

The Solitude of Latin America

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Antonio Pigafetta, the Florentine navigator who accompanied Magellan on the first circumnavigation around the world, kept a meticulous log of his journey through our South American continent, which, nevertheless, also seems to be an adventure into the imagination. He related that he had seen pigs with their umbilicus on their backs and birds without feet, the female of the species of which would brood their eggs on the backs of the males, as well as others like gannets without tongues, whose beak looked like a spoon. He wrote that he had seen a monstrosity of an animal with the head and ears of a mule, the body of a camel, the hooves of a deer and the neigh of a horse. He related they had put a mirror in front of the first native they met in Patagonia and how that overexcited giant lost the use of his reason out of fear of his own image.

This short and fascinating book, in which we can perceive the gems of our contemporary novels, is not, by any means, the most surprising testimony of our reality at that time. The Chroniclers of the Indies have left us innumerable others. Eldorado, our illusory land which was much sought after, appeared on numerous maps over a long period, changing in situation and extent according to the whim of the cartographers. The mythical Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca, in search of the fount of Eternal Youth, spent eight years exploring the north of Mexico in a crazy expedition whose members ate one another; only five of the six hundred who set out returned home. One of the many mysteries which was never unravelled is that of the eleven thousand mules, each loaded with one hundred pounds weight of gold, which left Cuzco one day to pay the ransom of Atahualpa and which never arrived at their destination. Later on, during the colonial period, they used to sell in Cartagena de India chickens raised on alluvial soils in whose gizzards were found gold nuggets. This delirium for gold among our founding fathers has been a bane upon us until very recent times. Why, only in the last century, the German mission appointed to study the construction of a railway line between the oceans across the Panamanian isthmus concluded that the project was a viable one on the condition that the rails should be not of iron, a scarce metal in the region, but of gold.

The independence from Spanish domination did not save us from this madness. General Antonio Lopez de Santana, thrice dictator of Mexico, had the right leg he lost in the so-called War of the Cakes buried with all funeral pomp. General Garcia Moreno governed Ecuador for sixteen years as an absolute monarch and his dead body, dressed in full-dress uniform and his cuirass with its medals, sat in state upon the presidential throne. General Maximilian Hernandez Martinez, the theosophical despot of El Salvador who had thirty thousand peasants exterminated in a savage orgy of killing, invented a pendulum to discover whether food was poisoned, and had the street lamps covered with red paper to combat an epidemic of scarlet fever.

The monument to General Francisco Morazan, raised up in the main square of Tegucigalpa is, in reality, a statue of Marshal Ney which was bought in repository of second-hand statues in Paris.

Eleven years ago, one of the outstanding poets of our time, Pablo Neruda from Chile, brought light to this very chamber with his words. In the European mind, in those of good - and often those of bad - consciences, we witness, on a forceful scale never seen before, the eruption of an awareness of the phantoms of Latin America, that great homeland of deluded men and historic women, whose infinite stubbornness is confused with legend. We have not had a moment of serenity. A Promethean president embattled in a palace in flames died fighting single-handedly against an army, and two air disasters which occurred under suspicious circumstances, circumstances which were never clarified, cut off the life of another of generous nature and that of a democratic soldier who had restored the dignity of his nation. There have been five wars and seventeen *coups d'etat* and the rise of a devilish dictator who, in the name of God, accomplished the first genocide in Latin America in our time. Meanwhile, twenty million Latin American children died before their second birthday, which is more than all those born in Europe since 1970. Nearly one hundred and twenty thousand have disappeared as a consequence of repression, which is as if, today, no one knew where all the inhabitants of Uppsala were. Many women arrested during pregnancy gave birth in Argentine prisons, but, still, where or who their children are is not known; either they were passed into secret adoption or interned in orphanages by the military authorities. So that things should not continue thus, two hundred thousand men and women have given up their lives over the continent, and more than one hundred thousand in three, tiny wilful countries in Central America: Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala. Were this to happen in the United States, the proportionate ratio would be one million six hundred thousand violent deaths in four years. A million people have fled from Chile, a country noted for its tradition of hospitality: that is, ten per cent of its population. Uruguay, a tiny nation of two and a half million inhabitants, a nation which considered itself one of the most civilized countries of the continent, has lost one in five of its citizens into exile. The civil war in El Salvador has created, since 1979, virtually one refugee every twenty minutes. A country created from all these Latin Americans either in exile or in enforced emigration would have a larger population than Norway.

I dare to believe that it is this highly unusual state of affairs, and not only its literary expression, which, this year, has merited the attention of the Swedish Literary Academy: a reality which is not one on paper but which lives in us and determines each moment of our countless daily deaths, one which constantly replenishes an insatiable fount of creation, full of unhappiness and beauty, of which this wandering and nostalgic Colombian is merely another number singled out by fate. Poets and beggars, musicians and prophets, soldiers and scoundrels, all we creatures of that disorderly

reality have needed to ask little of the imagination, for the major challenge before us has been the want of conventional resources to make our life credible. This, my friends, is the nub of our solitude.

For, if these setbacks benumb us, we who are of its essence, it is not difficult to understand that the mental talents of this side of the world, in an ecstasy of contemplation of their own cultures, have found themselves without a proper means to interpret us. One realizes this when they insist on measuring us with the same yardstick with which they measure themselves, without realizing that the ravages of life are not the same for all, and that the search for one's own identity is as arduous and bloody for us as it was for them. To interpret our reality through schemas which are alien to us only has the effect of making us even more unknown, ever less free, ever more solitary. Perhaps venerable old Europe would be more sympathetic if it tried to see us in its own past; if it remembered that London needed three hundred years to build her first defensive wall, and another three hundred before her first bishop; that Rome debated in the darkness of uncertainty for twenty centuries before an Etruscan king rooted her in history, and that even in the sixteenth century the pacifist Swiss of today, who so delight us with their mild cheeses and their cheeky clocks, made Europe bloody as soldiers of fortune. Even in the culminating phase of the Renaissance, twelve thousand mercenary lansquenets of the Imperial armies sacked and razed Rome, cutting down eight thousand of its inhabitants.

I have no desire to give shape to the ideals of Tonio Kruger, whose dreams of a union between the chaste North and a passionate South excited Thomas Mann in this place fifty-three years ago. But I believe that those clear-sighted Europeans who also struggle here for a wider homeland, more humane and just, could help us more if they were to revise fundamentally their way of seeing us. Their solidarity with our aspirations does not make us feel any less alone so long as it is not made real by acts of genuine support to people who desire to have their own life while sharing the good things in the world.

Latin America has no desire to be, nor should it be, a pawn without will, neither is it a mere shadow of a dream that its designs for independence and originality should become an aspiration of the western hemisphere. Nevertheless, advances in methods of travel which have reduced the huge distances between our Americas and Europe seem to increase our cultural distance. Why are we granted unreservedly a recognition of our originality in literature when our attempts, in the face of enormous difficulties, to bring about social change are denied us with all sorts of mistrust? Why must they think that the system of social justice imposed by advanced European nations upon their peoples cannot also be an objective for us Latin Americans but with different methods in different conditions? No: the violence and disproportionate misery of our history are the result of secular injustice and infinite bitterness and not a plot hatched three thousand leagues distance from our home. But many European leaders and

thinkers have thought so, with all the childlike regression of grandfathers who have forgotten the life-giving madness of youth, as if it were not possible to live a destiny other than one at the mercy of the two great leaders and masters of the world.

Nevertheless, in the face of oppression, pillage and abandonment, our reply is life. Neither floods nor plagues, nor famines nor cataclysms, nor even eternal war century after century have managed to reduce the tenacious advantage that life has over death. It is an advantage which is on the increase and quickens apace: every year, there are seventy-four million more births than deaths, a sufficient number of new living souls to populate New York every year seven times over. The majority of these are born in countries with few resources, and among these, naturally, the countries of Latin America. On the other hand, the more prosperous nations have succeeded in accumulating sufficient destructive power to annihilate one hundred times over not only every human being who has ever existed but every living creature ever to have graced this planet of misfortune.

On a day like today, my master William Faulkner said in this very place, "I refuse to admit the end of mankind." I should not feel myself worthy of standing where he once stood were I not fully conscious that, for the first time in the history of humanity, the colossal disaster which he refused to recognize thirty-two years ago is now simply a scientific possibility. Face to face with a reality that overwhelms us, one which over man's perceptions of time must have seemed a utopia, tellers of tales who, like me, are capable of believing anything, feel entitled to believe that it is not yet too late to undertake the creation of a minor utopia: a new and limitless utopia for life, wherein no one can decide for others how they are to die, where love really can be true and happiness possible, where the lineal generations of one hundred years of solitude will have at last and for ever a second opportunity on earth.