

# The Mexico of Santa Anna, the seducer

**W**e haven't heard about you for some time. After you retired from politics did you decide to keep quiet?

Quiet? Yes and no. I write history, and you need quiet in order to write about sound and fury. But isn't writing a way of speaking? Yes and no, right?

**Could you be more explicit?**

With pleasure. I'm writing a long book which covers half a century: *País de un solo hombre: el México de Santa Anna* (One Man's Country: Santa Anna's Mexico). The first volume just came out: *La ronda de los contrarios* (The Opponents' Circle), which covers the period from 1794, when Santa Anna was born, to the invasion of Barradas in 1829, when Santa Anna became the most popular figure in Mexico. The next volume will be *La siesta de un fauno* (The Siesta of a Faun), which I'm writing now and which will cover the period from the Plan de Jalapa regime—the Alamán administration—up to the Texas War in 1836. Or it might go up to the Pastry War. The third volume, *El brillo de la ausencia* (The Splendor of Absence), will deal with the stage beginning in 1836 (or 1839) and ending in 1854 with the Revolution of Ayutla. That will be the longest one.

**Why write about Santa Anna?**

Why not?

**Because it would seem there are more uplifting figures and topics.**

I like the reference to uplifting themes. It takes me right back to Plutarch, one of the most thought-provoking things I read in my youth.

**And so?**

Just for that reason. Because, *à rebours*, Santa Anna will lead me by the hand to the vital ethical contents of politics, which are so important.

**Ethical contents of politics through Santa Anna? In Mexico? Well, this is beginning to get interesting.**

**Would you like to elaborate on that paradox?**

Certainly. I say Santa Anna is not immoral, but so absolutely amoral that with his actions he reveals to us, to begin with, the indispensable need for moral limits to any political action. Without those limits it seems inevitable that there will be disorientation and, consequently, the loss

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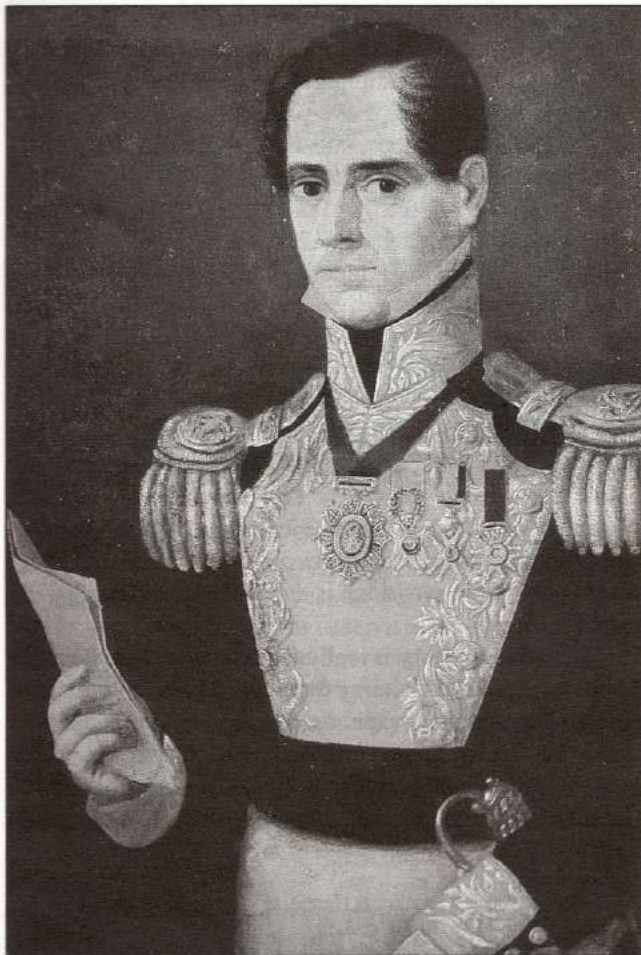
of the long-term goals that must characterize politics. In the long run, navigating without a compass leads to shipwreck. Morality, however, marks out the path; it shows the path. **You said "to begin with." Let's go more into depth.**

All right. Because then we would have to talk about other points: about juridical principles, the country's geography, history and culture, its regions and towns, its

small communities. But all of that began anew with independence. Moreover, Santa Anna was quite simply unaware of it all. And so he acted so freely. With no limits. Now I think that, through his behavior, Santa Anna shows Mexicans what can be done and what is impossible. Naturally you cannot act as Santa Anna did without running the risks that he ran both in individual and collective terms.

**And nevertheless...**

That's right. His "style" has turned into a sort of school. Why is that? That is precisely what led me to work on this book. The idea that Mexican politics is impregnated, bespattered, with Santa Annaism. Perhaps this is due to the knowledge of the figure and the era being not just partial but absolutely superficial, anecdotal, so to speak. And as is well known, sometimes a superficial knowledge of something is worse than total ignorance. In any case, Santa Anna was so successful after the capitulation of Barradas that this image of self-realization and plenitude which Mexico was so badly in need of, together with lack of knowledge on what happened



Antonio López de Santa Anna, oil on canvas, anonymous artist.

afterwards (which became a subject for specialists and experts), that the myth of the providential man remained like an invisible visitor, a ghost, creeping around the corners of the national house. Here and there it can still be found, moving around, expropriating, substituting for politics, like in the period before the foundation of the state.

**Do we know Santa Anna better?**

We think we know him. Rather, we know him anecdotally. For example, we know about his love of gambling. Santa Anna spent long periods of time in San Agustín de las Cuevas, in public view, gambling. He adored cock-fights. At other times he gambled in private, on his haciendas —at Manga de Clavo or El Encero. He was, in the words of that *corrido* about "Juan Charrasqueado,"<sup>1</sup> a lover, a fighter and a gambler. In other words, really a national symbol. But what is the meaning of this angle, which was so important in the personality of such a powerful man —the *mandamás* (boss)— of Mexican politics for almost thirty years? I think that in my book I've started to take a look at that aspect.

**Did Santa Anna think of politics as a game?**

Not just politics. Politics is part of life. Santa Anna played with everything: cards, money, parties, women, ideas, the country itself. In the beginning he had a huge fortune, in all senses of the word. Later... Santa Anna played, pretended, acted. There was, or there almost was, a different Santa Anna for each person he spoke to. I remember the remarkable portrait —portraits would be a better way of saying it— that the Marquesa Calderón de la Barca did of him. Despite the historical reservations the Marquesa puts forward, this was a romantic, *blasé*, pallid character, who had retired to his hacienda to think about the men and the things of Mexico, almost like a philosopher.

It seems like a sketch by Chasseriaux (one of Ingres' disciples). And I'm talking about one of the most intelligent women who has written about this country. She's dazzled from the beginning:

In a little while entered Santa Anna himself; a gentlemanly, good-looking, quietly-dressed, rather melancholy-looking person, with one leg, apparently somewhat of an invalid, and to us the most interesting person in the group. He has sallow complexion, fine dark eyes, soft and penetrating, and an interesting expression of face.

Since her feminine sensibilities had been awakened, perhaps too much so, and she let Fanny talk too much, Madame Calderón must intervene. However, the duet is inevitable:

Knowing nothing of his past history, one would have said a philosopher, living in dignified retirement —one who

<sup>1</sup> A *corrido* is a popular Mexican ballad. Juan Charrasqueado translates roughly as "Juan Who's Been Stabbed." (Editor's note.)

had tried the world, and found that all was vanity— one who had suffered ingratitude, and who, if he were ever persuaded to emerge from his retreat, would only do so, Cincinnatus-like, to benefit his country.

The Marquesa Calderón de la Barca finally prevails:

It is strange, how frequently this expression of philosophic resignation, of placid sadness, is to be remarked on the countenances of the deepest, most ambitious, and most designing men.

Is the author of these lines, in which a change of key is attempted, the Marquesa or Fanny?

Calderón gave him a letter from the Queen, written under the supposition of his being still President, with which he seemed much pleased, but merely made the innocent observation, "How very well the Queen writes!"

I ask the question since the observation, put into the general's mouth, is anything but innocent. The portrait reaches its high point:

Otherwise, he made himself very agreeable, spoke a great deal of the United States, and of the persons he had known there, and in his manners was quiet and gentlemanlike, and altogether a more polished hero than I had expected to see.

Once again the lady Calderón feels she must seek a balance, this time through the *casual*, familiar knowledge of history, and she even "risks" making a prophecy:

To judge from the past, he will not long remain in his present state of inaction, besides having within him, according to Zavala, "a principle of action forever impelling him forward."

I would not like to impute anything more than the observant sensitivity of Frances Erskine Inglis to the following paragraph:

En attendant, breakfast was announced. The Señora de Santa Anna led me in.... The breakfast was very handsome... served in white and gold French porcelain.... After breakfast, the Señora having despatched for her cigar-case, which was gold, with a diamond latch, offered me a cigar, which I having declined, she lighted her own, a little paper "cigarito," and the gentlemen followed her good example.

Although I would love to, I can't continue to read endless quotations from the spiritual sister of Charlotte and Emily Brontë, but allow me this last (very English) observation, which returns the Marquesa Calderón de la Barca to the strictest neutrality, thereby concluding her portrait:

We then proceeded to look at the out-houses and offices; at the General's favourite war-horse, an old white charger, probably a sincerer philosopher than his master; at several game-cocks, kept with especial care, cock-fighting being a favourite recreation of Santa Anna's; and at his litera, which is handsome and comfortable....

(*Life in Mexico*. Letter the fifth.)

This being said, Santa Anna is the man of a thousand faces—the man with the most faces in Mexican politics. Faces? Most faces? Masks.<sup>2</sup>

**Player,<sup>3</sup> actor...**

Absolutely. An actor gambles when he acts. The more of an actor I am, the more I gamble. In the final analysis, who is an actor? Everyone and no one. He only has a presence (and existence) on the stage. Now, if you corner me, asking me "Is Santa Anna a good actor?", then I have to answer honestly: yes and no. I have to show the nuances. Santa Anna seeks to be a player, on the stage and at the cock-fights, but in reality he is not a good player. On the stage he plays various roles, he acts, but at bottom he's always the same: a character who does not look for himself in the game of playing, who is too tied up in the part he's acting and, at the same time, always wants to play the role for which he feels himself predestined. It seems to me that an actor needs to show that he acts. He needs to distinguish himself from life. Not to be so "natural" that he winds up merging himself into his role. He always has to show that he is an actor on stage, that today he is playing this part and tomorrow another one. But he cannot, or rather, must not be perfect. That is where his mastery of the art lies. Santa Anna plays at many roles but always wants to be Macbeth. So he cheats. Like in gambling, he always has cards up his sleeve. He doesn't think it over, he doesn't take risks. He takes the point out of the game, he doesn't walk the tightrope unless there's a net underneath. And when he fences he files down the tip of the sword, he turns it into a prop sword and then it's not a duel, a challenge, but an exhibition. He only does things "as if," he fakes. He's a phony, a swindler. In short, Santa Anna is an actor, but not a good one. He's not a perfect actor.

**And so?**

So I go back to politics in order to conclude, for the time being, recalling the paradox of one of the wisest men of all time in politics, the Baron de Montesquieu: "In politics, the lesser evil is best." I left unwritten another idea which has come out now in this interview. Santa Anna was a seducer. He seduced the Mexican society of his day. But what I don't leave unwritten is the goal of the book, its message.

To reclaim history is really to reclaim destiny. This book is a plea for reclaiming memory. A people without a past is a people which cannot understand its present and cannot choose its future.

The past is not to be feared. It should not be buried. Because if we try to do that, what happens is that the dead

<sup>2</sup> In Spanish this is a pun: *caras* (faces), *más caras* (most faces), *máscaras* (masks). (Editor's note.)

<sup>3</sup> The word used here is *jugador*, which in Spanish means both "player" and "gambler." (Editor's note.)

## Antonio López de Santa Anna (1794-1876)

Army officer and statesman who was the storm center of Mexico's politics during such events as the Texan revolt (1836) and the Mexican war (1846-48).

The son of a minor colonial official, Santa Anna served in the Spanish army and rose to the rank of captain. He fought on both sides of almost every issue of the day. In 1821 he supported Agustín de Iturbide and the war for Mexican independence, but in 1823 he helped overthrow Iturbide. In 1828 he backed Vicente Guerrero for president, only to help depose him later.

Santa Anna gained much prestige in 1829 when he fought against Spain's attempt to reconquer Mexico, and he became known as the Hero of Tampico. This surge of glory helped him gain the presidency in 1833 as a Federalist and opponent of the Roman Catholic church; in actuality, however, he established a centralized state. He remained in power until 1836, when he marched into Texas to quell a rebellion by U.S. settlers there. During the course of this punitive expedition, Texas declared its independence from Mexico (March 2). Santa Anna, after defeating Texan forces at the Alamo and Goliad, then moved eastward to the San Jacinto River, where he was defeated and captured by Sam Houston on April 21. He was sent to Washington, D.C. for an interview with President Andrew Jackson, who returned him to Mexico, where he was forced into retirement.

In 1838, when the French navy seized Veracruz and demanded an indemnity for injuries to French citizens in Mexico, Santa Anna led forces to Veracruz, only to shoot at the ships as they departed. He lost a leg in the skirmish. He gained enough prestige from this event to act as dictator from March to July 1839, while the president was away. Two years later he led a revolt and seized power, which he held until he was driven into exile in 1845.

When war against the United States broke out, Santa Anna contacted U.S. president James Polk, who arranged for a ship to take him to Mexico for the purpose of working for peace. Santa Anna took charge of the Mexican forces upon his return; but instead of acting for peace, he led his men against the United States until he was routed by U.S. forces under General Winfield Scott. Santa Anna again retired, moving to Jamaica in 1847 and to New Granada in 1853. Ten years later he sought U.S. support in an attempt to oust the emperor Maximilian, whom the French had placed on the Mexican throne; at the same time, he offered his services to Maximilian. Both proposals were refused. Two years before he died, poor and blind, Santa Anna was allowed to return to his country.

Santa Anna possessed a magnetic personality and real qualities of leadership, but his lack of principles, his pride, and his love of military glory and extravagance, coupled with a disregard for and incompetence in civil affairs, led Mexico into a series of disasters and himself into ill repute and tragedy.

Taken from *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1993, Vol. 10, p. 423.

walk among the living and we don't even realize it. And that's much worse. We must look them in the face, recognize them, and then, yes, we will be able to bury forever the dead who do not deserve to continue side by side with the living. And we can reclaim those who do deserve to, so they may help us choose the future.

Fate lies like a dead weight only on peoples which don't know where they come from and when they accept, fatalistically, that what has always happened must continue to happen.

To reclaim destiny is to reject the supposedly inescapable fate of fate itself. *One Man's Country* is an appeal to look straight into the mirror of our history, precisely in order to reveal its dark side and, only then, to be able to make its bright side our own.

As Frank Tannenbaum said, Santa Anna is "the evil genius of Mexican destiny." His ghost continues to haunt us each time the country loses another opportunity to assert its own will and to take on, as a nation of adults, the exercise of its free will.

*One Man's Country* is a long book and the first in a series of three, the rest of which will also be long. I would like to think that the weight of this first "brick" won't prevent you from trying to read it. Because I am sure that, if you decide to go beyond the first few pages, you will begin to be caught in the web of a seduction similar to Santa Anna's seduction of the society of his day, the same one which caught me in its web, more and more, as I delved into the vicissitudes of our first attempts to shake off dependency, the fruition of a definitive discovery... the discovery of Mexico 