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THE *INDIGENISTA* NOVEL AND THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION

OF all the issues raised by the Mexican Revolution, none has stimulated artistic creativity more than that of the Indian, his past, his culture and his exclusion from the mainstream of national life. At the same time, no artistic form provides so thorough a treatment of these issues as the *indigenista* novel.¹

While the Revolution was not launched by Indians, nor were their interests initially central to it, as it developed their problems became a natural and important issue in the reorganization of Mexican society. As one writer observes: "in attempting to organize Mexican society, the *mestizo* revolutionary has had no other choice but to take into consideration the indigenous factor, so that although the Revolution was not the work of the Indian, in certain ways it has been for his benefit."²

By 1910, the Indian more than any other element of Mexican society had suffered from the increasing concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. Over the centuries more and more land had been taken from him, until under Díaz even subsistence was impossible on the scant, nearly worthless lands remaining to him. Labor on the white man's haciendas and in his mines provided almost the only alternative to subsistence farming, but in reality this was nothing more than a form of economic slavery. In either the mountains or the haciendas, the Indian was trapped in a socio-economic vise that was squeezing the life from him.

Due to his extreme poverty and isolation, the Indian's lack of political and economic power continued after the fall of Díaz. Hence, his recovery from centuries of abuse depended on the will of the revolutionary government, which, in 1915, began to adopt policies favorable to him. The first problem attacked was the basic one of land reform. However, this policy, like most others, bore only modest practical results until the administration of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940). The magnitude of the problem is illustrated by the fact that while Cárdenas distributed forty-five million acres of land (twice the amount distributed by all his

¹ The term *indigenista* is used in this text to designate novels in which there is at least some attempt to portray realistically indigenous characters living for the most part according to atavistic traditions. In this sense it is to be distinguished from the term *indianista* used to designate Romantic novels of the nineteenth century that idealized the Indian, and paid scant attention to the reality of his life style.

² ". . . al pretender organizar el conglomerado social mexicano, el mestizo revolucionario no ha podido menos que tomar en cuenta el factor indígena, de modo que aun cuando la revolución no fue del indio, ha sido en cierta manera para el indio." Moisés Saenz, *México íntegro* (Lima, Perú, 1939), p. 146.

predecessors), this was still less than half the acreage owned by just seventeen white men in 1910.³

An equally staggering problem for the Indian was that of education. The literacy rate nationally under Porfirio Díaz was only fifteen percent,⁴ leaving virtually the entire indigenous population illiterate. For many Indians this problem was further complicated by the language barrier. Accurate linguistic data for the Díaz period are not available, but whether monolingual or bilingual, the percentage of Mexicans living an aboriginal life style has been estimated at as high as sixty-one percent.⁵ The first significant efforts to give these people a modern education were initiated by José Vasconcelos, Minister of Public Instruction under Alvar Obregón (1920-1924). Again, however, it was not until the Cárdenas administration that programs for Indian education were productively expanded and intensified.⁶

The tremendous problems in education reflect the fundamental alienation between literate and indigenous Mexicans that had developed over the centuries. Inhabiting the same land, white and Indian were like foreigners to each other at the time of the Revolution. In an effort to bridge that gap, the government, the universities and private institutes launched programs to study both the Indian's contemporary culture and his history. Out of these investigations have come many important insights into the native way of life and world view.

This effort to understand the Indian contrasts strikingly with the attitude prevalent around the turn of the century, when the Indian was regarded by cultured Mexicans as a national burden and an obstacle to progress.⁷ This change in attitude was stimulated in part by a reaction to the foreign cultural and economic influences that prevailed in Mexico through the Díaz regime. In rejecting these influences, the revolutionaries turned toward the indigenous cultures in quest of an authentic sense of national identity.

It was in this quest for identity that art media first developed Indian themes. The pioneers in this area were the graphic artists, of whom the muralists such as Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros are the best known both nationally and internationally. While their international fame has been matched by artists of no other media, all forms of artistic expression in

³ Henry Bamford Parkes, *A History of Mexico* (3rd ed.; Boston, 1966), p. 305.

⁴ Anita Brenner, *The Wind that Swept Mexico* (New York and London, 1943), p. 6.

⁵ Warren L. Meinhardt, *The Mexican Indianist Novel: 1910-1960* (unpublished dissertation, Berkeley, 1965), p. 31, n. 14.

⁶ For example, under Cárdenas the Departamento de Educación Indígena was established in 1937, and the Consejo de Lenguas Indígenas, in 1939 (now called the Instituto de Alfabetización para Indígenas Monolingües).

⁷ Anita Brenner, *The Wind that Swept Mexico*, p. 6.

Mexico have developed a more national character as a result of Indian influence.

Primarily due to the language barrier, the role of the Indian in contemporary Mexican literature is less appreciated outside the country than is the case among non-literary art forms. Nevertheless, the art form that provides the most complete treatment of Indian themes is the *indigenista* novel. It mirrors all the Indian problems recognized and attacked by Mexican society since the Revolution, as well as the deep-seated forces that hinder adequate solution of those problems.

It seems no coincidence that the *indigenista* novel in Mexico first appeared during the Cárdenas administration. More than any other president since 1910, Cárdenas devoted himself sincerely to bettering the conditions of Indian life, and under his administration government programs directed toward that goal were broadened and intensified more than under any of his predecessors. As a result, the Cárdenas years have a unique importance to the *indigenista* novel throughout its development.

While the political climate of the Cárdenas years was uniquely promising for the Indian, those who were sympathetic to his cause had already witnessed the good intentions of revolutionary policy frustrated time and again, and they did not passively accept the conditions of the moment as the dawning of a new era. Indeed, it was in this historical context that the *indigenista* novel was born as a vehicle of protest against the apparently endless injustices suffered by the Indian. Dominated by this social commitment, the *indigenista* novels of the 1930's (*El indio* [1935] by Gregorio López y Fuentes; *Aztlán, tierra de las garzas* [1935] by Rubén Campos; *El resplandor* [1937] by Mauricio Magdaleno; and *San Gabriel de Valdivias* [1938] by Mariano Azuela) portray the Indian largely in terms of the abuses he suffers, and examine his culture and psychology only superficially. Hence, as a protest against existing conditions, they may also be counted among the novels of the Revolution.

Of the Cárdenas years, the most important *indigenista* novels in both theme and technique are *El indio* and *El resplandor*. The first of its kind, *El indio* is a fundamentally symbolic work, as its title suggests. Through symbolic characters and events, López y Fuentes evolves an allegory of race relations in Mexico since the Conquest. Of the novel's three parts, the last is the most important to the author's thesis. In it, the period of the Revolution is seen to be merely another framework within which the Conquest is re-enacted. Various reform projects are seen as nothing but stepping stones in the political careers of white men, while their only real effect on the Indian is to increase the rate at which he is being driven toward extinction. According to this view, the Revolution is only a rhetorical phenomenon that has left basic conditions unchanged.

A similar pessimism is reflected in *El resplendor* by Mauricio Magdaleno. Unlike the thematic panorama of *El indio*, *El resplendor* focuses on the problem of land. Trapped by the white man on the parched lands of San Andrés, the Indians are forever tormented by the sight of the lush hacienda "La Brisa", on which they must work to satisfy the white man's appetites. The impact of their dilemma is heightened through the cyclic pattern of history that Magdaleno evolves with structure and style. The narrative sweeps over generations of *hacendados*, all of whom are identically motivated and treat the Indians with uniform cruelty. The natives seem to be caught in an endless ritual of sacrifice, and their squalid village becomes a timeless inferno. Into this hell the Revolution brings the promise of salvation through return of "La Brisa" to the Indians. However, as in *El indio*, the promise is a sham, and the Revolution simply brings on one more cycle in the villagers' endless history of exploitation and suffering.

In their common pessimism both *El indio* and *El resplendor* are bitter indictments of the Revolution. Much of their final impact stems from the cyclic patterns in which they show events to occur. These patterns clearly suggest that the Revolution has failed to attack causes, and instead has simply evolved rhetorical means to disguise the truth.

The political climate in which *El indio* and *El resplendor* were written changed considerably in 1940 with the election of Manuel Avila Camacho as president. Indeed, it has become fashionable to cite that year as marking the end of the Revolution. Whether that judgment is totally accurate or not, it is true that the emphasis on land distribution and development of the Cárdenas years gave way to programs of building and industrialization under Avila Camacho and his successors. As a result, official attention paid to the Indian diminished noticeably and has not since regained the priority it had under Cárdenas.

While the Indian's political status decreased after 1940, the revolutionary goal of redeeming him socially and the quest for identity in his culture were by no means abandoned. From the political arena, emphasis simply shifted toward increased social services based on formal studies to identify need. A greater effort was made to understand the Indian's culture so as not to implement self-defeating measures on his behalf. These continuing efforts demonstrate that in at least one important area the spirit of the Revolution did not play itself out by 1940. They have contributed greatly to an understanding of the Indian, and have led to concrete improvements in his standard of living.

Both the changing political climate and the increasing knowledge of Indian culture are reflected in the *indigenista* novels of the 1940's. From the protest of the 1930's they turn to the quest for identity through a closer examination of the Indian's way of life and his role in national

history. In examining his culture, novelists of this period rely heavily on the historical and ethnological data gathered since the Revolution. At times their methodical technique is so pronounced that they seem to be writing anthropological texts in the guise of fiction. Their contributions do, however, pave the way for a deeper study of the Indian in the work of Ramón Rubín, beginning near the end of the decade.

Nayar (1941) by Miguel Angel Menéndez marks the beginning of the search for identity in the Mexican *indigenista* novel. Although it was published just after the end of the Cárdenas administration, the events in *Nayar* take place in 1936, indicating again the importance of that era for the *indigenista* novel. The hero, Ramón, obviously symbolizes the *mestizo* predominant in Mexican society. Accompanied by a white narrator, he makes a symbolic journey that ends among isolated Indians who live according to atavistic traditions. It is through intimate acquaintance with their culture that Ramón gains self-knowledge: "His *mestizo* alloy finally overcame the color of his skin, the color of dawn at the break of day. The light of the Spaniard was stronger than the shadow of the Indian."⁸ This discovery of identity in the *mestizo's* Spanish rather than his Indian heritage is unique among *indigenista* novels, and constitutes a reaction against the prevailing intellectual mood of the times.

The predominant, favorable attitude toward the Indian is again reflected in the historical novels that appear in close succession from 1946 to 1948. These novels examine different facets of the Indian problem at varying times in the nation's past, and through their ethnological data they contribute to the search for a cultural identity. The first of these works, *Taetzani* (1946) by Alba Sandoiz (pseudonym of Asunción Izquierdo de Albiñana), is a romantic tale set in the late eighteenth century. It portrays the Indian as a noble savage, and dramatizes his anguish at the prospect of cultural extinction. It is in the dramatization of this anguish that the novel is most successful. While a few documented events are woven into the plot, it and the characters bear no essential relationship to their time, so as a re-creation of an historical period, the novel fails.

Slightly more faithful to its historical bases is *Lola Casanova* (1947) by Francisco Rojas González. The protagonists are historical figures from the nineteenth century, and plot bears at least occasional resemblance to historical event. However, the author took considerable liberties with the details of plot and characterization. As in *Taetzani*, the Indian is portrayed as a basically noble savage, and, even more than in

⁸ "Su levadura mestiza venció por fin al color de su piel, color de madrugada a punto de aclarar el día. Pudo más la luz de lo español que la sombra de lo indio." Miguel Angel Menéndez, *Nayar* (4th ed., Mexico, 1965), p. 222.

Nayar, his life style is carefully documented. Much of this ethnological data, though, is not justified in the novel's development. Hence, it serves only as a pedantic embellishment, and the basic way in which the two-dimensional Indian characters relate to their culture is left a mystery.

In spite of the abundant ethnological data, an artificially grafted epilogue demonstrates that Rojas González's real purpose in *Lola Casanova* was neither to re-create history nor to document Indian custom. Instead, he wished to propose *mestizaje* as a solution to the race problem in Mexico. Unlike that of *Nayar*, however, the *mestizaje* proposed in *Lola Casanova* would be a blend of elements in which each would contribute, and none would be rejected: "Amalgamate all, to mold a new man, and with him, create a world, and after him and for him, a destiny."⁹

While Alba Sandoiz and Rojas González take broad liberties with their historical bases, Armando Chávez Camacho, in *Cajeme* (1948), adheres rigorously to document. The work examines the struggle of José María Leyva Pérez ("Cajeme") to form an independent Yaqui state in Sonora in the 1880's, and in his failure one sees the inevitable failure of all such independence movements among the natives. The author uses copious footnotes to substantiate both historical and ethnological facts, which, in a novel, produces an annoying distraction. Furthermore, this rigorous obedience to historical fact leads to a very uneven development, since where documentation is unavailable, there are simply gaps in the novel. As a result, *Cajeme* has greater interest as an historical text than as a work of fiction.

While the novelists from Menéndez to Chávez Camacho provided a great deal of historical and ethnological information, it had remained largely unassimilated, since in their subjective intent either to discover the *mestizo's* roots or to idealize the Indian, these writers left unexplored the precise way in which native custom serves basic human needs. Indeed, it was not until about 1948 that a full understanding of that function was becoming available through formal studies carried out among the Indians.

Probably the most important non-fictional document for the *indigenista* novel of this period is the well-known *Juan Pérez Jolote* (1948) by Ricardo Pozas. A study in social anthropology, it reproduces the autobiography of an Indian in his own words. Both the insights it contains and the artistry of its composition have made it influential in the development of the Mexican *indigenista* novel.

The first *indigenista* novel to follow Pozas' example was *El llamado*

⁹ ". . . amalgamarlo todo, para plasmar un hombre nuevo, y con él, crear un mundo, y tras él y para él, un destino." Francisco Rojas González, *Lola Casanova* (Mexico, 1947), p. 269.

dolor de los tzotziles (1949) by Ramón Rubín. The work is a psychological study of the protagonist, in which reality is seen basically as he experiences it. The study is somewhat unconvincing, since the pathology that he develops seems to reflect more the repressions of Western civilization as Freud saw them than those of the Tzotzil culture. On the other hand, however, the protagonist's experiences yield a balanced view of Indian culture. Through his misfortunes the reader is able to appreciate both the justification for certain customs as well as their destructive effect when applied to some individuals. Thus, the revolutionary fervor with which the Indian is exalted in such earlier works as *El indio*, *Taetzani* and *Lola Casanova* gives way in *El callado dolor de los tzotziles* to a more mature view of reality, and both culture and the individual are reduced to plausible human dimensions.

In addition to a balanced view of Indian culture, *El callado dolor de los tzotziles* represents at least three important developments in the Mexican *indigenista* novel. First is Rubín's examination of Indian society from within through the eyes of an individual. Second, in his use of custom he portrays Indian life more coherently than did his predecessors. Third, *El callado dolor de los tzotziles* takes place in the highlands of Chiapas, as do the works of all major *indigenista* writers after 1949.

The innovations heralded by *El callado dolor de los tzotziles* were, on the one hand, a natural step in the evolution of the *indigenista* novel. On the other hand, their development was accidentally influenced by government action in 1950. At that time the first of several Indian coordinating centers was established to serve comprehensively the particular needs of a group or region. Since the highlands of Chiapas have one of the highest concentrations of Indians of any area in Mexico, that zone became a major focal point of the program. It was to this region that a number of young Mexicans brought a professional training in ethnology, sociology and linguistics, as well as a literary vocation. This combination of professional training and literary skill has been extremely productive for both the *indigenista* novel and short story, giving rise to what Joseph Sommers calls the "cycle of Chiapas".¹⁰

Probably the most important contribution of the "cycle of Chiapas" has been to overcome the last vestige of non-Indian cultural bias in the examination of man and his society. This deeper understanding of the Indian is clearly evident in *Los hombres verdaderos* (1959) by Carlo Antonio Castro, who has done considerable work with the Tzeltal and Tzotzil tribes of Chiapas. It is a first person autobiographical narrative

¹⁰ Joseph Sommers, "El ciclo de Chiapas: nueva corriente literaria," *Cuadernos americanos* CXXXIII 2 (1964), pp. 246-261.

that extends to about midway in the protagonist's life. In the narration of his own learning experiences, the protagonist examines all major aspects of his culture, which provides not only a thorough study of custom, but also manifests the autochthonous values from which behavioral patterns grow. The narrative point of view so effectively draws the reader into the native world that for the first time in the *indigenista* novel it is the white man who appears as "other".

Los hombres verdaderos is further distinguished among *indigenista* novels by its portrayal of race relations. On the one hand, relations between white and Indian do not necessarily lead to the injustice and exploitation that inevitably result in previous *indigenista* novels. On the other hand, the protagonist is able to deal with the white man without experiencing a sense of inferiority or losing his cultural identity. In fact, his experiences with white society, begun during the Cárdenas years, instill in him a cautious optimism by the novel's end. Both his stable cultural identity and his optimism about racial harmony suggest a different solution to the Indian problem from that of Nayar and *Lola Casanova*. Instead of the earlier revolutionary goal of *mestizaje*, Carlo Antonio Castro seems to be calling for a coexistence and cooperation between the races, in which neither loses its ethnic identity, but in which understanding destroys the barriers of prejudice.

The final optimism of *Los hombres verdaderos* is totally lacking in *Oficio de tinieblas* (1962) by Rosario Castellanos, who, like Carlo Antonio Castro, has worked extensively with the Tzotzil and Tzeltal Indians. *Oficio de tinieblas*, like *Los hombres verdaderos*, is set in the highlands of Chiapas during the Cárdenas period, but the omniscient point of view is identified with neither the white nor the Indian community. Alienation between these groups is shown to be fully as severe and violent as in *El indio*. Indeed, in this respect the *indigenista* novel has come full round with *Oficio de tinieblas*, but in its conclusions the latter differs greatly from *El indio*. Instead of suggesting as López y Fuentes does that alienation reflects a basic difference between white and Indian, Castellanos studies their peculiar ways of responding to essentially the same problem. As a result, she discovers that their distinct behavior represents only particular forms through which universal needs are served.

The deep-seated prejudices that for generations have blinded white and Indian to their common humanity in *Oficio de tinieblas* place the legal reforms of the Cárdenas era in a far different light from that of *Los hombres verdaderos*. The problem of incorporating the Indian into the mainstream of national society is seen to run far deeper than the level of political reform, and the tool for breaking the mechanism of preju-

dice seems as yet undiscovered. In view of historical reality, Castellanos' gloomy portrait of the Indian's situation may be among the more accurate of those represented in the *indigenista* novels: "Mexico in 1960, after twenty years of economic progress, was still a land of contrasts. In fact, the differences between poverty and wealth, primitivism and civilization, were probably even sharper and more visible than in the days of the viceroys or of Porfirio Díaz."¹¹ Whether it is overly pessimistic or not Castellanos' is certainly the most probing and thorough analysis of race relations found in the Mexican *indigenista* novel.

Having evolved from a vehicle of social protest into a study of history and ethnology, the *indigenista* novel has probably run its course with the penetrating social analysis of *Oficio de tinieblas*. In that course it has forcibly dramatized the socio-economic issues raised by the Revolution, and has reflected the changing conditions in which these problems have been attacked. As they turn from protest toward ethnological study, *indigenista* novels probe deeper into Indian characters and culture, until the mask of exoticism is entirely stripped away, to reveal the human being of universal needs that lies beneath. In this discovery the *indigenista* novel contributes significantly to the quest for a national identity. At the same time, however, it appears to have advanced beyond Mexican society in general, in which the Indian is still a marginal citizen at best, and in which the higher positions are still occupied largely by those of European descent.

Little remains to be discovered in the novel about the Indian as a particular cultural being, or as a victim of injustice, and it is significant that since the publication of *Oficio de tinieblas* there have been no new additions to the *indigenista* vein. The task remaining to novelists is to discover the profound but subtle ways in which the Indian's culture has shaped that of modern Mexico. Only then will the sensitivity to the Indian engendered by the Revolution reach maturity and only then will the quest for a national identity reach its ultimate goal.

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¹¹ Henry Bamford Parkes, *A History of Mexico*, p. 433.