

TRAVELERS IN MEXICO  
A BRIEF ANTHOLOGY OF SELECTED MYTHS

Traveler, come with us! Do not be afraid. You will see sublime and melancholy, gay and beautiful scenes. Poet! Down there you will find poetic themes worthy of your most inspired verses. Artist! For you there are pictures of admirable freshness, painted by the hand of God. Writer! There you will encounter legends not yet written, legends of love and hate, of gratitude and vengeance, of hypocrisy and abnegation, of noble virtues and repugnant crimes; legends of fragrant romanticism and rich in truth. Let us go there, plowing the dark and agitated waves of the restless Atlantic, through the islands of the Antilles, to the shores of Anáhuac.

Captain Mayne Reid:

*Los Tiradores de Rifle*, 1850

In the strictest sense, the *Occident*, (that prestigious union of nations, ideologies of progress, and export and import companies) *discovered* Mexico in the 19th century. Only at the end of Spanish

Translated by Jeanne Fergusson.

domination—that never understood that “there are various kinds of excellence”—did other countries and Mexico itself begin to learn of the scope of the Conquest and regions affected by it, partially replacing Spanish mythology with another, more varied but equally remote. The greatness of the ancient Indians and their happy age was praised, while the living natives were reviled; the idealization of the pre-Columbian, which had been suspended by priests and *encomenderos*, was continued (Hernández wrote in 1577, “In this new world signs of avarice had never penetrated, nor had ambition been born until our compatriots arrived, carried by ships and the wind”); the possibilities of the new country were greedily examined; scornful notes were taken on the successive and simultaneous failures in the attempt to create a republic; the vices and virtues of those who were suddenly free were enumerated; a climate favorable to invasions and the amputation of territories was created; customs were observed with joy or alarm.

Europe had very fantastic ideas of the new world that Spain had jealously guarded, and exaggerated information on wealth and kingdoms. Theodore de Bry’s engravings of his travels in the East and West Indies (1590) had a large viewing public. There, everything was harmonious: the beautiful muscular bodies of the Indian warriors, the dimensions of their savagery and their anthropophagy, the precise dismemberment of bodies to be cooked or impaled, court customs, commendable nakedness, duels with bows and arrows, the cult of Huitzilopochtli. In his attenuation of this savagery, de Bry exchanges for esthetic astonishment the horrible actions of these beings that, without showing emotion, eat human flesh and roam through a perverse paradise.

European curiosity found its first trustworthy informant in Alexander von Humboldt, who traveled in Spanish America between 1799 and 1804 and wrote *A Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*. Humboldt, a scientist, scrupulously reported what he saw (mining operations, the activities of nature, social phenomena, archaeological ruins) and rigorously interpreted them. It was the end of an era. Between 1810 and 1820 independence movements occurred all over the continent and marked the arrival of numerous journalists and travelers provided with notebooks in which they tirelessly wrote down their impressions. There, confronting their avidity for marvels and disasters, was what the Spanish Crown and

### *Travelers in Mexico*

the Inquisition had not permitted to be seen. The travelers were excited, noticing what “the Mexicans themselves do not know”, and wrote, described and engraved. Who were they doing this for, and what significance for their public had the emperor Iturbide, the insurgent Vicente Guerrero, His Serene Highness Antonio López de Santa Anna, the alternating periods of stability and instability of a political chaos that lasted half a century? Very seldom did they want to give information on the overall view of ideologies and leaders. They took disorder for granted and were pleased by it. The French historian, Jean Jacques Ampère (son of the physicist) in *Paseo por America* (1855) ironically wrote:

In spite of what was predicted, there has been no revolution in Veracruz. The performance of the revolutionary or counter-revolutionary drama that was announced has been unexpectedly postponed for a few weeks. There is no show, but what a misfortune it would be to spend a week in Mexico without seeing a revolution.

For artists, society hardly existed: the landscape and the conversion of human beings into functional parts of the landscape was everything for them. Painting and engraving clarify what in literature is variegated and confused: enthusiasm before the potential of the country, indifference or suspicion before its inhabitants. The painters and engravers Johann Mortiz Rugendas, Juan Gros, Paul Fischer, Frederick Catherwood, Charles Bowes, Daniel Thomas Egerton, Eduardo Pimgret, George Ackerman, Enrique van Wyk or Eugenio Landesio have something in common at the limits of their specific qualities: the decision to equalize the physical and human landscape, to present on one hand the significance of this nation (in addition, unpredictable) and abide by the absolute aestheticization, to the conversion of beings into scenes of beauty, of societies into pictorial motifs. Exceptionally, an artist like Claudio Linati took the inventory of the new country into account and was forced into exile. The others, Egerton, Landesio or Gros made the ideological assumption clear: Mexico was the great miraculous area, mostly uninhabited. A Scottish lady, wife of the Spanish ambassador Francés Calderón de la Barca, perfectly expresses this “ideologization” of the landscape in *Life in Mexico* (1842):

In all the houses on the outskirts of Mexico City one experiences an undescrivable sensation of solitude, an immensity, a disillusion that I have never felt in the most solitary houses of other countries. It is not sadness, precisely because the sky is too brilliant, nature is felt too keenly and the air we breathe is too pure to permit it. It is the impression of finding oneself completely out of the world, alone, in the presence of a gigantic nature, covered with the tenuous traditions of a vanished race. And when an Indian passes and breaks the silence with his footsteps, instead of his presence breaking the enchantment,—poor and degraded descendant of those extraordinary and mysterious men whose origin we do not know—one would say that the mystery grows, in such a way that these woodcutters and water carriers, who live today in the land where their remote ancestors were once masters, are part of it.

#### EVERYTHING IS IN DECADENCE

The writers are blunt. They observe without mercy (and without explanation) the human conglomerate that had suddenly lost its former controls. In the inevitable chaos of a nation in the making, formed in authoritarianism and subject to plunder, they see only the threatening system of looting. The monarchists and conservatives warn: “*Everything is in decadence... A system of government has been abandoned and nothing put in its place...*” This is the axis of the ideas on Mexico. A nation no longer monarchic and which in no way could be called a republic. A colony that has stopped being so politically, but whose elite still hold to that form of life in which everything depends on a metropolis. Finally, what matters to a large number of travelers is what seems to be an inexhaustible supply of raw material.

In her valuable investigation *Travels in Mexico (Foreign Chronicles)* Margo Glantz gives examples of these travelers who are the advance guard of the general appraisal of the country. According to one of them, William Bullock, (in his book succinctly titled: *Six Months' Residence and Travels in Mexico; containing remarks on the present state of New Spain, its natural products, state of society, manufactures, trade, agriculture and antiquities*, 1824), the importance of his account “will depend on the growing interest in this part of the world and the recent importance of Mexico for English

commercial enterprises". The attitude of Bullock may be generalized. As soon as the country was open to foreigners and minimally affirmed the "maturity of soul" that assumes life in common with people of other beliefs, it was necessary to catalogue its wealth and study its commercial advantages. Because of this, Juan Ortega y Medina in his preface to the Spanish edition of Brantz Mayer's book, *Mexico As It Was and Is* (1844), characterizes almost all the travelers as "secret agents" or conscious or unconscious voices of the capitalism of the 19th century: "Behind the lyricism, behind the clear or hazy description of landscape and behind the folklorism is hidden and almost always evident the acute sense of smell of the searcher for future dividends" ... According to Ortega y Medina, to this is added the way in which the perception of Mexico is transformed into a new idea, "*Mexico*", the conversion of the political fact resulting from the hegemony of the metropolis into an idea that combines denigration with self-denigration. The ideologues of the Mexican right and almost all travelers constructed that "*Mexico*" and peopled it with prejudices that would be converted into judgments, fantastic notes on the national psychology that would become actualities and ways of behavior.

"*Mexico*" is a country whose natives, from pretention to huts, cannot sense, they can only suffer. That determination is expressed in the great majority of the accounts of travelers who, conforming to the time, see themselves literally undertaking an odyssey, examining the good and bad savages, ratifying religious or political prejudices. "*Mexico*" is the unknown Utopia, the terror equivalent to an inferno, exceptional places encircled by seas of misery, hospitable and picturesque notations. The great chroniclers, Brantz Mayer, Francés de la Barca, Mathieu de Fossey, J.R. Poinsett, Albert Gilliam or J.C. Beltrami agree on all that, without being explicit: Mexico is a phenomenon that, unfortunately, the Mexicans do not understand.

#### THE WORKS OF MAN

In a magnificent book of essays, *Orientalism*, Edward W. Said examines the ideological construction of the Orient and recapitulates: "My point of departure is that Orient is not an inert fact of

nature. It is not merely *there*, in the same way that Occident itself is not *there* either. We must take seriously the great observation of Vico: men make their own history, what they know is what they have achieved, and this is extended to geography: as geographical and cultural entities, geographical sectors such as “Orient” and “Occident” are man’s work. Thus, like the Occident itself, the Orient is an idea with history and tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary that has held reality and presence in and for the West; the two geographical entities support each other and in a way reflect each other”.

The same thing applies to the geographical and cultural fact called “*Mexico*”, whose process goes from *historical invention* to the cataloguing of the virtues and faults of its inhabitants, always formalized according to the perspective of “civilization”. In reading the journalists and travelers we observe the superimposition of two inclinations: one that is commanded by an ability to observe, intelligence and prejudices of class and nation, and one which, not often, was inspired by their hosts. A national voice is heard in many of the complaints and quarrels of these travelers, that of the upper class, first to insistently denounce the savagery of Mexico, which was mythified and declared an unrenounceable characteristic of the new nation. Alongside the revelations of the travelers and journalists arose in Mexico the initial conclusions that the most privileged inhabitants derived from their country.

What was to be done? A mortgaged nation, without a communications network, subject to the irresponsibility of the politicians, to unwholesome living conditions, to banditry, with only a small part of the population able to read and write, no schools and without a visible future. In 1839, the *Calendario de M. Lara* records a homily:

Independence itself, that should be the origin of our happiness and the inexhaustible source of all good, is considered by some, not without reason, as another Pandora’s box that has released every calamity among the unfortunate Mexicans. Within the space of nineteen years we have run the gamut of all forms of government without having enjoyed the good, while suffering all the evils to which each of us is susceptible.

And here is the lament of a creole Job, the *Santanista* José María

*Travelers in Mexico*

Tornel y Mendivil, of the *Supremo Poder Conservador*. Tornel says in the Alameda, on the solemn anniversary of Independence:

It has been two months since the cannon thundered in the streets and plazas of this opulent capital. We have not come to this lovely place without noting the debris and ruins of majestic buildings that could have been our heritage and that we did not know enough to respect. On your way from the temple of august ceremonies, you can observe the route, formerly of triumph and now sprinkled with Mexican blood and the source of painful lamentations. Alas! Why are the unfortunate born and life given to a people who feel only affliction, anguish and desperation? Should we curse the day the Republic was born? Do I dare execrate the night when the news of its political conception was announced to the world? Oh, no! Friends, forgive the wanderings of an imagination that is sorrowful and agitated because of the gloomy images of barren and unfortunate dissensions.

Into such a torn society the travelers arrived, and in this region they stayed. Daily events were terrifying for the dominating classes, accustomed as they were to the harsh colonial order: they were obliged to seize apocalyptic sensations that were an ideological tool. It was with these people, frightened and controlled by the philosophy of devastation, that almost all the visitors preferably communicated.

“THE MEN ARE WITHOUT HONOR AND THE WOMEN WITHOUT VIRTUE”

The testimony of the traveler is also the preparation for warlike spirits. From 1820 until the eve of the war with Mexico, the North Americans traveled to proclaim the beauties of Texas, California and New Mexico and to ascertain the impotence of the Mexican government. The theory of Manifest Destiny advanced, divided into two branches: the Manifest Destiny of the United States is universal greatness; that of Mexico is plunder. Albert Pike wrote in *Prose Sketches and Poems Written in the Western Country* (1834)—quoted by D. Wayne Gunn in his excellent book, *North American and British Writers in Mexico* (1960)—“The Mexicans do not cease to lie and steal and do not know what gratitude is. In New Mexico honor seems to be in the hands of the proprietor.



Character is only a drug, an object of no value, and he who is lacking in it is as rich as he who has it to a high degree. The most honored men in this country are those who have stolen, committed perjury or dishonored themselves”.

The technique is very simple. A capricious observation made of a few is applied to all. Mexicans are primitives and thieves. Richard Henry Dana, Jr., in his classic *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840) is blunt; Mexicans are “a lazy, wasteful people”, upon whom has fallen a curse “stripping them of everything except their pride, their habits and their voices”. He concludes, “In the hands of an enterprising people, what a great country this could be!” Generalization is inevitable and determined by economic and territorial ambition, as well as the desire to legalize prejudices. George F. Ruxton declares in *Adventures in Mexico and the Rocky Mountains* (1847): “I do not recall having seen a single trait worthy of praise in the character of the Mexican, always excepting the women from this general concept...”

A campaign of aggression, contempt and conquest was culminated by the war of 1847, a campaign during which in the emerging nation of the United States were constructed images that activated and perfected an enterprise of looting. The national, religious and racial differences were utilized in a lasting publicity: the Mexican was weak, without ambition and true national pride, and was easily calmed by the consolations of his fanatical faith. The political and administrative ineptitude of Mexico was repeated with vehemence, and even before the war began the North Americans considered it to be just and inevitable. What better destiny for those territories than to subtract them from laziness, cowardice, economic voracity and the inefficiency of the Mexicans, the *meskins* or *greasers*?

If anything is demonstrated by investigations such as that of Cecil Robinson in *Mexico and the Hispanic Southwest in American Literature* (University of Arizona Press, 1977) it is the calculated operation of physical and moral destruction plotted by the United States with an efficiency whose traces are still seen today—with more productive ends—of a country and a national psychology. In reports and travel books, for example, it is possible to reconstruct a panorama overflowing with prophecies, terrors, menaces and mythical exaltations and occupied in the fierce humiliation of the poor neighbor. Narrators or witnesses, describe the Mexican as an unfortunate drunkard or tireless procreator who will go from the



*Travelers in Mexico*

dusty and frightening shadows that hover in novels entitled *Los Gringos* or *The Time of the Gringo* to the incomprehensible and trivially kind customs of the chronicles.

Scorn substitutes or anticipates punishment. An abundant literature insists on the examination of the remains of greatness, a subjected arrogance that became abject. Prescott, the great publicizer of the Conquest, sees in the Mexican the “degenerate descendant” of the Aztecs. “Those familiar with the Mexicans of today find it difficult to understand how this nation was at times capable of creating a refined culture”. In 1847 George Wilkins Kendall summarizes typically:

It is strange that in as noble a country as could be desired on the face of the earth, one that has a variety of soils and climates, fruit and minerals, the Mexicans do not benefit from example and adapt the systems of their Saxon neighbors. They obstinately cling to the customs of their ancestors and become poorer every day; in short, they fall behind morally, physically and intellectually in the great race toward progress that is taking place in almost all the corners of the world. Give them tortillas, beans and red chile to gratify their animal needs and seven out of every ten Mexicans will be satisfied; and so it will continue until the race becomes extinct or mixed with the Anglo-Saxons.

Xenophobia at the service of expansion. The nationalist interest of the United States ordains a vision of the Mexican: cowardly, lazy, treacherous, a child of the *fandango* incapable of a sustained mental effort. In 1856 the Texan writer Jeremiah Clement gave his version of the cause for the racist term “greaser”:

For a North American whose bad luck forced him to stay for a time in the city of Matamoros, it was not difficult to establish the origin of the term “greaser” given by the old Texans to Mexican ranchers and subsequently applied to the entire nation. Narrow, muddy, filthy streets teeming with equally filthy men, women and children, houses without flooring, constructed of mud and straw, foggy and unwholesome air; everything produces an ensemble of discomforts that makes the purgatory of the orthodox Catholic seem like a pleasant place. In Mexico the people seem greasy, their clothes are greasy, their houses are greasy, so that grease and filth share dominion, and it is from this that the singular exactness of

the name “greaser” brought about its universal adoption by the North American army.

In 1869 John Ross Browne in *Adventures in Apache Country* described the Sonorans:

For this reason, I believe that Sonora can surpass the entire world in the production of low races. The mixture of bloods has prevailed in this region for three centuries. Each passing generation worsens the population, and the Sonorans may now be classified as near to their natural companions: Indians, *burros* and coyotes. (Quoted by Rodolfo Acuña in *América ocupada*).

In addition: the Mexican is the eternal minor, never adult, irresponsible because of his fears, his organic laziness, his lavish sensuality or his incapacity for cleanliness. Nothing could be better than to deprive him of his land that he would never exert himself to cultivate.

#### THE MUSEUM OF PRIMITIVISM

From our perspective, four stages are clearly discernible in the invention/re-creation of “*Mexico*” for the traveler. The first stage lasts from approximately 1820 to the beginning of the Restored Republic (1867); the second goes from the Restored Republic to the end of the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1910); the third is the recapitulation of the armed revolution (approximately 1910-1917); and the fourth, from the '20's to the '40's, is the discovery of the “*Mexico*” of primitive essences, competent in artistic achievements and the estheticization of cruelty. These stages have points in common:

- The use of key terms: mystery, primitivism, savagery, innocence, lost paradise, atavism, sensuality, cruelty.
- The impression of an unrecuperable beauty expressed in colonial monuments, pre-Columbian ruins, that which has no continuity nor descendants who measure up to its greatness. Thus, for example, to describe Guanajuato, a very beautiful colonial city, is to refute the present abilities of the Mexicans.
- The idea, shared by many natives, that “*Mexico*” can only be

*Travelers in Mexico*

seen through foreign eyes. For the Mexicans, especially in the 19th century, any objectivity was impossible because of frenetic partisanship.

- The imperious control over the inhabitants of colonial countries, synthesized by Marx in *The 18th Brumaire*: “they cannot represent themselves; they must be represented”.
- The absence of *civilization* as the first evaluating criterion. This helped the disguising of political, economic, religious and cultural interests.

During the first stage, it was usual to ignore the improbable advent of democracy and be entranced before the natural beauties and the perfect example of disaster. Exoticism was everything, and the conversion of Mexican reality into exotic remoteness deprived it of the just denouncement of evils: cruelty, apathy, the rejection of juridical systems, the certainty that who steals from a government steals from nobody. The majority of the travelers was not interested in understanding but in scandalizing, and description was the favourite analysis, for instance, the journey over inhospitable roads, transport unworthy of the name, food that immediately brought on “black vomit”, thieving customs officers, bandits, revolutions, bloodthirsty Indians. The traveler was confronted with all that *was not civilization* and quickly remembered that civilization meant physical and spiritual comfort. To travel was to transmit the terror of one who, in the 19th century, was returned to the Middle Ages. In Jalapá, Joel R. Poinsett (author of *Notes in Mexico, made in the autumn of 1822*, published in 1824), arrived at a place that was so filthy that his servants needed a shovel before they could sweep in order to install camping beds, tables and chairs. Those inns, with holes pompously called windows...! In *Les Anciennes villes du Nouveau monde* (1855) Désiré Charnay told of a journey of more than fifty kilometers in Citalá “on the back of an Indian”: “It is the usual way to travel in this part of the mountains, and one experiences an uncomfortable sensation of something unfitting, to convert one’s fellow man into a beast of burden for one’s benefit. Of course, the feeling quickly vanishes, because it does not bother them, and they carry one as if he were a bag of cotton...”

How far away from civilization is a country whose inhabitants are absolutely unconcerned about their condition as beasts of burden? If the reports proliferate it is due to the "fascination for the depths" of the travelers and their readers in Southampton, Orly, Philadelphia or Milan. Everything on the surface is risk, adventure, moral scandal, humanistic preoccupation. Everything, from the arrival at Veracruz ("anchored with reefs", according to Humboldt) to the incursion through rocky and thorny wasteland that extends to infinity. To the obstacles is added the astonishment at seeing how the natives badly imitate civilization. On the one hand is the grotesque mockery of a European court in the madness of Generalissimo Santa Anna; on the other the uniforms that are intended to be majestic and the customs of a society that longs to be elegant. These people without history copy everything, and what in Europe is *civic enthusiasm* is here only partisanship. Basil Hall records in *Voyage au Chili, au Pérou et en Mexique* (1825):

In times of crisis a partisan spirit dominates all the members of society; the impartial foreigner who does not participate and is not excited by one or the other party is considered an intruder; his indifference is seen almost as hostility...

When we arrive it seems curious to us that the entire population is occupied with only one thing; later, when it is impossible for us to compete with them in zeal and enthusiasm for the cause, the scene becomes boring for us.

The Mexican landscape also lends itself to prophetic considerations. Ampère is a typical case:

Mexico is like a condemned man who has been conceded an undetermined amount of time; this time cannot be very long. Such a conviction is on everyone's mind, and I notice that a person in a very high position expressed in a conversation a wish that France or England would adopt Mexico, so that his country could escape falling into the hands of the United States... After having seen in the United States how a people can be born and grow, here I see how a nation dissolves and is extinguished.

The best information that reporters and travelers furnished was, all in all, political. For above the amiable description and sharp

### *Travelers in Mexico*

intuition was the countersign of expansionist necessities, the conditioned reflex of superiorities. From the 19th century, the cultures represented by the travelers make of the Mexican a useful and profitable contrast. In the details telling of the journey from Morelia to Guadalajara (6 days) or from Tequila to Tepic (13 days), we read between the lines the joy of anticipating the reactions of compatriots, the taste for adventure still possible in a sphere subjected to the calm of progress, the pleasure of reminding the far-away readers that civilized comfort is not even the aspiration of millions of people. Ah, those stagecoaches for six or eight persons travelling at five miles an hour! Oh, the litters and wheelbarrows! Ah, the aspect of the Indians and the Mexicans with whom the traveler was forced to have contact! Ah, the good luck to recover some merit from this mass of unknowns that is this people!

### GOOD SOCIETY AND ITS ENEMIES

In the 19th century, foreign reporters in Mexico insist explicitly on the qualifier that everything determines or explains: “primitive”, that is, subject to redemption or susceptible to attention (industrial and mercantile, prerequisite to cultural assistance). Only by diligence could this magic country be added—with the magic of removal of Reason and Progress—to the concert of civilized countries. In such a system of priorities even those who never traveled in the New World were hopeful. Two examples: Jules Verne in *Un drama en México* (1860) and Alexandre Dumas père in *Diario de Marie Giovanni* (1855). The attitude of Verne is paradigmatic. If he disregarded the colonialist order, he had absolutely no information at his disposal. He describes an uninhabited country in which the only possibility is to magnify and describe the landscape, to know that here Nature’s time devours Society’s time. Mexico is suitable for a backdrop: mountains, narrow roads skirting precipices that bring on vertigo, vegetation whose luxuriousness is without a name. Mexico: context, slope, vegetation; the frame within which majestic or sordid tragedies are incited. Mexico, the succession of auditory and visual effects that causes a sentiment of deep catastrophe in the soul that natural grandeur (always) promotes.

In *Diario de Marie Giovanni Dumas* combines trustworthy information with the unchaining of prejudices. The principal character says:

“The best stores are found in the Calle de Plateros.

In an instant I was transported to Paris, which I had left two years earlier.

The stores on the Calle de Plateros rival in luxury those of the Rue de la Paix and Rue de Richelieu. In addition, which is not surprising, most or nearly most of the stores are French.

I found there exactly what I could have seen in Paris in the best establishments, except that fashions were a month late, the time it took for the boats to arrive from France”.

Dumas approaches the understandable “*Mexico*”, the society that existed through reflection and mimesis, to guarantee the efficiency of the extremes in a colonial country. *As-in-Paris*, with the difference that marks the feeling of orphanhood and abandonment. Luxury, fiestas, big stores, boulevards crowded with a boastful throng, dressed in their finery, churches to which one went in the same spirit as to a fashion show, enclosed sections at the opera, where women smoked, lavish spending to correct the wrong idea that the guests had of their hosts, carriages that indicated the precise location of their owners on the social scale.

Some were entranced by the opulence of the barbarians: others were distrustful of it. Ampère, suspicious, knows that he is not seeing “regular and lasting” institutions. Mexican society, “undermined at the foundation, rests on a vacuum and will end by plunging into it”. But if the apocalyptic sensation is usually rhetorical, quite real is the taste to alternate it with that “brilliance suspended in a vacuum”, and a belief is inevitable: the *Mexicans*, both men and women, are only those leaders of social visibility, the people with whom the travelers speak English or French, courteous hosts. They have taken possession of escutcheons, and nobody disputes their right to exclusiveness (*The Others* are the Indians, the unknowns, the mass covered by the racist term *léperos*). One of the many French and imperialist witnesses of the time, the Countess Paula Kolonitz, who had been a member of the retinue of the Empress Carlotta at Miramar (*Eine Reise nach Mexico im Jahre 1864*), notes:

## *Travelers in Mexico*

Mexico City has four or five theaters, two of which are among the best I have seen. They are large, very sonorous; their wide corridors are open and supported by graceful columns; garlands of gilded and slightly raised flowers intertwine on a white background. The illusion is very brilliant and the custom of the Mexican ladies of not attending the theater unless in the most sumptuous clothing gives a magic, almost solemn effect... At six o'clock in the evening, in long files of carriages, the Mexicans take the air. Here the ladies come, in their evening finery, low-necked dresses decorated with flowers... As I said before, the carriages and attendants are lacking in taste... The men, most of the time, come on horseback and wear national dress, whereas when they are on foot or in their houses, they use French dress. That large sombrero in a light color and with a wide brim that extends over the shoulder, decorated with gold cords; that dark jacket with its small silver buttons; the boots that are embroidered in gold and silver are worn over the trousers, no lower than the knee (fastened at the waist with a leather belt), everything is graceful and gives them a good appearance... the whole life of the Mexican carries with it the character of *dolce far niente*; I never saw them run quickly through the streets; never utilize their time. They get up early, and the veiled women go to church while the men begin their rides on horseback.

The expropriation of nobility. Only some are, and deserve to be, called *Mexicans*. The Countess Kolonitz says: "The interior arrangement of the Mexican houses is most beautiful and comfortable. The staircase, almost always extraordinarily steep, rises from the gallery that surrounds the house and upon which all the doors open..." She continues, "The Mexicans are very fond of gilt; and tables, armoires, mirrors, moldings are part of the most sophisticated luxury". Her generalizations extend to the corruption in society and government. The countess notes:

The condemnation for which I make myself the spokesman is not serious, but it is true that to judge by its co-nationals (the Mexicans) the harshest accusations may be made. No one trusts anyone else, and they denounce each other as thieves and traitors. *Chez nous rien n'est organisé que le vol!* a very amiable Mexican said to me one day... And no doubt he was right, because everyone steals, not only the ruffians who rob stagecoaches and attack *haciendas*. The ones who set the best example are the presidents



of the Republic. Elected for only three years, they are usually soon overthrown by some rival so that they take advantage of the short time they are in power to enrich themselves and put their relatives into high positions of the Republic, who in this way are offered the best opportunities to amass a fortune and make themselves powerful...

“I DO NOT DARE TO RAISE MY EYES”

The ironic “dazzlement” in face of Good Society is, unequivocally, fear and horrified expressions in face of the marginal people, the *léperos*, who by their appearance show the absence of that minimum guarantee: the imitation of the European. The Marquise Calderón de la Barca writes:

While I am writing, a horrible *lépero* is watching me out of the corner of his eye, through the window, reciting an interminable and strange complaint, at the same time putting out his hand with only two big fingers; the other three were probably tied back in dissimulation. “Señorita, señorita, for the love of the most pure blood of Christ, for the miraculous conception...” Poor man! I cannot raise my eyes, but I feel that his eyes are fixed on a gold watch and some seals that are on the table. That is the worst that can happen in a one-storey house... And now others are arriving! a paralyzed woman, straddling the shoulders of a bearded man, very robust, so that it appears I should have to recur to more effective means, were it not for the iron bars and that he has a deformed foot, probably fastened behind who knows by what extraordinary device... How much whining! How many rags! What a chorus of lamentations! This gathering is due, surely, to the fact that yesterday we sent them some money. I try to act as though I don't understand and continue writing as if I were deaf. I must leave the room without looking over my shoulder and tell the porter to send them away. Why don't they use bell-pulls here?

Disturbances, annoyances, anxiety, fear. These sensations in a country whose mystery was a bottomless well contrast with the clouded vision of the travelers in Mexico, enthusiastic about the power of the United States and the accumulated perfections of Europe. If Mexican society surprised the travelers with its splendor and ostentatious spending, it was to emphasize its rash and irre-

*Travelers in Mexico*

sponsible nature, ruled by superstition and lacking civilized goals. For example, how is the dreadful egalitarianism of a country that is no longer monarchical conceivable?—noting, with posthumous irony, that because of the *Grito de Dolores* and Independence, the Indian had the same right to get drunk as the *cristiano*. Time and again in describing the filth of a roadside inn, the unwholesomeness of Veracruz or daily life, the travelers and chroniclers are astonished before this people milling around in its infancy. The Marquise Calderón summarizes:

Never have I known a country where, as in Mexico, families are so closely united, where affections are so concentrated or where this devoted respect and obedience exists on the part of the children and married sons and daughters for their parents. It seems that they have never stopped being children. I know many families whose married children continue to live in the house of their parents, forming a kind of small colony, living together in the greatest harmony. They cannot accept the idea of a separation, and only an unfortunate necessity makes them abandon the paternal hearth. They turn a deaf ear to all the tales of the travelers who describe the pleasures they could enjoy in the capitals of Europe. Their families are in Mexico: parents, brothers, relatives, and they cannot conceive of happiness elsewhere. You can imagine, then, the tremendous sacrifice of parents that for religious motives dedicate their daughters to life in a convent.

Both wishing and not wishing to, the majority of the travelers encountered what they already knew. From a people recently risen to the universal light, only immature customs may be inferred. Without paying attention to the three centuries of viceroyalty, the Marquise Calderón attributes the family attachment (the result of authoritarian structures) to the childish disposition of the people. Equally, in the matter of housing, she does not accept that the shortage of basic necessities, furniture and food, the awareness of hygiene can be explained by the simple fact that travel in Mexico “is something of recent date here; it is as if we are living a novelty” (Brantz Mayer). Explanations are plentiful; astonishments are abundant.

In the face of “unusual” customs, a colonial attitude was inevitable: immediate superiority. Not only the Protestant Anglo-Saxons, also Catholic Latins were ostensibly irritated before superstition. The Marie Giovanni of Dumas affirms: “Truly there is nothing more strange for us French Catholics than to see those Christian ceremonies that seem so close to idolatry. There is no idol or pagan fetish that can give an idea of those mutilated images before which the people kneel”. She cuts short the diatribe, redeeming something of this wreckage of paganism with a pious mask: “We hasten to say that those ceremonies only exist among the common people, the Indians or *mestizos*. Fetishism is not, after all, so surprising. Indians and *mestizos* are very fond of exterior pomp”.

Visitors and nationals describe an immature people, spontaneous, loving ostentation, infantile, idolatrous, always looking for bloodshed, installed in begging and robbery. This “*Mexico*”, invented as a general explanation in face of the demand for national psychologies, converts the description of events into psychic obligation and sees in the processes of growth (certainly painful) the abandonment of tradition. Everything comes together in the presentation into society of an *expendable* people, unfit to think for itself, in which the bold may emulate Cortés, Pizarro and James Fenimore Cooper, while the more cultivated will evoke the discoveries of Rousseau. Faced with the Mexicans, they feel themselves possessors of a supreme advantage, a mixture of romantic imagination, bitter wisdom and financial calculation: their point of view is that of Civilization. With “the eyes of the white man” they inquisitively look over the bullrings, cock fights and religious festivals; the hordes of beggars and rogues; the executions and downfalls of leaders; idolatry protected by the opportunism of the Roman church; and the autocratic system that calls itself “Republic”.

A central aspect is lacking, one that the modesty of the time silences or covers up with the rhetorical veil of the rediscovery of innocence: native sensuality, something that goes far beyond complacency in the “beauty of Mexican women” and acknowledges the orgiastic powers of abundance and nature and the complete ignorance of civilization. (The tendency, elaborated and updated,

*Travelers in Mexico*

persists in each of the descriptions of paradisiacal and cruel Mexico that abound from the 19th century). For Mathieu de Fossey (*Le Mexique*, 1857), for instance, the illnesses, storms, savage ambushes, the hostility of the natives, is justified by the reeducation of the senses, the delight in adventure and the certainty of rediscovering something already abandoned by France and the West. Dutifully he marveled at the forests, the rivers, the green thickets, the clear water, the women with bronzed bodies naked to the waist, the men in their hammocks. It was a sensualized Eden without ethical problems, since the sexuality of the natives did not reach the level of moral responsibility. They were, at the best, beautiful animals lacking conscience and soul although they were in human form:

If it is thus that the view of those sumptuous monuments, created by man, excites in us a profound admiration, true honor to the arts, it is necessary to confess that it is never enough to produce a sentiment of happiness or an unknown enchantment, everything being serious and uniform in our admiration. But as soon as nature is invested with what it contains of variety and interest and admits us to the spectacle of its great scenic changes, we experience a sweet satisfaction with living and are even actors in this continuous metamorphosis, we enjoy it as spectators, as if it were presented only for us; so that each new secret of nature, disclosing itself, serves as a new incentive for our curiosity.

The opinion of De Fossey is categorical: the greatest satisfaction in life is nourished by nature and transcends discomforts, fear of the natives and fear of self-abandonment. Not in vain does De Fossey know ecstasy on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, a region that for its physical characteristics and density of indigenous culture lends itself to the continuous mythification of the first frightened priest of Sergio Eisenstein in *Que viva México*.

OF PULQUE, ARCHITECTURE AND DICTATORSHIP

Beginning with the liberals' triumph over Maximilian, there is considerable variation in the tone of chronicles and accounts of the travelers. In the eyes of the "civilized world", first Benito Juarez,

then Porfirio Díaz *normalized* Mexico and, in some way, the execution of Maximilian—also a traveler in search of fascinating spectacles—took away much of the character of “exoticism” from the country. Moreover, Mexico had been “Mexicanized”, that is, in the minds of its ruling class many of the myths and fables invented by external criteria had been internalized.

A communication network was developing within the country, and the evolving of the train and telegraph caused the accumulated destiny of good- and ill-wishers to be disregarded. In part, Mexico was no longer “the wilderness of instinct and injustice” and, even though it persisted in its legendary condition, the work and charm of Porfirio Díaz were viewed from the outside as signs of progress. The travelers of the second stage (1867-1910) go from disdain to fear, from zoological curiosity to enthusiasm for the society that was striving. For the North Americans, the spectacle was centered on the study of the past and its customs (in his classic *The Education of Henry Adams*, 1907, the author assures us that he went to Mexico “to study the delights of pulque and baroque architecture”) or in the uncertainty about democratic apprenticeship. The liberal William Cullen Bryant wondered in 1872: “Who can affirm that this country that has made so much progress will not be able to accustom itself calmly to submit to the arbitrariness of the vote, as a lesson learned through a long series of bloody experiences?”

Attention was now centered on this peculiar community, mestiza and indigenous, bloodthirsty and hospitable, Catholic and pagan. The entomological view of the first stage of travelers was converted into an anthropological taste for a community whose elite longed for progress, in the midst of masses clinging to the indistinction between physical nature and social nature. In *Escenas de la vida civil en México* (1850) the Frenchman Gabriel Ferry advances this somewhat “museographic” perspective. Ferry knows a *lépero*, Perico, who invites him to a wake “to pray for the dead and rejoice with the living”:

The meeting to which I went with the *lépero* presented a very strange scene. About twenty individuals of the lower class, men and women, were seated in a circle; everyone was talking, shouting and gesticulating at once. The room was full of a ghastly, fetid

odor, barely attenuated by the smoke of cigars and the vapors of sherry and *chinguirito* (rum). In one corner of the room was a table covered with provisions of all kinds, as well as cups, glasses and bottles. At a more distant table, around which were crowded a group of card players, was heard amid the noise of copper coins all the technical terms of *monte*, being disputed with all the heat excited by liquor, over some piles of *cuartillas* and *tlacos* (copper coins). Under the triple inspiration of wine, women and gambling, the orgy at which I was present seemed at first that it would later take a quick and fearful turn, but what surprised me most was precisely the object that attracted so little of the attention of the people there. On a table was extended the corpse of a child who was scarcely seven years old. His pale forehead, covered with flowers that were withered with the heat of the suffocating atmosphere, his vitreous eyes and his lean cheeks full of purplish spots indicated at a glance that life had abandoned him and that it had been several days that he slept the eternal sleep. In the midst of the shouts, loud laughter, the card game and conversations; in the midst of those men and women who laughed and sang like savages, the sight of that young corpse and the jewelry that covered it far from taking the lugubrious solemnity away from death, made it more repugnant. There you have the place that I visited thanks to the ingenious solicitude of Perico.

A general silence followed our entrance. A man rose to receive us whom I recognized as the owner of the house, father of the dead child. His face, far from being clouded over with grief, seemed on the contrary radiant with happiness, and he pointed with pride to the numerous guests assembled to celebrate with him the death of his son, considered as a favor from Heaven, since God had called him to his side in a state of innocence. He made us welcome saying that on such a day strangers were equal to friends. Thanks to the loquacity of Perico, I was the target of all eyes. The *lépero* had put me in a role that was difficult to play, then he had said to anyone who would listen that it was impossible to come across any man who was a better fighter than I. To place me even higher he urged me to hide my gloves and to affect an air of *perdonavidas*, convinced that it was prudent to howl, being among wolves.

The new mythology was established: love of death, the pleasure of fighting, the festivities of the funeral vigil. A sociologically explainable behavior is converted into the essence of the community.

“I WISH TO BE EXECUTED BEFORE THE PUBLIC AND PEOPLE”

The Mexican Revolution convoked two fundamental species of travelers: those who came to be horrified and to extract sensational material that would cause delightful shivers among the civilized, and radical reporters who tried to understand and support a popular explosion. The great precursor was the North American anarchist, John Kenneth Turner, who in 1908 published his report *Barbarous Mexico*, under the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. For the first time the term *barbarous* was not applied to the people but to the oppression under the army. Turner records:

A resident who has been for a long time in Mexico calculated that 200,000 residents of the capital, that is, 40% of its population, are sleeping on the ground. On the ground does not mean in the streets, because it is not permitted to sleep in the street nor in the parks, but on the floors in cheap housing or inns.

It is possible that this is not quite exact: nevertheless, from having observed it I confirm that the figure of 100,000 would be conservative and that at least 25,000 spend the night in *mesones*, a name commonly given to the cheapest lodging for transients.

A *mesón* is an inn so miserable that only *galeras* or prison dormitories for slaves from the “*tierra caliente*” are worse, the reason for that being that in the latter the slaves are driven with lashes, half dead with fatigue, hunger and fever, and the door is locked when they are inside, while the miserable, ragged and starving people who go through the streets of the city arrive at the *mesones* that rent, for three copper *centavos*, a short and limited refuge. . . a piece of bare ground on which to throw themselves, a mat, the company of lizards that breed in the filth, and a restless night in a nauseating lodging with 100 or more people who snore, are agitated and are brothers in misery.

Beginning with Turner, there are many writers, especially North Americans, who crowd together in Mexico, testifying to the misery, the mystery, the revolution, the revelations. Some try to demystify, to understand what is really happening. The majority feel the desire to penetrate the legendary atmosphere, even at a high price. In a letter of 1913, the writer Ambrose Bierce (who disappeared in the revolution) says to his niece: “Good-bye. If you hear that they put me against a Mexican stone wall and tore me to pieces with bullets,



*Travelers in Mexico*

think that I believe it is a good way to leave life. To avoid old age, illness or the risk of falling down the stairs in some wine shop. To be a gringo in Mexico is truly euthanasia!”

The novelist Jack London was in at the beginning, partisan of the revolution and the Socialist project of the *Flores Magón* and was later angry when faced with a devastated country. As documented by D. Wayne Gunn, London despised the natives: “only descendants of the millions of stupid people who could not hold up under the hundreds of vagabonds of Cortés and stupidly passed from the hard slavery of the Montezumas to the no less hard slavery of the Spanish and later the Mexicans”. Mexico had to be saved from itself.

In the social upheaval, very few, Mexicans or foreigners, kept a sufficient distance, an intelligent understanding. *Insurgent Mexico* by John Reed is the best example. Traveling with Pancho Villa’s troops, Reed continued the radical education begun with the strikers in Paterson, New Jersey, and the anarchic unionists of the I.W.W. *Insurgent Mexico* is a long, romantic chronicle of discoveries, of popular truth and cultural authenticity. Its unprejudiced attitude is a critical analysis and a taking of sides. In the soul of those soldiers who literally offered their lives, in the relationship with the dramatic and contradictory figure of Villa, in the simplicity of life and passions, Reed recognizes, without theorizing, the keys that explain the demolition of feudal structures and the appearance of an order that is still undecipherable. In his intent to disregard symbolic models Reed is the most detached of a handful of North American radicals, among them the writer and agitator Lincoln Steffens, who traveled with Carranza, proclaimed the justness of the anarchic unionists and defended Mexico in the North American press.

“RED LAND, VIRGIN LAND IMPREGNATED WITH THE MOST NOBLE BLOOD”

The last stage of this mythification/invention of “*Mexico*” for travelers is the most interesting, literarily, and the most prolific in poetic hallucinations and prophecies of bones and blood. Nevertheless, it does not entirely avoid the colonial perspective.

Its center is the 20's in the so-called Mexican Renaissance, especially organized around the muralist painters, Diego Rivera and the efforts of the Secretary of Public Education, José Vasconcelos. The most persistent expression is allegory.

In the 20's and 30's many people went to Mexico, wanting to go deeper into the nature of the collective tragedy and learn the legends of charisma and devastation: Pancho Villa, Emiliano Zapata. "Mexico" was, internationally, the area of enigma and instinct. The Mexican vanguard attempted a new culture, founded on the symbolic and real incorporation of workers and farmers. In Europe the revolution that overthrew tyranny, the emergence of peasant armies and the strength of the artists were exciting to the point of incomprehension. In the 30's the French writer Antonin Artaud, he himself a decided advocate of the search, gave his version of the facts:

You must know, perhaps at this moment in Europe there exists an immense fantasy, a sort of collective hallucination with regard to the Mexican Revolution. The Mexicans are almost seen as wearing the clothes of their ancestors, actually making sacrifices to the sun on the pyramid of Teotihuacan. I assure you that I am *barely* joking. In any case, there has been talk of great theatrical reconstructions on this same pyramid, and it has been believed in good faith that there was a well-defined anti-European movement and that present-day Mexico would like to found its revolution on the basis of a return to pre-Cortésian tradition. This fantasy makes the rounds in the most advanced intellectual circles in Paris. In a word, it is believed that the Mexican Revolution is a revolution of the native soul, a revolution to capture the *alma indigena* as it was before Cortés.

The indigenous substrate of Mexico. The spirit of the Noble Savage who regresses in these insane lands. The conspiracy of the old, first forces. The sphere where only the irrational is felt. The North American poet Hart Crane is exasperated and worried: "I doubt that there is anyone really able to understand the Indian. It may also be a dangerous search. I am sure that it is. But humanity is still so little mechanized here, so near and really dignified. . . that it is giving me a new perspective". Artaud speaks of the great contribution of Mexico, the discovery of *analogical forces* through

*Travelers in Mexico*

which the organism of man functions in accord with the organism of nature and controls it. To go toward the integral rediscovery, points out Artaud in the full act of prophecy:

In short, it is a matter of reviving the old sacred idea, the great idea of pagan pantheism, in a form that this time will not be religious but scientific. True pantheism is not a philosophic system but a means of *dynamic investigation* of the universe.

Mexico will teach the world a lesson. It will take the forms of mechanized civilization of Europe, adapt them to its own spirit, and this will destroy the forms. In his turn, the English author D.H. Lawrence is also excited by the cosmic vision. In his novel, *The Plumed Serpent*, he raises to its limit the confusion, the resentment and the passion for “*Mexico*” that determines the external construction of the Mexican Renaissance. For Lawrence, the native is the essence of blood and destruction, and if Mexico is important it is because of its interminable rite of cruelty, conservation of the land and tragically revealed instinct that is exploited in the senselessness of the bull ring and hidden in the murals of Rivera and Orozco. Lawrence confides to his friend Bynners (*Journey With Genius*):

Everything is of a piece. . . what the Aztecs did, what Cortés did and what Díaz did—this total, interminable cruelty—the land itself behaves in this way to whoever lives here. Look at this dead land around us, the cactus with its fingers like daggers, the sun with its knife-sharp edge. Everything is death!

At the center of attention, the psychic arsenal and spiritual combustion of Mexico. The interest in recounting fatigue, ill-smelling inns and bandits disappears. In a certain way, however, D.H. Lawrence is the exception. The majority abstains from peopling its writing with theories and resurrected and malign gods. Without a doubt, the great book situated in Mexico is *Under the Volcano*, by Malcolm Lowry. But in two decades the list is impressive. Painters, poets, sculptors, photographers and novelists arrived in Mexico. Aldous Huxley wrote *Beyond the Mexique Bay*; B. Traven settled in the country and produced his novels denouncing the situation of the native peasant (not exempt from mythifica-

tion); Graham Greene aided in the protection of the persecuted Church and the denunciation of the tyranny of President Plutarco Elias Calles (*The Lawless Roads*; *The Power and the Glory*); Evelyn Waugh produced a chronicle that reviles president Lázaro Cárdenas and praises the English oil companies (*Robbery Under Law*); Katherine Anne Porter furnishes stories and novels with this “magic” and traditional horizon, rebellious and atavistic. Many place their narratives in Mexico to endow them with “mystery” and prestigious hallucination: Ray Bradbury, Ken Kesey, (“Mexico is the rainbow, Mexico is. . . wooden”).

What is summarized in literature is developed by the cinema. The cinematographic historian, Emilio García Riera, has catalogued more than two thousand films, from North America, Germany, Spain and Italy, that are partially or totally laid in Mexico. Generally, these films—that never aspire to greater congruence—thrive on the thematic or scenographic shelter of the Mexican Revolution, already become an institution for films, with its wealth of assassins with their unflinching aim, heroic women, semi-deserted towns, infernal battles. In recent times, the myth of “Mexico” has been stylized and industrialized in the cinema, from *Viva Villa!* by Jack Conway, with Wallace Beery, to *The Wild Bunch* and *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo García* by Sam Peckinpah. There is always the confrontation between the North American adventurer, individualist, technologically efficient and a nomad, and “Mexico”, romantic, unbridled, the lover of death, submitting to the family, full of traditions that crouch within cloaks and are uncovered in the presence of idols, full of possessive and jealous *machos*, whose inevitable motto is taken from a song: “*Si me han de matar mañana, que me maten de una vez*” (“If they have to kill me tomorrow, let them kill me all at once”).

Much of traditional Mexico lent itself to being interpreted and abhorred by the travelers. However, industrial progress and the growing complexity of society are dispelling the majority of myths. The last great attempt to ransom primitive and barbarous Mexico and establish there a new esthetic of cruelty and instinct for death was that of some surrealists. André Breton traveled in Mexico near the end of the 30's and is eloquent in his catalogue: “Red land, virgin land impregnated with the noblest blood, land where the life of a man is of no value, always disposed, like the maguey, to

*Travelers in Mexico*

disappear from the sight of the one who is describing it, to be consumed in a flower of desire and danger. At least there is a country in the world where the wind of liberation has not perished”.

Breton’s obsessions are extreme and, in his prophetic way, colonialist. For him a “civilized” Mexico is an aberration. He is one of the last to insist from the outside that Mexico be saved from a “false progress” and return to the sources of its marvelous irrationality:

Mexico, rudely awakened from your mythological past, continue evolving under the protection of Xochipilli, goddess of flowers and lyric poetry, and Coatlicue, goddess of the earth and violent death, whose effigies, more pathetic and intense than any of the others, are found from one end of the national museum to the other... This power of the conciliation of life and death is without a doubt the principal attraction of Mexico. In this regard, it keeps open an inexhaustible register of sensations, from the most benign to the most insidious.

In recent years, the mythologizing criteria of “*Mexico*” have greatly changed. Exploitation continues, but the accent of its practitioners is unequivocally touristic. The major “mystery” has been unveiled.

Carlos Monsiváis  
(*Mexico*)