



Vol. 5, No. 1, Fall 2007, 215-227

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Review/Reseña

Max Parra, *Writing Pancho Villa's Revolution: Rebels in the Literary Imagination of Mexico*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005.

Exorcising the Lettered City: The Literature of the Villista Revolution

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One of the key mythical figures of revolutionary Mexico was not actually named Pancho Villa at birth nor is he buried in the *Monumento a la Revolución* in Mexico City. Doroteo Arango is perhaps still lying somewhere in Chihuahua, his adopted motherland, and maybe under the grey tombstone that says "Villa" at one of the four solitary pillars of the unfinished and forsaken Porfirian parliament turned revolutionary pantheon rests an old indigenous woman.¹ As late as 1976, Institutional Revolutionary Party president Luis Echeverría ordered Villa's remains to be moved from their resting place in Parral, Chihuahua, to the capital city—a

¹ Paco Ignacio Taibo, *Pancho Villa: una biografía narrativa* (México, D.F.: Planeta, 2006).

belated sign of Villa's redemption into the national sphere and the final official recognition of his relevance as a revolutionary. According to historian Friedrich Katz, a horse without a rider accompanied the casket through the streets of Parral in a mournful November parade.² The absent, disembodied horseman not only evoked Villa's reputation as a "Centaur," a mythical hybrid neither human nor horse, but it also underscored the ghostly, uncanny presence of the revolutionary figure in contemporary Mexican society. To a certain extent, whether we believe official records and historians (such as Katz) and accept as Villa's the body in the casket, or opt for the more folkloric and romantic suspicion that Villa's body escaped its institutional cooptation and remains rebelliously absent (Taibo's version), the debate over the corpse is somehow irrelevant. Not so the spectral rider outside the casket: the empty and yet eerily burdened saddle, that oddly tangible presence atop a black horse, disrupts the efforts to both embody and bury the popular revolutionary hero.

Unsurprisingly, Villa is one of the "uncomfortable dead" or "muertos incómodos" at the center of the collaborative novel penned by Zapatista Subcomandante Marcos and Paco I. Taibo II: an uncomfortable dead still in the larger book of Mexican history.³ Marcos's chapters are for the most part predictably situated in Chiapas, the site of *Zapatismo's* legacy today, while Taibo's familiar detective, Belascoarán, is imbued by the teachings and the tradition of northern Villismo. Villa's unwilling and hypothetical burial in the national Monument—"panthéonisé" to use the always catchier French—next to his inveterate enemy Venustiano Carranza, is in fact the cause of the latest metropolitan quakes, if we believe one of the many urban rumors echoed by Paco Ignacio Taibo II. Taibo consistently uses this image of political tectonics—in some of his chapters in the two-way novel as well as in his recent biography of Doroteo Arango—as a signifier of Villa's underground political currency. The urban rumors and the earthquake ripples they portend, reinstate Villa's ghostly presence at the heart of the national celebration of revolutionary accomplishment.

² Friedrich Katz, *The Life and Times of Pancho Villa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

³ Marcos and Paco Ignacio Taibo, *Muertos incómodos: falta lo que falta* (México, D.F.: Editorial Joaquín Mortiz, 2005).

Coinciding with the publication in *La Jornada* of Marcos and Taibo's novel, the Spanish publishing house Planeta, always alert to market slides and fads, charged Taibo with writing a monograph on Villa, and the writer delivered 884 pages of detailed biographic and cultural commentaries on the figure of the revolutionary. Furnishing bookshops for the upcoming centenary of the Revolution is becoming a palpable activity in Mexican cultural life. In contrast to Taibo's well-researched "narrative biography" and with his incursion into "revolutionary" detective fiction in the earlier *Muertos incómodos*, the author charged by Planeta with a volume on Zapata, crack member Pedro Ángel Palou, unsurprisingly produced a flimsy poetic narrative that confirms his territorial claims as a practitioner of "literatura light," the ghastly brainchild of magic realism. It would seem that though Zapata is still available for political employment and *Zapatismo* itself a force to be reckoned with, his life and miracles are less literary than the Centaur of the North's many exploits. But Villa was always a literary, and cinematic, character quite literally *avant la lettre*, or as Mexican poet José Emilio Pacheco put it: "In Mexico, Pancho Villa lost the war, but he won all the literary battles."⁴

Even in these latest literary and biographical assaults to the memory of Mexico's two major revolutionaries, the long-standing tension between the center and the periphery, the city and the countryside, emerges as the undeclared narrative fracture of Mexicanness. The fault line between the lettered city and its radical other, the "illiterate" highwayman, lies there at the epicenter of the unsutured national discourses about the Revolution.⁵ The lettered city itself is still today fractured and moved by the undying specter of the rural revolutionary who often rides in novel and in film,⁶ but whose political heritage seems to have been successfully hollowed out by

⁴ Quoted in Taibo, *Pancho Villa*, p. 850.

⁵ For a recent and thorough discussion of the ways in which bandits were a necessary other –either in their exclusion, idealization, or recuperation– in the construction of the national cultures promoted by the Lettered City in Latin America, see Juan Pablo Dabove, *Nightmares of the Lettered City : Banditry and Literature in Latin America, 1816-1929* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007).

⁶ Berman, S., I. Tardan, et al. "Entre Pancho Villa y una mujer desnuda" (Chicago, distributed by Facets Video, 1999), Isaacs, D. S., T. Mark, et al. "And Starring Pancho Villa as Himself" (New York, NY Burbank, CA, 2004. HBO Video, Distributed by Warner Home Video).

decades of commercial and official cooptation, as Taibo despondently notes throughout his biography.⁷ Villa's lurking presence in contemporary Mexico would perhaps need to be addressed through a study in spectral science, something close to what Derrida called "hauntology": an investigation into the impossibility of fully totalizing the past into a closed narrative, of fully closing the pantheon. Alternatively, or perhaps in addition, we could look at the monstrosity of the rural bandit, how and why he is constituted as an absolute "Other," a nightmare of the Lettered City, sometimes expelled, sometimes desired, others simply suppressed, and carry out a study in teratology and culture, as Dabove has so persuasively done in his recent *Nightmares of the Lettered City*.

Less concerned with the magic realism of monsters, ghosts, and poltergeist earthquakes, Max Parra's *Writing Pancho Villa's Revolution* takes a different approach. Parra probes into the literature of the Villista camp—works by writers from the north like Nellie Campobello, Martín Luís Guzmán, Rafael F. Muñoz, and Mariano Azuela (though the latter was born in Jalisco)—who had a direct experience of the revolution and of Villa's popular army, and whose writings invariably recast the Revolution as a narrative of violence with varying degrees of meaninglessness. Parra's study of the competing representations of the Villista camp by the lettered city is a necessary cultural intervention that carefully sifts through a variety of mediated imageries to offer new mappings and a new critical approach to post-revolutionary Mexican culture. Parra looks at the ways in which these "elite versions of the historical agency of subaltern groups that had participated in the revolution" (4) contributed to portraying a popular movement "beset by intellectual naïveté, political anarchy, and arbitrariness" (6). The book problematizes the cultural agency of rationalist intellectual liberals and it investigates their role in fomenting a portrayal of revolutionary heroes that replicated and secured a written version of the latter's subaltern status. Parra writes about white-gloved—or white-collar—killer writers, writers who symbolically shot or dismembered the historical Pancho Villa and his followers, even as they converted them into regional heroes or national demons. The differentiation between the regional and

⁷ See particularly the section "Casi final," 841-51.

the national spheres becomes particularly relevant in Parra's analysis of Villa's conflicting place in Mexican culture. This regionalist perspective and its combination with a subaltern theoretical framework achieve a productive critical distance from the prevalent nationalist ideology at play in the texts studied.

Four of the chapters in *Writing Pancho Villa's Revolution* (chapters two to five) are organized around a specific literary work each, bookended by a set of two introductory sections, the introduction and chapter one, focused on theoretical and historical-political issues respectively, and two concluding chapters. The main chronological point of reference for the central monographic chapters (1925-1935) roughly coincides with the period known as the *Maximato*, while chapter six frames its discussion around the main years of the ensuing presidential term, the period known as *Cardenismo* (1935-1940).⁸ Much of Parra's argument spins around the marked differences in the post-revolutionary culture promoted by each of these two administrations: the divergent intellectual attitudes fostered under the more radical term of president Cárdenas contrast with the previous, more moderate Calles administration. These two political periods are crucial to understand the cultural reception of the protagonists of the 1910-1917 civil war, for as the leader "máximo" during over nine years, Plutarco Elías Calles, had fought against Villa, intellectuals who like Martín Luis Guzmán had been with the Northern Division, tried to distance themselves from Villa in the 1920s (126). Similarly, under Lázaro Cárdenas's more forgiving approach to rural Mexico, those same intellectuals tried to recast the revolutionary *caudillo* in more favorable terms. The concluding chapter-epilogue briefly recapitulates and reorganizes the main points established throughout the book.

A short introductory chapter effectively frames the debate over the role of the middle-class urban intellectuals in shaping a post-revolutionary culture from 1925 to 1940, the time-frame of the overall study. Parra's methodology is informed by both subaltern studies and regional historiography although he confesses to not fully adhering to either school.

⁸ I have followed Parra's delineation for the years of these two time periods.

As he notes both approaches overlap “in their effort to highlight the importance of primary networks of sociability (kinship, territoriality, local cultures) in the construction of collective identities and in understanding the epistemology of popular mobilizations” (7). Parra places this epistemological preoccupation at the center of his project when he highlights and scrutinizes the power relations generated by the very process of narrating and representing the (regional) subaltern. As he demonstrates in his introduction and in the detailed readings of six major works related to the Villista camp—*Los de abajo* (1915), *Cartucho* (1931), *El águila y la serpiente* (1928), *¡Vámonos con Pancho Villa!* (1928) *Memorias de Pancho Villa* (1938-1940) and *Villa ante la historia* (1939)—Parra aptly strikes in different directions, using those theoretical frameworks to carry out a thorough analysis of the context, and the power relations out of which the literary texts in question emerged. He discusses in detail the material relationship between the authors and their reading public, the specific type of representational politics developed in each case, and even the evolving and at times contradictory image of Villa as seen by the same writer, as in Guzmán’s case (chapters four and six).

After the short theoretical introductory section, chapter one, “The Politics of Incorporation: The Calles Years, 1925-1935,” examines the period of the *Maximato* looking for the reasons behind the proliferation and success of Villista literature during those years. Among his carefully chosen explanations, Parra underscores the eager embrace of literature as an “agent of national integration” (16) by the post-revolutionary intelligentsia through what he calls the “politics of incorporation” of Villa into the national cultural discourse. As Calles and his followers were intent in creating new state apparatuses from above, imbued with a new revolutionary, though elitist, rhetoric, so too their accompanying literati were looking for a new literary tradition and new literary forms to deal with the Revolution. The Calles regime introduced a significant change in the revolutionary rhetoric: as Parra notes, “the ‘revolution’ was conceptualized as a forward-looking process, an ongoing movement of tasks and commitments to be accomplished.” The past struggle would henceforth be regarded as a “discrete historical period whose importance was to

illuminate the inevitability of the new power” (15). Parra engages his readers with a comprehensive and critical description of the ways in which the first stable post-revolutionary administrations endorsed an “explicitly elitist ideology” that nevertheless promoted social awareness, and how *Villismo* became a fertile ground to explore the “virility” and the social themes sanctioned by the new regime. Ironically, the success of *Villista* literature, with Azuela’s *Los de abajo* at the center of a major intellectual debate in 1925 about the nature of Mexican literature, coincided with the silencing of Villa’s political legacy. This double movement, to represent while silencing, successfully set aside some of the radical notions of decentralized nationalism and direct popular political participation that Villa and his followers had fought for, while it placed a strong emphasis in the overblown representation of manly violence, itself an interpretive icon used by the urbanite writer to defer and deride the popular revolutionary voices.

Citing Katz, Parra sums Villa’s nationalism as one that placed the *patria chica*—the regional community—at its core. The decentralized federal state, a key item of the *Villista* political agenda, becomes crucial for the larger regionalist argument in *Writing Pancho Villa’s Revolution*: except for Nellie Campobello, barely any of the writers that dealt with *Villismo* seem to have paid much attention or respect to Villa’s regional program. This oversight further places the works of some of these writers, Guzmán’s in particular, within the context of the emergence of a nationalist discourse that emphasized the centrality of Mexico City and its corollary: the hegemonic supremacy of the centralized government.

The first extended practice of Parra’s “subalternist-regionalist approach” (139) is his chapter on Mariano Azuela’s *Los de abajo*, which deals with one of the most canonical novels of the Mexican Revolution as an instance of “an ambivalent cultural process that, at the very moment of representing the revolutionary agency of the subaltern peasant, proceeds to simultaneously and, to varying degrees, suppress it” (36). Parra complexly addresses the discursive and ideological loop that besieges Azuela’s text, namely its construction of a peasant subjectivity incarcerated within the paradigms of the middle classes and the new intellectual elite. This is a

particularly challenging argument given the satirical tone with which both groups are dealt with in the novel. The *curros*, or educated urbanites, are one of the objects of parodic contempt throughout the narrative, a mode best represented by the character of Luis Cervantes, a former medical student whose rhetoric unashamedly hijacks the revolutionary group at the center of the novel. Read as a satire of the falsity of the revolutionary ideals of the ruling intelligentsia, and as a revision of the cooptation of a fragmented and displaced peasant political body, the novel can be seen as a denunciation of the survival cynicism put in practice by the enlightened classes at the time, and thus not easily recuperated as part of a dominant discourse.

Parra steers clear of these generic considerations and instead emphasizes the ways in which the reception of the novel favored the very dynamics of domination that the novel could be said to denounce. He points to the rationalist and pessimistic voice of the narrator as a key element for understanding the ways in which the peasant subjectivity is constantly suppressed in the novel. The dismissal of orality as a source of “knowledge about the popular revolution” (43) is a particularly telling aspect of the cultural hierarchies that undercut Azuela’s well-meaning satire. Parra goes as far as to equate the voices of two of the intellectual characters (Solís and Valderrama) with an authorial narrator, a move that, questionable as it seems, offers a key stepping stone for his entire subalternist argument: Azuela constantly alludes, through different means, but often through these “informed” voices, to the blindness and irrationality of the popular uprising and its leaders (read: Villa). Such critical and uncompromising re-reading of Azuela’s classic text promotes a feasible framework for understanding this anti-epic as an early instance of the patronizing discourses that would permeate Mexico’s cultural life in the decades to come. What makes Parra’s argument particularly new and groundbreaking is his emphasis on the subtle processes that regardless of its vaunted protagonism render the subaltern as an “other” of reason, instead of falling for the more traditional consideration of issues associated

with satire, namely pessimism, disillusionment, and cynicism.⁹ As a point of contrast Nellie Campobello, studied in the ensuing chapter, offers an isolated, fragmented set of narratives that adopt a subaltern subjectivity from a regionalist perspective to eschew the larger project of thinking about the revolution through the mediation of the national(ist) intellectual.

Nellie Campobello's *Cartucho* ranks highest in Parra's scoreboard of Villista texts, perhaps due to the disavowal of a totalizing narrative and its associated male intellectual, as author, narrator or focal character, and her use of testimony and oral sources for her short stories and sketches. Orally transmitted traditions and intimacy become the actual sources and sites of the multiple narratives in Campobello's attempt to recover the voices of the vanquished and enfranchise them within the discourses of the revolutionary past. According to Parra, Campobello hoped to "articulate an alternative, noncentralist, historical memory that would validate and, ultimately, redeem for the nation the revolutionary identity of the local Villista soldiers who died in the war" (76). This inclusion of a militant regionalist (noncentralist) perspective and its associated efforts to reclaim and reenact the voices of the defeated becomes Parra's golden standard throughout his study. Campobello's ghostly past is not just filled with a series of uncomfortable dead "others," but rather it becomes a complex network of private memories and autobiographic sketches whose retelling involves a form of liberation and of afterlife victory for the familiar fallen, and thus a kind of historical and personal exorcism.

For his monographic chapter on Martín Luis Guzmán, Parra stages his dexterous biographical strategies to place the Ateneísta intellectual within the tradition of liberal *Arielismo*, a school of thought widespread throughout Latin America in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Founded on the principles espoused by José Enrique Rodó in his *Ariel* (1900), *Arielismo* was characterized by its elitist beliefs: the cultured and spiritual visions of the intellectual whose priestly figure should guide

⁹ This is perhaps the single most subscribed line of reading the literature of the Mexican Revolution; see John Rutherford, *Mexican Society during the Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971). Juan Bruce Novoa suggests this cynicism can be read as promoting depoliticization and being anti-revolutionary, Juan Bruce-Novoa "La novela de la Revolución Mexicana: la topología del final," *Hispania*, 74:1 (1991), 36-44.

social development. Parra underscores the influence of two interconnected ideas derived from *Arielismo* to better explain Guzmán's attitudes toward Villa: firstly Rodó's "insistence on the [...] interdependence between aesthetics and ethics" (84-5) and, secondly, the idea of "spiritual selection," the basis for the creation of social hierarchical divisions according to "aesthetic sensibility and intellectual culture" (85). The stark contrast between the rarified atmosphere of city intellectuals and their reinvigorated Greco-Roman poise, and that of the rural revolutionary, is a self-explanatory image: and yet these two "irreconcilable worlds"¹⁰ far removed from each other come together in a text such as *El Águila y la Serpiente*. The study of Martín Luis Guzmán's uneasy relationship with the lower-class revolutionary underscores the separation between the liberal sympathizer and middle-class intellectual, close to Trotsky's feared "fellow-travelers of the revolution,"¹¹ and the social fighter whose political formation and language derives as much from hands-on experience as from intuition but hardly from the debates of the cafés and the *athenaeum*. Parra's analysis of Guzmán's descriptive language reveals how his urban geographies and in particular his metaphoric language betray his aesthetic longing for bourgeois tranquility and order. The breathing of "barbarism" in the northern sierra stands out against the "urban paradise" of San Luis de Potosí (85), and when depicting Villa, Guzmán engages in heavy metaphorical language: the leader "had more of a jaguar about him than a man." The image of the momentarily tamed jaguar "whose back we stroked with trembling hand, fearful that at any moment a paw might strike out at us" is for Parra the "anti-teleic figure" against which Guzmán constructs his intellectual persona and consolidates his status. As Guzmán becomes the intermediary by which Villa is read, the transcriber of his deeds, so to say, he also looms large as the suppressor of the subaltern and necessary "Other" on which the narrator has consolidated his status. Parra productively rearticulates the paradoxical power relations extolled by these images: Guzmán portrays himself as both a threatened victim of the potential violence (the paw might strike), but also as a fascinated observer

¹⁰ Martín Luis Guzmán, *El águila y la serpiente* (43-44), in Parra, 90.

¹¹ Leon Trotsky, "The Literary 'Fellow-Travelers' of the Revolution," *Literature and Revolution* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968): 56-61.

whose gaze in turn represents and resituates the popular revolutionary as a subaltern, animalized and primitive figure. *Arielismo* was not alone in provoking this patronizing viewpoint. In his re-visitation of Guzmán's work at the time of *Cardenismo* in chapter six, Parra stresses the changing attitudes in official Mexican culture toward the rural movement in the second half of the 1930s. Guzmán's *Memorias de Pancho Villa* reads closer to a "ventriloquist [literary] act" (130) than to the earlier colonial explorer's account of jaguars and paradises. A well-meant ventriloquist, Guzmán tried to "mimic Villa's colloquial and uncultured yet richly textured rural language" (128), an enterprise that nevertheless kept Villa as a "curiously remote, evanescent figure." Parra stamps his reading of Guzmán's monumental *Memorias* with a balanced combination of aesthetic leniency and subalternist censure toward the power relations revealed by this impersonation, an effort that created a new standard and a new "kind of [intellectual] authority": a writer's ability to "reproduce the voice of the people" (131). All the authors analyzed by Parra who had published on *Villismo* before the *Memorias* had also tried in one way or another to attain that often stereotyped linguistic realism and in so doing had also established their access to a wider set of linguistic registers and its associated power position of *raconteur* or witness.

Rafael F. Muñoz's case is particularly interesting as it offers a counterpoint to Guzman's position. One of the best-sellers of the period, *¡Vámonos con Pancho Villa!* (like Guzman's *El águila y la serpiente*, it first appeared in Madrid in book form: Spanish publishers were already very interested in the booty of the Mexican Revolution back in the 20s) this series of related stories encapsulates an appealing combination of virile iconography, gratuitous violence, and regional sensibility. For Parra, Muñoz's Villa is the closest to the popular version made available through the *corridos*, but also one of the most successful literary attempts to recreate the Villista struggle ("a consumer product of considerable literary quality," 118). What is less clear in this otherwise compellingly written chapter is how the defense of the virile version of Mexican ruralist nationalism, with all its violently excluded "others" (women, indigenous people, homosexuals, foreigners) can be exempt from reinstating and

reproducing new or old subaltern identities. Nevertheless, Parra admits Muñoz's shortcomings and opts for a positive assessment in view of the writer's ability to "construct and exploit the perpetually warlike mentality of the oppressed in northern Mexico for the sake of sensationalism" (119). This last balanced observation makes clear to the reader that Parra's views on Muñoz are not doctrinaire however, and that his carefully crafted prose contains a whole range of similarly nuanced observations whose emphasis is in a better understanding of the processes and motivations that generated so much literary interest in the figure of the Centaur in the twenties and thirties.

As the monstrous headless ghost of Villa takes different voices and guises again in our time, Parra's book is a particularly important addition to enhance our comprehension of the role of the literary text in the midst of the struggle for memory and representation. *Writing Pancho Villa's Revolution* is not just a generous and engaging contribution to the field of Mexican literary studies, it is also a strong reassertion of the significance of literary criticism as both a cultural and a political practice that uniquely locates and interprets those unclear and blurry lines where literary texts and discourses adhere or wrestle with the discourses of hegemonic dominance.

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