by a philosopher-king.

But Pinedo does something different. Pinedo directs himself toward the post-

29. The wordplay is obvious—with the bankruptcy of religion and the spiritual notion of sainthood (*tierra santa*, or "holy land"), the Messiah responds to a much more corporeal demand: health (*sanidad*).

30. "A la mañana siguiente, en medio de la Plaza apareció un palo con una mano derecha clavada en la punta" (Pinedo 2004, 103).

apocalypse. Postapocalyptic narratives, even though they are marginal within the already-marginal world of science fiction, have always attracted authors because, in the words of one writer, “it allows us to start from degree zero, to wipe the slate clean and see what the world could have been if we knew then what we know now” (Adams 2004). These words direct us straight back to Plato. In the *Republic*, Plato states:

The philosopher-kings would take the city and the characters of human beings as their sketching slate, but first they'd wipe it clean—which isn't at all an easy thing to do. And you should know that this is the plain difference between the philosopher-kings and other rulers, namely, that they refuse to take either an individual or a city in hand or to write laws, unless they receive a clean slate or are allowed to clean it themselves. (*Republic*, 501a)<sup>31</sup>

Pinedo does not take advantage of the clean slate in the way foreseen by Plato. Pinedo does something much more cryptic: he attempts to wipe clean language itself. That is to say, he narrates the postapocalypse. Of course, his task is an impossible one, but he comes remarkably close to achieving this goal. Yet something pulsates through this stripped-down, violently transparent language. That nagging thing behind the crisp, frightening descriptions is history itself: that which can never be wiped completely clean. In self-defense, the Plain's history has wrapped itself tightly to protect its truth from the harsh environment. It appears as a fetishized seed, waiting out the toxic muck to once again flourish at some future moment. That particular seed, in Pinedo's case, happens to be a sheet of paper, the fragment of text that narrates the “great extinction.” The old woman who adopted Plop after his mother's death carried that sheet of paper with her, but hidden. Old Goro, as she is called, takes out the sheet of paper—the sole remaining trace of a literate culture—only once, at a festival, where she reads it aloud to the illiterate Group. Before her death, she passes on both the fragment itself and the gift of literacy. Plop uses both to consolidate his power; the sheet, which he keeps guarded and out of view, becomes the seal of Plop's ascent.

Literacy and history become Plop's secrets. No truly clean slate, Plop's truth hibernates. The Group's collective memory is dirty, clouded—in a word, mud-died. The final scene of Plop's slow death beneath successive scoops of slop could be read as the entombment of the last remaining scrap of history, but perhaps it is otherwise. Throughout the protagonist's life, he has metaphorically dug his own grave. Now, as he finds himself buried under the successive memories from his brutal life, he may finally escape the contaminated mud. The question becomes, is it possible to get beyond the toxic ahistoricity of the *tabula rasa*? Can the roots of history penetrate the layers of muck of the ages? Or is it rather that history,

31. Michel de Certeau also weighs in on the blank page in his reflections on the scriptural economy. After he affirms the blank page as the site where the subject confronts and/or dominates the object (thus recapitulating Descartes), he continues: “In other terms, on the blank page, an itinerant, progressive, and regulated practice—a ‘walk’—composes the artefact of another ‘world’ that is not received but rather made. The model of a productive reason is written on the nowhere of the paper. In many different forms, this text constructed on a proper space is the fundamental and generalized utopia of the modern West” (Certeau 1984, 134–135). Like many of his contemporaries, Certeau stops short of definitively linking the “generalized utopia of the modern West” and the Spanish conquest of the Americas.

buried along with Plop's body and the final remaining trace of literary, has simply exhausted itself? Dormancy rather than extinction: Plop's seed lies fallow in history's sediment.

#### RUIN PILED ATOP RUIN

In *Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative*, Roberto González Echevarría (2000) offers the ambiguous concept of the archive as the key figure for understanding Latin American literature. The archive, most clearly represented by the scribe Melquíades's room in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, is metaphorically constructed on top of the clearing left by Alejo Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos*. For Echevarría, Carpentier's novel is crucial both as a challenge to the impulse to erase the past and/or clear the slate,<sup>32</sup> and the foundation of the space—precisely a clearing—from which it will be possible to narrate the archive.<sup>33</sup>

Pinedo's postapocalyptic *Plop* is strongly opposed to the paradoxical tendency to at once erase and/or clear and found, because in its status as a postapocalyptic novel, it deals with remains. *Plop* breaks Echevarría's causal chain: instead of founding, it is concerned with continuity. Like Walter Benjamin's (2003) angel of history, *Plop* moves toward the future with its back turned, straining to catch a glimpse of the receding past. Pinedo fundamentally resists the foundational command. In fact, the text highlights the destructive possibilities implicit in any clearing impulse. Far from creating a "clearing in the jungle" from which it will be possible to construct a Latin American narrative, Pinedo's postapocalyptic novel shows us that the clearing itself is a wasteland.

This postapocalyptic (and post-2001) novel does not pretend to erase anything; it neither searches for nor attempts to make a clearing in the jungle. On the contrary, it pauses to contemplate the actual wastelands, and in that space it finds nothing more than the accumulated muck of an entire history. *Plop* would like to break with the present—is there a more decisive break than an apocalypse?—but that is an absolute impossibility.

What Pinedo's compact and strange novel wagers is that its moment of composition is already marked by a postapocalyptic language. *Plop* agrees with *Facundo* that barbarism is triumphant, yet the two texts couldn't disagree more as to the identity of the barbarians. Pinedo's novel accomplishes the frightening task of creating a *truly* postapocalyptic language that is somehow intelligible to his contemporary audience. This leaves the reader wondering, "Is Pinedo's

32. "Thus *Los pasos perdidos* dismantles the central enabling delusion of Latin American writing: the notion that in the New World a new start can be made, unfettered by history. . . . For instead of being relieved of history's freight, the narrator-protagonist discovers that he is burdened by the memory of the repeated attempts to discover or found the newness of the New World" (González Echevarría 1998, 4).

33. "His own story is the only one that he can authenticate, that is, his story about looking for stories, telling past stories, repeating their form. . . . But in the writing of the novel a clearing has been reached, a metafictional space, a razing that becomes a starting point for the new Latin American narrative; the clearing for the building of Comala, Macondo, Coronel Vallejos, for the founding of the imaginary city containing all previous forms of Latin American narrative as well as the origins of the novel; a space for the Archive" (González Echevarría 1998, 17).

postcatastrophic language the true culmination of the American idiom?" If the answer is affirmative, then the conclusion is inevitable: *Plop* is not post-anything but rather the contemporary name of the muck of the present.

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