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Book Review: Writing Pancho Villa's Revolution: Rebels in the Literary Imagination of Mexico

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Max Parra. *Writing Pancho Villa's Revolution: Rebels in the Literary Imagination of Mexico*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006. 192 pp. $19.95 (paper).

"On March 6, 1913, Pancho Villa and eight followers crossed the border into Mexico from El Paso, Texas, with the aim of overthrowing the dictatorship of General Victoriano Huerta." Thus begins Max Parra's remarkable tale of the Mexican Revolution during the years 1913–14, where, he says, "no other revolutionary mobilization in Mexico 'had the popular intensity and mass following' of Villismo, nor did any other arouse such feelings of pride and power among the rural poor." The more I have read, thought about, and reflected about the Mexican Revolution in *Writing Pancho Villa's Revolution*, the more I agree with the author that "the popular revolutionary leader was, indeed, regarded by all segments of Mexican society as a vivid and forceful expression of the people's power, pride, resilience."

Parra's strategy throughout the book "engages theories of identity as they relate to subaltern personalities" and "relates them to larger issues of cultural and political history" making this one of the most successful aspects of his narrative, where Villa is portrayed as a man that some have deified as a national leader of the magnitude of Emiliano Zapata, others have accused of being a bandit, and still others have tried to punish his daring incursions in the United States with his death.

The *Introduction* is a good vehicle to understand where the author is leading his readers, with images of Villa and Zapata seating in the Presidential Palace never before occupied by an illiterate man from Durango and a "legendary agrarian leader" from Morelos, as real representatives of the people. The images serve as "an eloquent statement of the people's empowerment" and as "a visual reminder that the social order had been turned upside down."

Making reference to four undisputed literary authors of the Mexican Revolution: Mariano Azuela, Nellie Campobello, Martín Luís Guzmán and Rafael Muñoz, Parra paints a mosaic of Villa closer to his representation as a hero and one who stood up against corrupt power and the meddling of the Colossus of the North. This image of Villa is diametrically opposed to the one portrayed in the U.S. press at the time, closer to another book by Azuela, *Las moscas,* which is often cited for the portrayal of most revolutionaries, including Villa, as bandits.

The first chapter places the literature on Villa in the context of the country's social struggle. Both Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 discuss Azuela's *Los de abajo*, where Parra finds Ranajit Guha's method of treating dominant literature with a grain of salt or, "against the grain," very useful in dealing with Azuela. Parra begins discussing the depiction of Pancho Villa and his men in *Los de abajo*, where the peasant leader from Durango is portrayed not so much within the regional cultural world he represent but obliquely through the actions of men that may or may not be representations of the mythic hero.

Chapter 2 insists on a revisionist reading of *Los de abajo,* criticizing Azuela for a lack of "political rationality" because he suppresses popular subjectivity in the revolutionary discourse. Parra insists on placing the reading within the "proper historical and social context" in which it was produced. By doing so, the author is adding to the Azuela's narrative strategies of storytelling based predominantly on oral tradition and the *corridos,* which helped create the myths of the heroes of the Mexican *Bola.* Perhaps the author excessively hammers the point that "popular movements are rooted in regional histories," especially when dealing with Villa and Zapata. His conclusions, nonetheless, are part of a reasoned thinking based on his analysis of unpublished newspapers and manuscripts he discovered in the Mexican national archives.

Citing Nellie Campobello's perspective on "Violence and Fantasy" in the third chapter of the book, Parra points out that her *Cartucho*, besides being a book about "memory and identity," brings up the theme of survival, also found in *Los de abajo*. Most of the stories in *Cartucho* take place between 1915 and 1919, when the Villistas reverted to their popular, peasant roots and abandoned the capital city. The narrator is a child who witnesses the violence and death that surrounds her. In *Los de abajo***,** another child who cries at the sight of his father returning home from the front becomes the vehicle for asking the question of why men like Demetrio Macías are fighting. They abandon their home and all that is dear to them, prefiguring their own deaths in a seemingly meaningless effort that has lost any sense of direction, fighting only for the sake of fighting. The same wonderment found in Demetrio's son's eyes is reflected in the terrified eyes of the narrator in *Cartucho*, who as a child and, later as an adolescent, bears testimony to "appalling acts of violence" apparently without justification.

If Azuela had painted a romantic, if somewhat critical appraisal of Francisco Villa and men like him, Campobello

tries to restore his credibility, being furious especially at his portrayal as someone "even worse than Attila." But Villa was not only considered a bandit outside of Mexico, he also suffered disapproval within the country itself, especially in the large urban areas such as Mexico City and Monterrey. Although Parra is reluctant to give us too much historical background to the Revolution and Villa's role in it, it is well to point out that the United States were after Villa for several reasons. One was the political fall back for Villa's incursion into Columbus, New Mexico, where he shot up the town and there was a public outcry that demanded justice be done against the invader; the other, was that the United States did not trust either Villa or Zapata and preferred Carranza and Obregón to them. There ensued a wild-goose chase through the Chihuahua Mountains to capture the *bandit* Pancho Villa. The Pershing's punitive expedition to achieve that goal, however, while enflaming sentiments on both sides of the border, was a total failure. Mexico remained a "violent land" in the eyes of the *gringos*, and Villa, a bad guy who could not be captured. With the publication of *Cartucho* in 1931, Campobello attempted to restore Villa's reputation, and that of a nation, though she received doses of adverse reaction in some quarters in Mexico and certainly in most of the United States.

The wonder of the drama of the Revolution gave Martín Luís Guzmán a sure touch in his treatment of Pancho Villa, portraying him in episodes that have entered the mythology of the popular leader. "Unpredictable, violent, ruthless, the unruly Villa is a permanent source of uneasiness for the 'narrator' of *The Eagle and the Serpent (El águila y la serpiente).* The book offers the reader a canvas of revolutionary Mexico, where other leaders are depicted in less than laudatory terms: Carranza as a mediocre politician, Plutarco Elías Calles, as the one who usurped the presidency from Adolfo de la Huerta, Obregón, as a comedian. Villa as hero will later be rehabilitated by Guzmán in his monumental work, *Memorias de Pancho Villa.*

Chapter four continues to examine the aesthetic of Arielismo in *El águila* and "life as art or dramatic spectacle rules Guzmán's constructions of characters" where Pancho Villa cuts a formidable presence. Parra, without saying it, makes Guzmán's tale as meticulous and detailed as Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España,* another writer who wanted to set the record straight and was obsessed about making the story of the conquest devoid of the errors and faults of other chroniclers. Guzmán's work also summarizes the political and historical debates prevalent at the time about Villa and other revolutionaries.

Divided into two parts, *El águila* begins with the assassination of Francisco Madero in 1913 and ends with Villa's exploits, his marching onto Mexico City joined by Zapata, an the creation and downfall of the *Convencionista* government, with Guzmán abandoning Villa's army and taking refuge in the United States. There is a discussion in Parra's work of the social philosophy of the Uruguayan José Enrique Rodó, who influenced not only Guzmán but José de Vasconcelos and Alfonso Reyes as well, all founders of *ateneismo*, a rejection of Positivist thought and a return to aesthetics and metaphysical speculation. City life is modernity, and the countryside reflects the barbarism of uneducated men who are antithetical to the author's idealism and are a paradigm of the "low order" and act as dangerous animals once they are cornered. While Villa generates fear in Guzmán, he is also "a magnetic presence" symbolized by the jaguar, the secret animal of the aborigines. The valor of the fighter reaches epic proportions, with Guzmán contributing to the creation of the myth of Pancho Villa, soon to be deflated by images of Villa taking control of gambling houses, lottery games, and houses of prostitution, thus delegitimizing this "icon of Mexican manhood."

Parra's next chapter deals with *Vámonos con Pancho Villa,* written by Rafael Muñoz who had witnesses the violence of Villismo in his home state of Chihuahua and based his stories on his experiences and on newspaper articles that helped him create a popular novel about "daring, heroism, loftiness, sacrifice, cruelty and bloodshed." *Marketing Violence, Searching for Mexicaness* gives us a not much different portrait of Villa than Guzmán's had painted in the previous chapter, this time comparing the man from Durango to "a kind of Huitzilopochtli [the Aztec god of war]."

As a founding father of the *Partido Nacional Revolucionario* in 1929, Muñoz's work is symptomatic of his career as a journalist, an important ingredient in the evolution of literature in Mexico. His idea was turning the book into a Villista novel, once again writing from the pen of one who had witnessed the horrors of war and lived through the anecdotes recounted. But the author's primary objective was also the search for the Mexican ethos surrounding Villa's outlaw years.

Made up of several short stories, the novel begins with *El Puente (The Bridge),* which pits two antagonists against each other and shows a reversal of fortune when Medina instead of El Diablo is court-martialed, living up to the element of surprise generally found in a short story. The second story talks about El Diablo's relationship with Tía Lola and his indifference toward the woman who has risked her life to save him. It also depicts the revolutionary expedition making headway in the South. Both stories make little reference to Pancho Villa but set the tone for our understanding of the military culture of Villismo. The idea that "real men" or *machos* had the fortunes of Mexico in their hands also points to their differences with the upper-classes against whom they were fighting. The self-consuming *machismo* of chapter 5 tells stories of honor and death.

Parra shows that the second part of Muñoz's novel is separated from the first by a two-year hiatus. Loyalty is a predominant theme in counterpoint to Villa's war machine, while more gruesome stories are unfolded to reveal how the end justifies the means of violent men bent on killing to achieve their purpose, as is the case of General Tomás Urbina, who orders to incinerate Máximo Perea to protect the soldiers from smallpox, or Villa killing the wife and daughter of Tiburcio so that the latter can rejoin him in the

fight against the Carrancistas, who, when captured, are killed by Villa if they refuse to join his forces.

Quoting Friedrich Katz, Parra gives us the three legends surrounding Villa, depicting him as an "unscrupulous bandit, a popular hero, or a Mexican Robin Hood (the last image created mostly by Hollywood films). While Muñoz weaves several legends together in portraying Villa, he also explains how the Porfiriato emasculated men of the lower classes of their patriarchal sexual expression in the domination of their women. The poor fought the revolution and recovered their manhood. The penetration of Villa into Columbus, New Mexico, and his evading the Pershing pursuit reinforced the idea of patriarchal ideology and became a symbol of Mexican nationalism against a foreign enemy. Citing Feminist scholar Linda McDowell, Parra also states that war is tacitly understood as a "male enterprise" and "attests to the power of patriarchal normativity," jut as the 'rape' on the American homeland reasserted Villa's and Mexican masculinity. The corridos heightened the sense of pride surrounding figures such as Villa, who survived for their knowledge of the land and their closeness to nature.

The last two chapters of the book, *The Battle for Pancho Villa during Cardenismo* and *Villismo legacy* brought new insights on the debate over the status of Pancho Villa and his revolutionary army in the nation's memory. This led to a "positive revalorization of rural culture" and inspired the *indigenista* literature. Muñoz's *Vámonos con Pancho Villa* was made into a movie, but the film by Fernando Fuentes only covered the first part of the novel. Gregorio López y Fuentes, with his *El indio,* and Azuela with his *San Gabriel de Valdivia,* set the stage for having the indigenous people of Mexico be at center stage of the social drama. Historically, the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–40) gave the Indian population access to the educational system, and gave the rural poor a more meaningful agrarian reform than his predecessor Calles, who was later exiled for his meddling into Cardenas' populist policies. A re-evaluation of Villa then began, with key players providing a revisionist historical role for the *Centaur of the North.*

Villa's exploits were serialized in newspapers and began to depict him as an "uneducated man yet wise…loving and sentimental, although at times blinded by terrible outbursts of hatred and revenge." Both Campobello with her *Apuntes sobre la vida military del general Francisco Villa*, and Guzmán's *Memorias de Pancho Villa*, contributed, according to Parra, to the historical rehabilitation of the man from the North. In the 6th chapter, Parra also points to the political mileage obtained by Cárdenas by having Villa become a national hero, and the contribution to the country's nationalism that made his presidency popular with the poor, the workers and the unions.

Perhaps the best chronicling of the chapter occurs when Parra discusses the feud between Villa and the Herrera family. Celia Herrera publishes in 1939 a book called *Villa ante la historia*, contradicting Guzmán's lesser threatening and more acceptable portrayal of Villa, and showing Villa himself, after pardoning all the prisoners taken in 1919, made sure that three of them, all members of the Herrera family, were sentenced to death: "the Villa-Herrera conflict was to be a feud of tragic, even epic, proportions." It did not end there. Parra documents how Jesús Herrera, the sole surviving brother, participated in the murder of Villa and his escort, who died as they were leaving Parral "in a hail of bullets." If Guzmán painted a "white legend" in memory of Villa, Celia Herrera was responsible for the "black" one. Regardless, Villa was enthroned in the "pantheon of official heroes of the Revolution." Villa remains buried in Hidalgo del Parral, with subsequent Mexican Presidents, including Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, referring to Villa as hero at times of national problems.

The last chapter goes back to discussing the subaltern-regional approach to literature and how important it is to take the literature of the Mexican Revolution seriously as a subject of investigation. The memory of Villismo, even when fading, is still a part of the consciousness of a nation and its folkloristic past, essential to Mexico's identity. Parra's *Writing Pancho Villa's Revolution* contains a wealth of historical and literary perspectives and is a book no student of modern Mexico will want to miss. ¡Viva Parra!