

# Images of novels on the Mexican revolution: Hippolytus' mirror

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## Preamble

### *Santa: The flesh is full of sorrow*

The history of the twentieth century Mexican novel begins with the publication of *Santa*, by Federico Gamboa, in 1902. This is the first genuinely modern novel written in Mexico, a paradigm of Mexican naturalism, an inventory of the taboos and fantasies of the Porfirian era, a portrait of Mexico City and its luxurious brothels; but it is, above all, the debut of one of the first truly vital characters in Mexican literature.

Because in spite of the evident mark of Emile Zola's *Nana* on Gamboa's novel, and notwithstanding the influence of the impressionistic prose of Flaubert, Gamboa was able to create a profoundly believable, real, almost tangible character: a woman of fatal curves and unyielding innocence, whose perversion consists of nothing more than the search for salvation through sin.

*Santa* is a novel which opened the universe of private life to Mexican literature. This disclosure is also a disclosure of the body, of desire and sexuality. It is no coincidence that the extended metaphor which Gamboa employs in the novel, its recurrent theme, is that of the flesh: flesh for sacrifice, ritual flesh, prostituted flesh. It is here that the new textual space

comes into play; the metaphoric irruption of private life into the public arena, the predominance of lowness over more elevated ideals, appear in Santa's torn flesh.

A reversal of values: the underworld is enthroned and becomes the new décor of the Mexican novel. In his seminal work *Los bajos fondos* (The underworld), Sergio González Rodríguez explores the dialectic of low and high, while discovering the aesthetics of marginality in Mexican literature. Marginality is what has given meaning to Mexican literature: marginal desire, social marginality, and also the margination of elitism.

However, as I mentioned above, Gamboa was very much influenced by Flaubert's style and the themes of Zola. Despite the novel's setting—in Mexico City—and the numerous innovations which it introduced into Mexican literature, *Santa* is still very much a French work, too literary and too artificial.

The objections I have raised regarding Gamboa's novel notwithstanding, there is a character in *Santa* who deserves greater attention: Hippolytus, the blind piano player in the brothel where Santa works. Eternally in love with the heroine (an obvious projection of the author) and the archetype of the scorned lover, he is also the predecessor of Agustín Lara (again, it is no coincidence that Lara played

Hippolytus in one of the film versions of *Santa*); this character is an allegory of Mexican literature, whose modernism still isn't completely defined. He is a blind man with character.

When Santa is dying of cervical cancer, she arrives at Hippolytus' house, where she finds a mysterious mirror. Here the reader might ask: What use would a blind man have for a mirror? The answer, perhaps, is not to see himself, but so that others might see him from the outside.

Not only does the mirror reflect the invisible face of a blind man in love with a prostitute, but also the undefined form of Mexicans at the turn of the century who did not yet know who they were or what they looked like.

## Overture

### *Los de abajo* (The underdogs): Living to die

Fourteen years later, Hippolytus' mirror is broken. Hitherto unheard-of characters begin to appear in Mexican novels, spawned by exploitation and barbarity. The downtrodden explode onto the scene as the new marginals, the disinherited: beings without archetypes, without models in other national literatures; profoundly Mexican characters who, like Hippolytus, search for a lost face.

If Federico Gamboa was a poet of the flesh who created the myths

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surrounding Porfirian prostitution, Mariano Azuela, with his novel *Los de abajo*, would be the Mexican Homer, the creator of what might be rightly termed the Mexican novel.

Without falling back on the Flaubertian or European legacy, Azuela created a new language and new characters for the Mexican novel. Without Azuela, the work of writers such as Martín Luis Guzmán, Agustín Yáñez, Juan Rulfo, and Carlos Fuentes, among others, would be unthinkable.

Azuela is the creator of twentieth century Mexican narrative writing. As Carlos Fuentes has said, *Los de abajo* is the ragged *Iliad*, the Mexican *Iliad*, the archetype of the modern Mexican novel.

The style of *Los de abajo* reflects a profound renovation. Written in 1916, during the military campaign of Francisco Villa, this novel introduces a new character in Mexican history: the disinherited peasant, exiled from his own land, who leaves his village to join the revolutionary struggle.

The novel is written in clean, fast-moving prose. It gets to the point. The spontaneity of this unadorned and unaffected style reminds one of the chronicles of the Conquest. Azuela's technique, on the other hand, is clearly up-to-date, a kind of primitive modernity. Images as fast as gunshots, short phrases interspersed like mortar shells: the dynamics of war.

If Santa provided a definitive end to the Porfirian era, Demetrio Macías, the hero of *Los de abajo*, who embodies the orphanhood of peasants at war, opens new horizons in Mexican literature. Just as Posada reinvented Mexican plastic arts from the ground up and supplied us with an equivalent to Goya, Azuela invented a new world for Mexican literature.

In *Los de abajo*, flesh appears again, as it did in *Santa*; but here, it is not the voluptuous flesh of a decadent prostitute, but the bleeding bodies of revolutionary guerrillas. Flesh bereft

of desire, a pure image of death and decomposition. Cannon fodder.

Phantasmagoric novel of the Mexican revolution, *Los de abajo* offers a very different view of literature. Azuela is a writer committed to and involved in what he lived through and observed. His fragmentary proposition is profoundly modern.

The novel is written in an almost cinematographic style, with isolated shots like a mosaic of Talavera tiles. Each frame is structured like a puzzle, in which the final image is the chaos of revolution, the social cataclysm, the change from one geological era to another. Hippolytus' mirror would never be the same again; new faces are reflected on its quicksilver surface.

To paraphrase José Vasconcelos, Demetrio Macías is the American Achilles, a warrior whose only goal is death. At the same time as Thomas Mann and Martin Heidegger, Azuela discovered the concept of existing to die. The revolutionary soldiers knew that they had been born to die and that the only open possibility in their stories would be the manner of their death.

It is no coincidence that Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* and Azuela's *Los de abajo* were written during the same period, both framed within the context of the First World War. *The Magic Mountain* narrates the tragic destiny of Hans Castorp and his existence-for-death in the same way that Azuela narrates Demetrio Macías' existence-for-death. Castorp and Macías were both expelled from their villages by the social explosions and the convulsions of war.

There is a scene in *Los de abajo* which merits a synopsis: Following the seizure of an hacienda belonging to the conservatives, Villa's soldiers enter one of the rooms in search of jewels and money. Not satisfied with this, they also let their horses into the house to sleep with them in the bedrooms and to join in the drunken celebration.

This scene bears a surprising resemblance to a sequence from

Sergei Eisenstein's film *October*, in which the Bolshevik revolutionaries burst into the czar's Winter Palace and fire their weapons into the rooms, amidst the luxurious furnishings. Like the muzhiks, or Russian peasants, the Mexican revolutionaries enter into combat with another world when they burst into the bedrooms of their oppressors.

Azuela is a discoverer of characters and situations. His universe is that of the epic. While *Santa* bears a certain similarity to *Madame Bovary* or *Nana*, *Los de abajo* can only be compared to certain national epics such as *El Cid* or *The Song of Roland*. *Santa* is a universe of decadence; *Los de abajo*, on the other hand, is a universe of creation, the life-giving soil of the Mexican and Latin American novel.

Azuela's characters join the revolution seeking death. They know nothing of political, social or ideological motivations; they get into the *bola* (brawl) because this fiesta of blood and death offers them the possibility of looking into their own faces, which could be either the faces of death or of redemption.

One of the fundamental successes of Azuela's novel lies in the fact that he never presents a political statement or historical design; he narrates from within the events and does not attempt to explain them. He immerses the reader in the world of pure epic.

The final image of *Los de abajo* is that of the hero, Demetrio Macías, already dead, pointing towards the future, like a statue. He reflects a new image in Hippolytus' mirror: the being who confronts death.

#### Andante

***¡Vámonos con Pancho Villa! (Let's go with Pancho Villa!): The alienness of barbarism***

Rafael F. Muñoz wrote *¡Vámonos con Pancho Villa!* in 1931. While also a product of the author's revolutionary experiences, this novel shows a very

different face of the revolution than the one Azuela had portrayed writing in the immediacy of events.

The formal central idea, more polished and better finished, of *¡Vámonos con Pancho Villa!* does not make it a better novel than *Los de abajo*. In fact, the premises of the two novels are similar: both evoke a group of men with ties to the land, expelled from their villages, who join a revolution which they do not understand, but which nevertheless fascinates them.

A new character appears in Mexican literature: Tiburcio Maya, a member of the rough brotherhood of the Lions of San Pablo. Unlike Demetrio Macías, who exudes warmth and affection, Tiburcio is a character beyond comprehension, the pure alienation and otherness of the warrior, capable of giving his life for his leader.

Muñoz' style is elegant, descriptive and slow. *¡Vámonos con Pancho Villa!* narrates the saga of Pancho Villa from his beginnings as a revolutionary leader and confirmed follower of the democratic movement of Francisco Madero, up to what was the first—and so far, only— invasion of American soil. Tiburcio Maya is the "other," whose psychological make-up remains hidden to us; the blind follower of Pancho Villa, who is capable of sacrificing everything for him.

In Muñoz' novel, the revolution is a game of chance; anyone can win. This is exemplified when, after taking the city of Zacatecas, the revolutionaries decide to play a game which we might call Mexican roulette.

One night, Tiburcio Maya and his friends attend the game; there are thirteen players present. The game is played sitting around a table; a pistol is cocked, the lights are turned off, and the gun is thrown in the air, leaving fate to decide who shall die when the loaded pistol falls on the table and fires. The most cowardly

will be the one to die. When Tiburcio and his friends join the game, they argue against the fallacy of saying that whoever is killed is the biggest coward. They argue with the other players until they are obliged to play. The game is played. The bullet wounds Tiburcio's best friend who, in order to prove that he is not the most cowardly, shoots himself in the temple with his own gun.

This is the other side of bravery, the other side of the will to die. Muñoz' characters not only look for death, as do those in Azuela's works, but they also desire it, much like the old prostitutes in *Santa*. For Azuela's characters, death was little more than a possibility, a contingency, a necessary evil. However, for the characters in Muñoz' novel, death is predestined.

The central scene of *¡Vámonos con Pancho Villa!* takes place when Tiburcio Maya, after having run away from Villa's troops, is married and has children. He meets his former leader outside the miserable shack where he has made his home. Fleeing from Venustiano Carranza's troops, Villa asks Tiburcio to rejoin his army. Having laid down his arms, Tiburcio has returned to his peasant origins and has lost the will to fight. He tells Villa that he cannot rejoin him now that he has a wife, a son and a daughter. Villa says he understands, but that he needs every man to fight against the Americans. After a brief exchange, Villa asks Tiburcio to introduce him to his family; Tiburcio gladly complies. Villa enters Tiburcio's home, and he kills the entire family; he then tells Tiburcio that he no longer has anything to stay behind for.

The crowning moment of alienation in the novel, when the revolution shows its true face, occurs when Tiburcio stands in front of his dead wife and children, showing no signs of a human reaction, which in this case would have been to rebel or seek revenge. He does none of this,

but irrationally follows his leader's orders and submits to him.

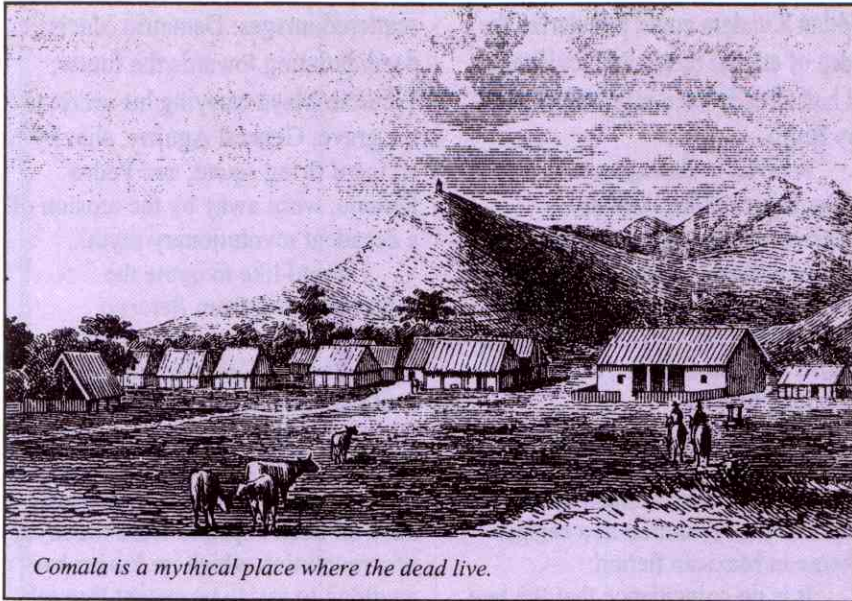
The finale of *¡Vámonos con Pancho Villa!* is another metaphor for the enigma of the revolution. Villa has been wounded in battle and is in hiding. Pershing's punitive expedition is closing in, and Tiburcio is captured as he goes in search of provisions. The Americans offer him money, but he—impassive—refuses. They ask him why he protects the man who executed his family, but Tiburcio remains silent. They torture him, but still he refuses to talk. He carries his silence and refusal to the grave. Tiburcio dies with his feet flayed, hanged from a tree by the bank of a river. The secret he carries to the grave is not that of Pancho Villa's whereabouts, but rather the deeper enigma of his own silence.

### Fugue

#### *La sombra del caudillo* (The shadow of the caudillo): The syntax of power

As the smoke of the revolution cleared, leaving behind the corpses of its popular leaders and of those who wrote the constitution, only one problem remained: who would oversee the future of the revolution? The problem was no longer an epic one, it became a political problem: to define the rules of the game under the new order. At this point, Martín Luis Guzmán's *La sombra del caudillo*, perhaps the most successful and well-defined of all Mexican political novels, comes on the scene.

Written in 1931, the same year as *¡Vámonos con Pancho Villa!*, Guzmán's novel deals with the problem of the succession to power. Two candidates are positioned to battle for the presidency: General Jiménez, the man designated by the caudillo of the revolution—a combination of political boss and patriarch of the revolution—and the other, General Aguirre, the choice of the warring factions in the chamber of deputies. The social forces generated by the revolution enter into conflict;



*Comala is a mythical place where the dead live.*

one of the generals will have to step aside, or die.

As in Muñoz' novel, Martín Luis Guzmán's deals with the problem of submission; but while in the former it was submission to a military leader, in the latter it is political submission. As von Clausewitz stated in his classical aphorism, politics is defined as the continuation of war by other means.

Guzmán's novel portrays a tragic hero whose fatal flaw of pride is, as in the tragedies of Shakespeare, the quest for power. General Aguirre does not seek the presidency. However, he is chosen by the warring factions and must therefore confront the caudillo of the revolution. As in France, where all of the original authors of the revolution died under the wheels of the juggernaut which they themselves had set in motion, so the petty revolutionary chiefs were devoured by the political monster they had created.

While General Aguirre is not as vital a character as those of the other novels I have mentioned, Guzmán constructs a dearly loved character who in many respects reminds us of Danton in the French revolution. Aguirre has a wife, a mistress and a lover, a taste for cognac, and, above all, he loves to stay up all night in

elegant saloons much like those depicted in *Santa*.

Jiménez, on the other hand, is the caudillo's servant, a kind of Robespierre: an absolutist ascetic, and an obsequious one. The caudillo's preference for Jiménez will ultimately bring about the downfall of Aguirre. Once designated as a candidate, he will have to eliminate his rival — permanently.

However, these characters are not Guzmán's greatest achievement. The main character of the novel is Axcaná, advisor to Aguirre, the candidate who will, in the end, be treacherously shot on the caudillo's instructions. Axcaná represents a new figure on this stage: an intellectual of power, a thinker, the Machiavelli which all power needs. Every regime requires a syntax; this is how intellectuals serve the state.

Guzmán's style is passionate and caustic. Each chapter in *La sombra del caudillo* is written in a different style and belongs to a different genre, so that the novel's structure seems to comprise several different novels. There are epic chapters, chapters which read like detective stories, and political chapters. Thus, Guzmán's novel is a profoundly multifaceted work in which different narrative forms intersect to form an all-encompassing whole.

Guzmán picks up the urban novel where *Santa* left off; he paints a picture of the revolution's new aristocracy, especially of their night life: from shady bar-rooms to their newfound taste for jai-alai. The novel introduces the detective story into Mexican fiction, but, above all, it is the first and best political novel ever written in Mexico. Novels such as José Revueltas' *Los errores* (The errors) or Héctor Aguilar Camín's *La guerra de Galio* (The Galio war) would have been unthinkable without the example set by Guzmán.

General Aguirre's death is symbolic; at one point, the caudillo says it all in a phrase: "get them before they get you" is the key to Mexican politics. They "get" General Aguirre on the highway to Toluca and they treacherously kill him at dawn. Before he is brought in front of a firing squad made up of inept soldiers, the caudillo's puppets, Axcaná, the narrator's alter ego, escapes and lives to tell the story.

### Finale

#### *Pedro Páramo: The curse of exile*

The last image of the Mexican revolution to be etched onto the mirror of blind Hippolytus, Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*, closes the cycle of revolution novels in Mexican literature.

From this point on, the Mexican revolution is presented as a myth: the myth of death. Comala is a mythical place where the dead live; it is the equivalent of the Greek Hades, or the ancient Mictlán of Aztec mythology.

Like Odysseus visiting the dead, Juan Preciado, the main character in *Pedro Páramo*, returns to the place of his birth. He, like Santa, Demetrio Macías, Tiburcio Maya, and General Aguirre—all dead—is an exile from the land of the living.

Much has been written about Rulfo's work; there are too many interpretations of *Pedro Páramo*. Nevertheless, one must point out that

with Rulfo, Mexican novels acquire new features.

However, the masterful conclusion of *Pedro Páramo* does not obey the rules of traditional fiction as *Santa* does, or as *Los de abajo* or *¡Vámonos con Pancho Villa!* adhered to the rules of epic narrative. Nor does it follow the development of the political novel as in *La sombra del caudillo*. Rulfo's novel follows the logic of myth and poetry.

Rulfo knew how to close the cycle: *Pedro Páramo* is not only the best novel ever written in Mexico, it is the beginning of modern Latin American fiction. Without Rulfo's groundbreaking effort, novels such as Gabriel García Márquez' *Cien años de soledad* (One hundred years of solitude), Mario Vargas Llosa's *La casa verde* (The green house), or Juan Carlos Onetti's *La vida breve* (The brief life), would simply have been impossible.

Comala is the place where we go after we have been expelled from this world. *Pedro Páramo* is a teetering stone statue of the revolution. A dead revolution. We are inhabitants of Comala, condemned to live out the cyclical myth of a past revolution. The aridness of Comala symbolizes the erosion of a myth which has turned to stone.

Since Rulfo, one can no longer continue the cycle, except in the language of poetry and myth. It is no coincidence that Carlos Fuentes used the metaphor of death in *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (The death of Artemio Cruz), or that more recently, Ignacio Solares, in his novel *Madero, el otro* (The other Madero), includes a dead man who communicates with the living.

Rulfo's style is unadorned like Azuela's, violent, like Muñoz', and profoundly political, like Guzmán's. Nevertheless, his greatest achievement lies in the cyclical structure of eternal return within which his characters are enclosed. Long before a writer like

Milan Kundera could popularize the idea of eternal return and revisitation, it had already been masterfully done by Rulfo.

A novel of dialogues in which the monologues of the dead are interwoven like signals emitted from a mythical world, a novel of impossible love, like *Santa*; a novel of erosion and the impossibility of redemption, *Pedro Páramo* endures, a scar on Mexican fiction.

The dead speak the language of poetry, which is the language of the future, of the abandonment of the myth of the revolution as a central theme in Mexican fiction.

It is no coincidence that the two central works of the first half of the twentieth century in Mexico are *Pedro Páramo* and Octavio Paz' *El laberinto de la soledad* (The labyrinth of solitude). Both deal with the problem of Mexican identity: Rulfo holds that we are children of a dead chieftain; for Octavio Paz, we are beings whose identity is the identity of death. Both write of the impossibility of return. Expelled from a lost paradise, we point on towards the future like Demetrio Macías, watching with irony as the statues of Tiburcio Maya, the caudillo, and Pedro Páramo begin to crumble.

Comala is our only territory; we inhabit the posthumous universe of *Pedro Páramo*. After the revolution, Mexican fiction had to strike out along new paths, seeking new languages and settings. Thanks to Rulfo, the Mexican novel opened up a new, unheard-of vein, toward myth and poetry.

#### Coda

Once the revolution was over, its scars healed, and the distant plumes of smoke cleansed from the horizon, we became again the distant Hippolytus, the blind pianist of *Santa*: blind men who see themselves in a broken mirror, searching for fragments of a imaginary identity. This identity remains etched in

scattered images: Demetrio Macías, dead, pointing towards the future; Tiburcio Maya carrying his secret to the grave; General Aguirre, shot by an inept firing squad, and Pedro Páramo, worn away by the erosion of a decadent revolutionary myth.

I would like to quote the following lines from *Retorno maléfico* (Pernicious return) by Ramón López Velarde, poet and contemporary of Azuela, Muñoz and Guzmán, who shared a deep sense of fraternity with Juan Rulfo. These lines exemplify the feeling that we have all been expelled from the myth of a revolution which no longer has anything to say to us except through the language of poetry and myth:

*It is best not to go back to the village,  
To that subverted Eden which is silent  
Under the mutilation of the machine-gun* ❧