STORIES ON THE MARGINS OF HISTORY: SPANISH IMMIGRANTS AND THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION

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The land reforms begun in mid-nineteenth-century Mexico with the passing of the Ley Lerdo intensified during Porfirian Mexico (1876-1911), tore at the fabric of rural life and ultimately led to the Revolution of 1910. The dislocation which began by the expropriation of church and indigenous lands by the Reforma Laws became worse with the colonizations of 1875, 1883 and 1894. Huge extensions of land were made available to big landowners and in 1894 the amount of farm land that could be possessed became limitless. The properties of small farmers who did not have ownership titles were also seized (González 971). Although John Womack Jr. brought to light the situation of the displaced peasants of the state of Morelos in his classic *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution (1968),* sometimes the winners and losers got mixed up in this period and there were more losers than have been accounted for. The inadvertent victims of Díaz's policies were not only uprooted indigenous communities but also the Europeans who had been invited to modernize Mexico. Unaware of the unpopularity of Porfirian immigration policies and of the widespread social discontent in the country, these foreigners became the targets of popular anger and, like many peasants, suffered displacement as a result of the Revolution.

The historian Enrique Krauze has commented on the predominantly nineteenth-century liberal slant in Mexican historiography which, as opposed to the conservative vision of a Europeanized Mexico, puts forward a 'national' history with its own heroes and villains.[1] In this scheme of things the history of

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[1] "En el infierno seguirían purgando su culpa eterna los 'traidores', los 'vendepatrias', los 'mochos', los 'cangrejos', los 'ilusos', los 'reaccionarios', los 'malos mexicanos'" (Krauze 328).

expatriate foreigners who migrate to Mexico in the latter half of the nineteenth century would have to find a place in subaltern history or a "history from below" which relies on first person accounts, diaries and letters. Felicitously, this kind of historical writing, predicated more on narrative than on the political figures and events that characterize traditional historiography, is more conducive to a subtler understanding of historical processes than straightforward explanations. As Paul Ricoeur says in *Time and Narrative (1988)*: "The history of victims is not the history of the vanquished because the latter were also candidates for domination but failed. Victimization is the other side of history that no cunning of reason can ever justify" (Vol III 189). One of the arguments Ricoeur uses to defend the use of literary texts as standing in for history is the elimination of the difference between events attested to by historiography and others:

> To the extent that historians are implicated in the understanding and explanation of past events, an absolute event cannot be attested to by historical discourse. Understanding – even the understanding of another person in everyday life – is never a direct intuition but always a reconstruction. Understanding is always more than simple empathy. In short, no such thing as a *historical reality* exists ready made so that science merely has to reproduce it faithfully. (Vol. I 97)

This notion of history as reconstruction is amply illustrated by nineteenth-century Latin American novels or romances written by statesmen and historians as a didactic supplement for history,[2] a kind of *ideal history* belonging to the nation-building project. Doris Sommer has shown how even the Boom novels of the 1960's which eschewed lineal narrative are also fillers for a history that is seen to have failed and signify the return of a 'repressed historical tradition' (76).

In the case of the dispossesed Europeans in turn-of-the century Mexico, two contemporary Mexican novels, Cristina Rivera Garza's *Nadie me verá llorar* (1999) and Monica Lavín's Café cortado (2001), deal with the searing effect of Porfirian policies

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[2]"For the nineteenth-century writer/statesman there could be no clear epistemological distinction between science and art, narrative and fact, and consequently between ideal history and real events" (Sommer 76).

on the lives of Spanish immigrant families and their descendants. Similar narrative devices are used in both to uncover the stories of victims that historical narrative might have inhibitions about or might not have fully exploited. The narrators are transcribers who have found documents and a story so akin to the story of their own lives that they feel compelled to relate it.[3] The narrator does not invent the events, the story is a simulation or simulacrum of real events. It is thus one more representation of real events, rather like that of an historian.

The pejorative word in Spanish *extranjerizante* is often used to describe the Porfirio Díaz era. It doesn't imply cosmopolitanism but instead a slavish imitation of the exotic and the foreign, anything that came from European shores. Indeed France set the cultural tone of the aristocracy but only a certain kind of foreigner who could be party to the great spending and modernization spree Mexico was embarked on was welcomed.[4] The debate on the foreign had some precedents in Mexico and throughout Latin America. In the case of Mexico, Andrés Molina Enríquez whose *Los grandes problemas nacionales* (1909) became required reading for future revolutionaries, scorned Roberto Gayol who had recommended European immigrants to reinvigorate Mexico's agricultural sector and had pinpointed specific nationalities apt for the job like Spaniards and North Africans. Molina Enríquez called this desire to attract more *criollos nuevos* unpatriotic because it drew foreigners to Mexico by giving them special treatment and created inequalities between them and the local population. Molina Enríquez felt that

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[3] Paul Ricoeur elucidates on this phenomenon: " In *The Genesis of Secrecy,* Frank Kermode introduces the idea that certain narratives may aim not at illumination but at obscurity and dissimulation. This may be the case, among others, with Jesus' parables which, according to the interpretation of the evangelist Mark, were told with the view of not being understood by 'those outside' and which, according to Kermode, also rather severely expel those "inside" from their privileged position. But there are many other narratives that have this enigmatic power of 'banishing interpreters from their secret places' (33-34). Of course these secret places are places in the text. They are the internal mark of its inexhaustibility. Yet can we not say that the 'hermeneutic potential' (40) of this kind of narrative finds, if not a consonance, at least a resonance in the untold stories of our lives? Is there not a hidden complicity between the secrecy engendered by the narrative itself – or at least by narratives like those of Mark or Kafka – and the as yet untold stories of our lives that constitute the prehistory, the background, the living imbrication from which the told story emerges? In other words, is there not a hidden affinity between the secret *of where* the story emerges from and the secret *to which* it returns?" (Vol I 75)

[4] "La espuma social adoró al Becerro de Oro. …El pecado capital de la élite entonces fue la concupisciencia, la avaricia, el afán excesivo de adquirir poseer dinero y la búsqueda desenfrenada de bienestar material. (González 1010)

the hardy job of cultivation in Mexico was the domain of the mestizos and that in the hurry to offer the best deals to the *criollos nuevos* the former were being overlooked. Paradoxically, Molina Enríquez sought more opportunities for the mestizos because he felt they were the sons of the soil who would be able to withstand the harshness of rural life in Mexico. As has been pointed out, he advocated their cause but in language that consistently denigrated them (Basave 221-259). In retrospect, through the lives of fictionalised characters in Cristina Rivera Garza's *Nadie me verá llorar* and Mónica Lavín's *Café Cortado*, it might be possible to disprove Molina Enríquez on other accounts. Not all *criollos nuevos,* the Europeans who arrived hearkening to Porfirio Díaz's appeals to populate the countryside would be the pampered big latifundistas. Falling prices in agricultural crops like coffee would hit big and small rancheros alike in Chiapas. And finally many *criollos nuevos* did make Mexico their home, and identified with the Mexican Revolution and the promise of a more inclusive Mexico.

The final pages of *Nadie me verá llorar* (1999) state that the novel is based on records, official documents, diaries and letters of the inmates of Mexico Ciy's General Asylum, La Castañeda, and that the data on the roads and buildings of Mexico City has been part of the research of the doctoral thesis of the author Cristina Rivera Garza. She does however mention that though the name and photograph of the principal protagonist exist, the rest of her life is imaginary. The novel is structured as a series of disconnected flashbacks. It begins after the Revolution of 1910 with a conversation between Matilda Burgos and Joaquín Buitrago the main protagonists who meet after a gap of twenty years in the mental asylum La Castañeda where the latter was a psychiatry student but later becomes a photographer of prostitutes and the insane. In the waning years of the last century the madhouse has a place for all those that Porfirian society deems unproductive and alienated. Some of them are drug addicts of elite families, law students brought there by their fathers who tell the director that their sons have become so cynical of society that they do not even fear God anymore. As a student caught injecting morphine says, " Todo el mundo rompe las reglas doctor, todo el mundo" (81).

The country seems divided in the novel into people like the director of the mental asylum, Eduardo Oligochea, whose careers are on the ascendant, and in the words of the narrator are

the easiest to bribe because they believe in the 'progress' Díaz promises and others like Joaquín Buitrago from wealthy families who are subversive because they choose to drop out. At times even Oligochea who considers his directorial tenure a stepping stone to better things, wavers in his zeal. What if they are right? What if, as Santiago Davis, one of the mad inmates, keeps repeating, there was no future and the country was going straight to hell? "A veces, ciertas noches de invierno, la vida impasible de los internos es capaz de sacar a Eduardo Oligochea de sus casillas. A veces su propia incertidumbre es tan oscura que sólo puede pensar en el placer momentáneo de fumar un cigarrillo" (80). The plot with its diversity of incidents is situated before and just after the Mexican Revolution and the episodes can also be divided into those which occur before and after. Though historical, the events like the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* by Sigmund Freud in 1900 are chronological markers and the plot evolves within an explicitly dated time-frame. But these events do not represent historical time— they are there only to add perspective to the fictional characters. Certain kinds of events are chosen which would add to the development of the plot and these are drawn into the temporal world of the protagonists.

To ascertain the facts of Matilda's life, Joaquín Buitrago looks for documents in the National Library where there are records of the arrival of immigrants and their histories. Matilda Burgos is the granddaughter of Marcos Burgos the only Spaniard amongst the boat loads of Italian immigrant families who arrive in Veracruz around 1857 (González 941). This fact is commented upon by Roberto Gayol as an example of immigrants who were ill-suited for the difficulties of the Mexican countryside and who are steadily reduced to just a hundred (qtd. In Molina Enríquez 323). The lesson he draws is that there should be a more judicious selection of immigrants. The subsequent history of most members of the Burgos family fits in well with Gayol's conjectures. Marcos Burgos marries an Indian woman María de la Luz. In 1885, soon after the birth of their grandchild Matilda, they take part in a rebellion of seven thousand Totonaca Indians organized by Antonio Diaz Montfort against the new agrarian measures which demarcate the land of the Totonac Indians. Marcos Burgos and his wife die during this four month uprising but one of his two sons, Santiago Burgos continues to stay on in Papantla, Veracruz taking care of his vanilla plantations and

earning the nickname "el esposo de la vainilla". But Santiago proves to be even more of a misfit at a time when oil companies are making a bid for the lands around Papantla. Desperately trying to awaken the conscience of the people to what is happening around them he climbs on to a pole thirty five metres above the ground and rants for three days against the government and greed and the oil companies who had caused the 'death' of the vanilla plantations. He minutely lists all the land expropriations and the concentration of thirty thousand hectares of land in seven buyers and yet the doctor who attends to him when he finally relents to come down diagnoses *delirium tremens*.

To guard against the eccentricities of her parents the doctor advises that Matilda be sent away and Marcos Burgos, Santiago's brother in Mexico City is considered the right choice. Here she meets Joaquín Buitrago and the piano teacher Diamantina Ovando and Cástulo who rebel against the allure of the new prosperity which has numbed a middle class that doesn't protest enough against Díaz' authoritarianism. In the words of Diamantina: "Los ricos sustituyen su falta de imaginación con objetos. Y los objetos, siempre terminan por ser un obstáculo para la imaginación" (41). But Diamantina dies, massacred with the factory workers she is fighting for, and Joaquín Buitrago and Matilda make their lives into a form of Refusal in order to embarrass a system. As the narrator says of Joaquín Buitrago:

> Joaquín saludó al fracaso y lo invitó a sentarse junto a él. Joaquín se imaginó por primera vez que podría descansar, que tal vez en el fracaso encontraría finalmente la paz, el silencio, ir a contracorriente del progreso, del tiempo mismo, y él, como el país entero, no necesitaba nada mas. Cuando Joaquín salió del Templo del Amor, lo hizo para alejarse definitivamente de la historia. (21)

On the other side of the divide is Marcos Burgos the Spaniard, Matilda's uncle who wants to flee a past of eccentricity and become part of the mainstream. Lacking in imagination he doesn't construct a new past but only mentions that he is the son of Spanish immigrants who for lack of means were forced to cultivate vanilla. He leaves out his indigenous ancestry, and like those who want to triumph over their past, Marcos develops a blind faith in the possibilities of the future, in the progress of the nation (103). Together with his friend Julio Guerrero, the author

of the anthropological treatise, *La génesis del crimen en México. Ensayo de psiquiatría social (1901),* he believes that the poor are a real threat to the country because of their lack of hygiene and lazy work habits, their unstable family life, alcohol and promiscuity as well as their highly seasoned food. He applauds Díaz' drastic law and order measures and for his own part tries to experiment with his social engineering ideas on Matilda. Cleanliness and hygiene and self discipline are the ways the poor can change their fate. When Matilda escapes him, rejecting thereby the chance Porfirian Mexico offers to change her destiny he stops mentioning her name and drops the matter as an irredeemable failure.

The story of Matilda and Joaquín who willfully refuse to participate in history – all the great historical occasions had passed them by– is emblematic of a cross section of Mexicans who felt like misfits in turn of the century middle-class Mexico (173). This was a Mexico in which, according to the historian Luis González, the blondes of Europe and the North would feel at home and where "suspiciously white señoritas" would be paraded in front of eligible foreigners. [5] Yet, thanks to the Revolution, Matilda's exotic colour, physical type, and mestizo ancestry become fashionable. As the narrator says at the end of the novel:

> Los anuncios de los cigarrillos del Buen Tono S.A. han descartado para siempre los dibujos de las mujeres afrancesadas y ahora incluyen la figura de un indio con plumas y collares degustando un un ancho cigarrillo con los ojos cerrados…. Los rasgos de Matilda y su tono de piel están de moda. (197)

According to Carlos Fuentes one of the enduring legacies of the Mexican Revolution is that it made clear that none of the many Mexicos that existed could be sacrificed (Fuentes 63). The factory workers, small peasants like Matilda Burgos' Spanish grandfather as well as youths like Joaquín Buitrago who find historical mention as the disaffected elite generation born between 1858 and 1872 and given to bizarre anti-establishment behavior, all contributed to the downfall of the Díaz regime (González 984). With the Revolution, the nineteenth-century anthropologi-

[5] "La época liberal no puede quitarse el mote de extranjerizante. Sus hombres ricos y poderosos y su clase media querían que los países fuertes nos vieran con buenos ojos, que los rubios de Europa y el norte se sintieran a gusto en ésta su casa" (González 1013).

cal categories that Molina Enríquez had so minutely studied also became irrelevant as all sections came together to rebel and began, symbolically at least, to value the Aztec past and indigenous culture.

The *criollos nuevos* made Mexico their home and their presence added to its multiculturalism. As Ingrid, the German daughter of his partner says to the newly arrived Miguel Islas from Spain in Lavín's *Café Cortado* "Los que vinimos a América estaos destinados a quedarnos" (141). The transcriber of the story is Diego Cabarga a young Mexican of the late twentieth century sent by the Mexican shipping company he works for to research the history of the Spanish Transatlantic Company which the Mexicans have just acquired. After much distraction and caviling he gets drawn into a story that finally moves him to visit the forests of Soconusco in Chiapas, Mexico where Spaniards had emigrated in response to Porfirio Díaz' exhortations to cultivate and prosper. Through the diaries and letters that he finds, he reconstructs a text and where he cannot find explanations for events, he relies on intuition or reproduces in his own life certain episodes so that the reconstruction become easier. He thus plots a probable story from the accidental or singular events he reads about. From the diaries of the Spanish journalist of Santander, Fermín Domínguez, he gets a description of the flow of human traffic from the port:

> Inundan el muelle de baúles y costales. Llevan puestas las ropas zurcidas, porque los buscadores de sueños son pobres. No llevan oro, van por él. Les han dicho que México es lugar para ser próspero, que hay minerales preciosos que hay campo fértil y que el que trabaja tiene ganado el paraíso (…) Un barco cargado de emigrantes es una península que se desprende del continente con las mismas flores, los pájaros y el calor de la tierra que deja. (15-16)

Across the seas the thinker Andrés Molina Enríquez also called it the disintegration of some communities and a forced integration into others and attributed it to the inducements offered to the new colonizers and the superior treatment they would receive which would result in the inferiority of the home population.[6] He recalled the manner in which the last Habsburg prince, Maximilian, had been invited to rule Mexico when the

[6] "El movimiento de desintegración y de integración a que nos referimos no se produce siempre entre los compuestos sociales más próximos ni entre los más débiles, sino

conservatives felt inferior to the task and rued the fact that no lessons had been learnt from this failure. This was a courageous voice of dissent as influential opinion in Mexico was overwhelmingly in favor of immigration. Agricultural progress would be possible only with immigrants and according to the politician Enrique Creel "Cien mil inmigrantes europeos valen más que medio millón de indios mexicanos" (qtd in González 966).

Despite the misgivings of Fermín Domínguez who was going to lose the woman he loved and Molina Enríquez' reservations, immigration was inexorable though not in the numbers expected. By the end of the last decade of the nineteenth century only twenty thousand immigrants had arrived and most of these opted to live in the cities. Far from there being a rush to make good with the opportunities that Porfirio Díaz offered to foreign capital there was a fear of Mexico. Foreigners were not optimistic about the geographical conditions nor the law and order situation so touted by the patriotic Porfirian elite.[7] Despite these misgivings Miguel and his brother Esteban make up their minds to leave despite their land holdings in Santander. The news about coffee sounds good initially. In the first half of the Porfiriato, 126 thousand 60 kg sacks were exported, from 1900-1905 this has tripled to 325 thousand sacks (González 942). Besides the government had promised to provide all facilities to export to Hamburg and the construction of a railway line to transport the coffee via the Atlantic. As Esteban tells Miguel: "-Yo me voy, hermano. El café nos puede hacer ricos. ¿Qué nos espera aquí? Labriegos, unas fanegas apenas de tierra, una casa, unos hijos y que nos entierren junto a los padres y abuelos" (24). Tedium with the routine and curiosity about new uncharted territory in Chiapas as well as the new money are the reasons for the journey. But Angela, Miguel's future wife and on whom the principal burden of Mexico will fall is unmoved by this desire to get away from Santander. Her own parents are skeptical about her fiancé's decision. If Miguel were so hardworking he would use his energy on his own land in Noja, they reason (59).

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que, por todo lo que llevamos dicho, se produce a virtud de la función combinada de la fuerza de atracción de cada compuesto, de la fuerza de resistencia de cada compuesto también" (Molina Enríquez 329).

[7] Arnaldo Córdova writes about the violence which was the most enduring characteristic of Mexican social life because of the radical inequalities. Prologue to *Los grandes problemas nacionales* (Molina Enríquez 16).

In Chiapas meanwhile a separate drama unfolds. Though the Revolution and the anti-foreigner discontent will take time to coalesce in the south, the divide here is between the mestizos and the Indians. Chabelo is a mestizo who acts as an intermediary between the foreigners and the Indian labor and longs to buy land like the German, French, Spanish and Italians who arrive in ships at the San Benito port. The land is cheap and available in plenty. Andrés Molina Enríquez was right about the envy they would arouse in the countryside but even Fermín the journalist whose diary annotations are interspersed in the chapters can foresee the impending disasters because foreigners represent oppression. The archetypes of rural Mexico that Molina Enríquez had written about appear: the absentee landlords like the Frenchman La Grange, who shows off in Europe with the proceeds from his plantations, and rentiers like the Frenchman Petenier, who rely on corrupt mestizo intermediaries like Chabelo to get them ever cheaper labor.

In order to pay off a debt to his partner the German Brunner, Miguel falls in with Petenier's plans to sell directly to the US market but this makes him rely heavily on Chabelo to get cheaper Indian labor which eventually leads to a deception of Brunner. Miguel is assassinated and the crime is never solved though the main suspect is Chabelo who buys Miguel's plantation and homestead. Angela knocks the Justice Ministry doors and is met with a curt answer: "Donde hay opulencia hay tentación. Uds los extranjeros se sienten muy de aca y con muchas ínfulas para exigir pero no conocen este pais" (113).

There is a wave of revulsion at the murder of Miguel and commiseration with Angela. His Indian farm hand Ponciano who discovers his body and carries Miguel on his back to the village weeps : "A qué hijo de puta se le ocurría abrir un tajo en una familia… Quién diablos había matado a su patrón. Quién diablos había asesinado un sueño" (107). And Vera the prostitute in the brothel consoles Angela when the latter starts her own investigation after the Ministry refuses: "…No sé quién acabó con él… Pero el café es así. Mueren a machetazos, los mata el indio, el comprador, el socio, los bandoleros, la envidia. La cochina envida cuando se respira la felicidad" (150). These reactions preclude us from considering Miguel as an oppressor who has been vanquished by the forces of the Revolution. Instead Miguel is a victim of history. He blithely ignores the dangers as when the Frenchman warns him:

> -No les gustan los extranjeros – dijo Lagrange mientras se sentaba con Miguel en el café. -Ahora fueron los gringos. Ya nos tocará.
> -Pero si vinimos a dar trabajo.
> -Ellos no nos lo pidieron.
> -Tampoco lo impidieron. El presidente Díaz lo alentó – dijo Miguel confiado en que no había venido a hacer nada malo.
> -Pero estamos en plena revolución.
> -Mientras sea sólo contra los gringos, que dure la revolución. (186)
> The expatriate Lagrange keeps an ironic distance but ingenuous Miguel identifies with Mexico and is too close to the scene of events.

This stroke of meaningless bad luck can be put in the context of a revolution, the exploitation and general insecurity. However by following the novels' sequence of events the explanation is still not likely to be understood or empathized with. After all as the Indian Ponciano reasons: there were wicked landowners who went scot-free and Miguel had been shot with a pistol and Indians never carried arms. And Chabelo the mestizo who buys the farm cannot maintain it because it soon passes to an absentee landlord in Spain. So Miguel's death cannot be reasoned. But if historians try to give reasons for every reversal or discordant note by making sequences of particular series of events probable, the novelist also tries to enlighten the perplexed reader but with different techniques. By adding voices of horror like that of the woman in the brothel who are neutral observers and who cannot be fitted into the paradigm of dominant / oppressed he shows the universality of human misery and how solidarity can come from unexpected quarters. The reconstruction of the story of Angela and Miguel by Diego Cabarga adds to historiography precisely through its use of the fictional mode. In the words of Paul Ricoeur:

> Fiction gives eyes to the horrified narrator. Eyes to see and to weep. (..) Either one counts the cadavers or one tells the story of the victims. Between these two options lies a historical explanation, one that is difficult (if not impossible) to write, conforming to the rules of singular causal imputation. Fiction is placed at the service of the unforgettable. It permits historiography to live up to the task of memory. (Vol. III 188-189)

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