

THE STAIN OF THE TERRITORY

IVÁN DE LA NUEZ

The moment that I hear anyone propose to speak—or to act—on behalf of Latin America alarm bells go off in my head and, if possible, I run for cover. Especially now, when with the commemoration of the bicentennial of independence exaltation has become a mandatory item on the ceremonial agenda. The moment that I hear anyone propose to speak—or to act—on behalf of Latin America, I also know that it's time to reach for the equalizer, time to run a filter over the rhetoric that invariably accompanies such an undertaking, with its hodgepodge of pretexts, its overblown ontology, and its dose—or overdose—of messianism, those combustible elements of the fuel that has fed all sorts of experiments, oligarchic and liberal, Marxist and neo-liberal, tyrannical and parliamentary, guerrilla and paramilitary, mythological and apocalyptic (Atlantis is rarely far away). Almost every time, the elements have been processed through the filter of populism, a suitable style for governments regardless of ideology (or even in the absence of any ideology at all).

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When the time comes to take precautions, run for cover, and adjust the dial, it's not just political projects that have to be taken into account. Cultural models haven't lagged behind at the hour of raising the temples. The Baroque and the Boom, Modernism and Anthropophagy, Ariel and Caliban, Postmodernism and Utopia: it's not that one ought to fight tooth and nail to deny the contributions, some of them formidable, of these currents. (Even tourist clichés have their place.) But one does need to be on guard against the demonstrable fact that what we construe as Latin America, in any of its guises, has persisted in a language of euphemisms and a pretended unity that have often done little more than reproduce colonial gestures. When all is said and done, what we construe as "Latin American" remains a *narrative*—which doesn't imply that that it is necessarily fiction. Whether laid out on the map sketched by Jorge Luis Borges or in what Carlos Fuentes has designated as "the territory of La Mancha," both of which are located within the region, a first draft, a pre-judgment—a prejudice—has taken prece-

dence, and the model has absorbed its successors, a fact which may go a long way towards explaining the origin of many of our disappointments. This abduction has not been the exclusive doing of natives. The history of external “appropriations” is a long one, stretching from the times of the Conquest to the present-day. When the driving force behind the taking is, let us say, the zeal of a reckless curator, then the pilferage becomes an *express* pilferage. In 1992, in commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the conquest and/or colonization of America, other landmarks were celebrated. “The meeting of cultures,” “the double discovery” —there were various euphemisms, various pretexts, various summonses. Nevertheless, thanks to the critical energies released by that milestone—and by the uncertainty of a universe in which even the “end of history” itself was being invoked—the position of Latin America in the world ceased to resemble a contest between an uncritical “reproduction” on the one hand and a hypercritical “confrontation” on the other. It was a healthy exercise, disposing of the old binary theses, the ones that reaffirmed Latin American identity via a process of negation (“we are everything our enemy is not”), afflicted by the symptoms of what Nelly Richard defined as “complicated periphery syndrome” and what Robert Schwartz for his part called “nationalism by extraction.” Even in regard to the United States, for all its history of conflicts and invasions, Latin America was now no longer seen only from the perspective of the North-South divide. Today it’s no longer possible to deny the fact that the Latin American presence north of El Paso represents a re-conquest whose consequences are as yet impossible to predict. Latin America thus brought different energies to the polemics surrounding identity and modernity, due to its position at the extreme edge of Western culture and its eccentric situation regarding it, its status as potential agent of peripheral vengeance, and the utopian possibilities it posed in opposition to the extreme rationalization of the modern world. At the highest point of euphoria, more than one observer predicted the end of Western culture, to be brought about by cultural eruptions from

Latin American—a kind of Francis Fukuyama in reverse (and with a taco in his hand). Not everything can be chalked up to the vicissitudes of history, thought, and the extraordinary lives of great men. In the construction of the paradigms that we labor under, we owe just as much to fictional characters who have also served as generators of the models that have made Latin America recognizable. Here we have them: the sleeper who awakes next to a dinosaur, in the story by Augusto Monterroso, and Beatriz Viterbo, in Jorge Luis Borges’s “The Aleph”; the title character of Gabriel García Márquez’s *The Autumn of the Patriarch* and Esteban the revolutionary in Alejo Carpentier’s *Explosion in a Cathedral*; Alvaro Mutis’s Maqroll the Lookout and Rómulo Gallegos’s doña Bárbara; Cirilo Villaverde’s Cecilia Valdés and Ruben Blades’s Pedro Navajas; Quino’s Mafalda and Werner Herzog’s Fitzcarraldo.

The dream and the misfortune of the continent have pooled together into these archetypes, which have at times turned into stereotypes.

The confluence of all worlds and the forerunner of the internet.

The eternal strongman so characteristic of these two hundred years and that narrative genre that is so uniquely Latin American: the novel of the *caudillo*. The enchantment and disenchantment with revolution.

The fugitive and the futurist. *Mestizaje*—the mixing of races—and violence. The *lumpen* emigrant and the enlightened European who seeks utopia in America, though not precisely to save the continent—as is often asserted—but rather to save himself.

In any case, it’s not always a good idea to look at things as they are refracted through reading glasses. As Edward Said held, “to literally apply what has been learned from books to reality is to run the risk of going crazy or ruining oneself.” This is so even in this Europe from which I write, a Europe where politics seems to be carried out not by war (Clausewitz), nor even by guerrilla activity (Che Guevara), but rather by aesthetics. Let us step away then, for the moment.

Latin America is also the enclave of the primary legacy bequeathed by many of these: violence. It’s therefore advisable to be very careful when

evaluating our state, economic, or political structures in light of facile theories. Consider for example the so-called “informal sector,” which is not as informal as its name would suggest (nor is the state entity to which it is contrasted particularly “formal”). The example of drug trafficking is a telling one. As we know, its effects fan out throughout politics, culture, and the economy. We already speak of “narcopolitics” (trafficking engrained in the institutional establishment); “narcoterrorism” (in which the supposedly “collateral” population begin to suffer the brunt of the war); and “narcoculture” (affecting the fine arts, music, and literature, not to mention the considerable impact on Hollywood). Paramilitaries and urban settlements that don’t fit into any readily definable sociological category, invisible migrations, new forms of nomadism—through practices like these, Latin America is redefining itself, albeit through discourses that don’t aspire to the pulpit.

Name-dropping tends to become boring and fallacious, to obscure more than it reveals. In the guise of clarification it merely bewilders. So I’ll mention just a few names—not random ones by any means but ones that could just as easily be replaced by others. I am thinking of recent work by Rodrigo Rey Rosa, Teresa Margolles, Yuri Herrera, Carlos Garaicoa, Pedro Vizcaíno, or José Antonio Hernández-Díez. These authors touch on issues of unusual magnitude, but they filter those concerns through stories that take place on a small stage and generally in a manner unique to their own setting. Youth gangs and an absence of state structure. Colonialism and post-colonialism. Revolution and counter-revolution. Violence as an end in itself. They face the facts of urban life as they find them, and contend with the dregs of the contemporary world. They take on repression and the morbid obsession with ruins. They confront the clichés about what is Latin American and, in consequence, reckon with the theme park to which the “great causes” have been reduced. They propose neither a “literary beyond” nor a “metaphorical here-and-now” to invoke other and conceivably loftier histories. They address, if you will, an amoral intensity that, nonetheless,

entails the existence of a kind of ethic. When Pedro Vizcaíno addresses youth gang violence, and the rituals and gestures that govern that underworld, he is referring in large part to a system of communication and consumption, of kinship and of signs. A system that has its own market, fashion, cartography, its own set of signals that have taken on the dimensions of language. More than just a narrative about youth violence, his graffiti and paintings can be understood as the archive of a tool kit, the record of a war party with all the gear that a gang member employs: cell phone, gun, sneakers, everything he needs to be ready for action. This closeness does not entail a celebration of the gang member. On the contrary, there is much discomfort in the way this “joyful” banality of evil is regarded.

When Carlos Garaicoa tallies the physical consequences of utopias, he brings us face to face us with the devastating consequences that have befallen some of our dreams. He establishes a contrast between the “no such place” of our projects and the places that really exist—the ruins of those projects. Ruins whose unfolding has transformed them into ritual sites, ceremonies of honor. What we are left with is not the utopias—so costly for Latin America—that stand wreathed under a redemptive halo; instead we have the decay products of the spaces that those utopias occupied. The more they are portrayed as paradigms for the future, Garaicoa warns, the more rooted they in the present. What we have is no longer Camanella’s *La ciudad del sol* (The City of the Sun), nor Tatlin’s spiral, nor those Italian futurist works that were intended for tomorrow. What we have instead, to put it bluntly, are places where torture has not been absent.

The language of Yuri Herrera’s novels isn’t always comprehensible to the reader. The documents that Rodrigo Rey Rosa employs in *El material humano* (The Human Material), in an effort to try fathom violence, aren’t always comprehensible either. The fact is that some evidence is difficult to translate into other cultures. For all of that, some of them do manage to remain “legible,” and in that lies their greatness.

In the end, we're talking about the artists and writers of a "civil war." But in contrast, for example, to the situation in which Spanish authors find themselves, our civil war isn't rooted somewhere safely in a past era. The "civil war" that is rocking Latin America today—often under the guise of ordinary crime—is literally a war between civilians.

In *Posdata* (The Other Mexico), Octavio Paz employed the metaphor of the pyramid to address the sacrificial Mexico that underlay the modern nation. The manner in which he explained the massacre of Tlatelolco, in that distant "beyond" of 1968, needs to be borne carefully in mind. Sometimes I wonder whether we aren't living in the era of that inverted pyramid, and whether this sacrificial violence hasn't buried our modern aspirations, leaving them, perhaps, as only an encumbrance to the extreme experience of the Latin America that we want to conceive, define, and —why not?— even improve on.

It's out of this inverted pyramid that different tales spring, from other authors, ones who manage to illuminate the questions I have posed precisely by refusing to spin out luminous theories. Authors who, under the territory of the La Mancha of *Don Quixote*, succeed in exposing *la manchaba*—the stain—of the territory, without holding anything back.