

AN APPROACH TO THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION THROUGH NAMING TECHNIQUES

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The single most significant event so far in XXth Century Mexico is the Revolution of 1910. Artists and writers echoed the impact of this moment. Among them stands Agustín Yáñez, born in Jalisco in 1904 and author of the novel The Edge of the Storm, 1947, which the critics have always included in the novelistic cycle of the Mexican Revolution.¹

Yáñez himself declared in an interview with Olga Harmony in 1974: "I have searched for the universal through the Mexican themes." He also expressed to her his intention to publish a 'comédie mexicaine' à la Balzac in which "The Edge of the Storm would be the novel of a village." In addition, he characterized the modern antinovel pure publicity, illustrating his opinion with an anecdote: Edmund O'Gorman insisted that Yáñez make a crude scene out of the tragic encounter between two lovers in the climax

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of The Edge of the Storm. But Yáñez, after trying in vain to put into practice this advice, concluded: "I still think that what is insinuated in The Edge of the Storm turns out to be more sensuous than what is described in detail, because the art of literature is more insinuation than expression." When the interviewer asked him his personal opinion concerning the success of today's Latin-American writers, Yáñez answered: "The reason is that they search for the universal through the national for the first time in centuries." The last question in this interview had to do with the advice he would give to young, ambitious, writers. His answer: discipline, quiet reading, and as a practical matter, to have handy always two notebooks; one to note down the words of unknown or doubtful meaning so that the reader can look them up in the dictionary and so enrich his own vocabulary; the other one, to write down the thoughts provoked by the readings, or to summarize the contents of the book. He concluded: "This opens the way to the art of synthesizing which is the basis of intelligence."

This paper is an attempt to interpret the approach to the Mexican Revolution as it appears in The Edge of the Storm. Yanez himself says that he searches for what is universal in the Mexican people, that the protagonist of his novel is the town, and that any writer worth the name must be very conscious of his vocabulary. In

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keeping with this last point, the emphasis of this paper will be on the contribution of onomastics to the universal meaning of the book.

Yáñez explains the title: "The Edge of the Storm" in an introductory note: "It is a rural expression which describes the moment when it begins to rain, and in a very common, figurative sense, the imminence or the beginning of an event." Anyone who wanted to, could entitle the book "In a Place within the Archdiocese the Name of Which it is Pointless to Remember," as Cervantes would say concerning La Mancha.² Yáñez even goes as far as to suggest another title: "The Old Order." Both not only introduce the reader fully in onomastics as a literary device, but also imply some guidelines for the interpretation of the novel. Each one has religious suggestions.³ The first one locates the narrative spatially within an ecclesiastical enclave, an anonymous archdiocese. The second places it within a context of time and milieu, an old order about to collapse. The novel could in fact be read as an allegory or a continued metaphor of the natural evolution of one order of things to another in much the same manner that the Old Testament gave way to the New.

These comments of the title are followed by the description of the setting in which the characters are going to act: a

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cloistered village, women dressed in black, silence, austerity, cleanliness, peace, whispers, dryness, slowness; a scenery interspersed with religious symbols, crosses, many crosses of all sizes and shapes, church bells presiding everything, impinging upon everything, and regulating everybody's life. The reader is thus transported to a convent atmosphere with its conventional world of dogmas, rites, authority, submissiveness, discipline, superstition, morbid asceticism and true contemplation. The characters function within this framework like 'marbles' to use Yáñez's own expression.

Each individual's identity and behavior will be determined by his or her name, which, more often than not, has resonances of traditional stereotypes common to cultural background of the average reader. The result is a collective protagonist for the novel. Once in a while, a character will emerge who incarnates a feature, aspect, or sector of the collectivity. Other times, as we shall see later, different characters represent different facets of the same type.

What the novel does not have however is a plot in the traditional sense. The author, faithful to his novelistic creed, resorts constantly to the insinuation technique. And here is where onomastics serves him handily.

After the presentation of the setting, comes the description

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of the nocturnal ghosts which haunt the town: guilt and remorse instilled in don Timoteo Limón--his name means the bitter fearful of God--by his murdered victim Anacleto, whose Greek name means "the one who announces from far away." Other haunting ghosts are: repressed love incarnated in Merceditas Toledo; mourning and death in Leonardo's wife, a nameless woman in the novel; longing for woman's liberation in Micalela, the city girl who refuses to live in the village because she sees in this environment no possibility of living in love. The author had written in the "Preparatory Act": "Among black robed women they spend their lives. Death comes--or love--, which is the strangest, the most extreme form of death, the most dangerous and dreaded form of living death." (p.13)

We said earlier that don Timoteo Limón incarnates the presence of guilt and remorse in the novel. The catalyst of these feelings is his dog Orion, so named probably because of the mythic character who gave his name to the constellation represented by a hunter with his belt and sword--the antithesis of Cupid. The lust temptation, cause in part of don Timoteo's guilt takes form in the novel in the names of the virgins and martyrs as they appear on the old Canon of the Mass. With this onomastic device, the author gets rid of time and space barriers. The Roman vestals

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were also the object of lusty desires, Christian ethics and the guilt element to the concupiscent desire, which permeates and suffocates the novel. The plenitude of love, with the exception of Martha the contemplative woman who incarnates benevolent love,⁴ never takes place.

The town's girls will also refer to men, using names in the order in which apostles, martyrs, and confessors appear in the Canon of the Catholic Mass: "names with enigma, unuttered, never to be borne along by the wind in the deserted streets" (p.51). This same technique of insinuation by provoking association with names already familiar to the reader, is used very skillfully by Yanez when he makes his characters talk by quoting classic authors such as Jorge Manrique, Fray Luis de León, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (p. 107).

Maybe the characters who better illustrate this onomastic device in the novel are Marta, María, Victoria and Gabriel. The orphans Marta and María live with their uncle, the pastor of the parish, don Dionisio Martínez. They are described in the novel in the following terms:

Marta is now twenty-seven, and María twenty-one.

Marta's soul is veiled in shadow, María's radiant, unclouded by the general inhibitions. Marta is

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pale and thin, with an oval face, deep-set eyes, bushy brows, and long lashes; she is flat-chested with a thin colorless mouth and a sharp nose; her step is quiet and her voice low. María, on the other hand, is dark, with a round, rosy face, a full mouth with a faint mustache on the upper lip, and big darting grey eyes: the tones of her voice are deep and playful. Both are strong-willed, the elder serene, the younger impatient. (pp. 63-64)

The novel's calendar is the cycle of the liturgical year. The sacred texts are often the point of departure for the reflections or actions of the characters. Thus the gospel of Palm Sunday about "Jesus at Lazarus" in Bethany, suggests to one of the parishoners the following thought: "The Gospel also mentioned Marta [...] Marta the Parish Priest's niece." (p.82). The most poetic pages of The Edge of the Storm are the ones where the contemplative nature of Marta is described, so poetically described, that the translation by Ethel Brinton omits those paragraphs.⁵

Besides being contemplative, Marta has the role of confidant, peace-maker, mother. Yáñez does not even hesitate to apply to

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her the Marian Litanies: "Faithful Marta, loyal Marta, devoted Marta, mystic Marta, Marta, the helper of those in need, Marta of the good counsel, Marta saddened by confused restlessness." (p.71).

María, on the other hand, is the sensuous woman and the nonconformist. The reader is told that María's most secret ambition, increasingly internalized and impossible of realization, is to travel, at least as far as Teocaltiche." (p.64). The reader knows also that in the town's atmosphere of tension "María, Fr. Martínez' niece, silently accepts the idea of a violent eruption of strange men. She takes pleasure in imagining it. She may not be the only one." (p.96). But as her counterpart, Mary Magdalene of Bethany, María will eventually sublimate her love. At this moment the girl reasons:

Love is not an instinct, it is not a routine of living together, it cannot turn into a mere habit, it is not a passing delight of the senses, it is not a capricious game; love is the identity of two souls, and all the rest is superfluous; two spirits who possess each other, and all the rest is only a hindrance; suffering in love comes from collision with the perishable; fear in the face of love is

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the inheritance of the flesh; heroism in love is the victory over all that hinders union, the spiritual possession frequently frustrated by custom and the daily round of living. Doubtless, Gabriel caught a glimpse of this [. . .] but why am I thinking so much about Gabriel? Maria wondered for the second time. (pp. 272-273)

The people of the town will never suspect such intellectual subtleties as coming from María. "She is a bad lot," is the town's judgment at the end.

Marta and María represent two complementary facets of women. Yáñez introduces yet another aspect of femininity in the person of Victoria, the sophisticated widow. Her attributes are "woman," "goddess," "statue." Gabriel, the bell-ringer, reminisces about her when he sees the real statue of the Victory of Samothrace. Victoria then represents the total woman—sophisticated and unfettered. The town will never be the same after she leaves. Her presence in town serves a catalyst which will balance the overpowering impact of the atavistic inhibitions in the people. The town will then start losing its conventual appearance. But even though she is only a tourist, Victoria is not totally alien

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to the town. The narrator is very careful to identify her with María as he often does with María, Micaela and even Marta. He says: "I wonder who is in Gabriel's thoughts. Victoria? Maria?" (p. 215) Damián, the prodigal son of the town, will say: "You María are the same as Micaela. You are the same woman. No one can master you." (p.313) Don Dionosio Martínez confuses them also in his subconscious when he believes he hears a man's voice confessing: "The worst is that it is not Maria that I love, but Marta; and loving Marta, I have made love to Micaela deceiving both Marta and María." (p.185). The reader is challenged here by a play on names which has great power of suggestion in a novel with a collective protagonist.

Luis González, the Licenciado Vidriera, of The Edge of the Storm, sees the feminine presence in the following way: "Marta, that's not your name, you are Euterpe--and you María, you are tragedy. Don't let Micaela usurp your role. You are Melpomene, Micaela is comedy, mere comedy, Thalia." (p. 287).

Gabriel is another interesting example of the author's use of onomastics for character portrayal. He is an orphan related to don Dionisio Martínez, and like Marta and María, lives in the rectory. Like his namesake the Archangel, Gabriel is 'messenger, herald, penulum'. His bells set the mood and the rhythm of the town.

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Maria even asked him: "Wouldn't you like to be the bell ringer of Rome or Sevilla?" "Why?", he answered, "It wouldn't be the same. I couldn't." At this point the narrator clarifies: "He meant: I would be a stranger in those cities and couldn't make their bells talk. The bells of each place are as individual as the speech of a man." (p.162)

When Victoria⁶ listens to his bells for the first time, she reacts:

What man could convert a few humble bells into an instrument of such an unearthly music? Overwhelmed, Victoria imagined a hieratic, translucent being, without eyes and without feet, hands like a gravedigger's, a woman's pierced hands of crystal, arms crossed above a tongue of fire. A faint aura formed the head. The crossed arms were attached to ceaselessly fluttering wings. She would seek him out as before she had sought out great pianists, celebrated actors, famous people. She would seek him as she never would seek a husband. And, if he were Death himself? She would find him! (p.168)

A few pages later, the narrator describes the encounter of the two characters:

Victoria (woman, goddess and statue) and Gabriel (archangel) stood motionless, each in the center of a whirlwind, joined in a mood of exaltation, but each, without realizing it, afraid to touch the other. When Victoria, imperiously, took a step forward, her gesture triumphant--thighs, breasts, arms, and head like those of the statue, the wings invisible--Gabriel was powerless to move back. He could only shut his eyes. Then he collapsed. Compassion surged through her: a fallen archangel, with battered wings and a dirty face, a bird blown in to mud by a storm, its wings useless. A blush of shame reddened the earthy color of his face. Victoria could not resist. She bent down, her eyes shining through a prism of tears, stretched out her trembling hand to him and asked: "Are you ill?" [...] Before she could touch him, the

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archangel moved back, waving his mighty wings, while his lips repeated the monosyllable, No! No! [...]. He was the archangel of wrath, magnificent in his splendor! [...] A menacing Gabriel, not the gentle messenger of the Annunciation [...] His attitude was so fierce that Victoria's compassion turned to shame, and she crept down the circular staircase in confusion [...] Eve driven out of Paradise. (p.170)

Neither Gabriel nor Victoria will be the same from this moment on. Victoria, like Eve being driven out of Paradise, leaves town, while Gabriel watches her from the belltower. But unlike Eve's presence in the Garden, Victoria's presence in town has been redeeming. Gabriel, María, don Dionisio, the whole town have been exposed through her to a new perception of themselves, of love, of art, of beauty. The author's power of insinuation has been intensified and enriched here with a new triangle of characters: Eve, Victoria, Mary the mother of Jesus—this last one introduced through the allusion to the Annunciation.

There are other examples of the use of onomastics as a characterizing device in the novel: Luis Gonzaga is the martyr

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of his ascetic dreams and of his chastity; Micaela's father, ignorant of his daughter drama, is called don Inocencio; The town healer's name is don Refugio; and the priest responsible for the spiritual stagnation of the town, has the name of Fr. Islas, a misanthrope by definition who ends up consumed by epilepsy.

By means of this literary device, then, the form of novel complements its contents. The author seems to approach the Mexican Revolution from a universal standpoint. When the atmosphere of a closed room becomes suffocating, its windows must be opened in order to let fresh air in... The reactionary, oppressive old order, carried within it the seed of its own destruction.⁷ Here seems to lie the secret of the true revolution, which is evolution, renewal.

The political leaders and the military forces, whose strength consists of fear and destruction, appear in clandestine forms.⁸ Yáñez seems to suggest that the change must come from within, in such a way that a catharsis, a conversion, a metanoia, takes place.

The signs of the times called for a new order, an integral humanism. Man lives also by bread is the message of the non-underground northerners:

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I tell you, Padre, we can't go on like this; sooner or later the world will turn, and for better or worse, things will change. To be frank, it would be better if the gringos did come and teach us their way of life, than for us to stay the way we are living no life at all. Who enjoys it? Tell me. The poor? No. Nor the rich either. They don't even know how to spend their money. The women work all the time like slaves, raising families, always wearing black, always afraid to move. What are we working for? The next life? That's all right, but I believe that we ought to make this one a little better, and live like human beings. Why can't we eat our fill and enjoy it, have a drink now and then, have some fun for a change, sing, visit, speak our minds, talk to women, wear decent clothes that fit us, work in freedom like the gringos? They at least aren't hypocrites. Here life is always sad, we sigh without knowing why, we don't even dare to draw a free breath. We take pleasure in making ourselves suffer. (p.137)

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Don Sionisio Martínez, the Alter Christus of the novel, admits at the end that the Revolution may also be an instrument of the providential economy to initiate a new order: "Might not the Revolution be the instrument used by Providence to bring the ideal justice and purity into existence?" (p.331). And in a beautiful symbolic, Gethsemane like, closing scene⁹ the elderly priest will end the book with these words from the Introit of the Mass: "Unto God who gives joy to my youth."

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NOTES

¹ No critic has ever challenged this assumption based on the fact that this novel portrays as no other novel does the prelude of the Mexican Revolution. It must be placed at the threshold of the entire group.

² Quotations all through the paper follow Ethel Brinton's translation of the Novel, University of Texas Press, Austin 1971.

³ Octavio Paz, perhaps the most incisive of all of Yáñez's critics, relates him with James Joyce: "Joyce was a decisive model for Agustín Yáñez. I use the word "model" instead of "influence" even though both be accurate, because the main factor is not the assimilation of certain techniques, but the attitude of both writers towards reality: Catholic tradition and crude realism; a taste for the solemnity of language and the laybrinths of consciousness, an avid sense of sensuality with a taste of ashes in the mouth; in short, a sort of fierce passion for one's birthplace. "Novel and Province: Agustín Yáñez," Mexico en la Cultura (Novedades) September 4, 1961, p. 3.

⁴ Emmanuel Carballo asked Yáñez in an interview: "What attitude should the author have vis-á-vis his characters?" Yáñez answered: "First and above all he is obliged to respect their

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freedom and destiny. In the first pages of The Edge of the Storm, Marta's character is treated with a great deal of care. She seems to be headed towards greatness, as I myself believed. Nevertheless, María's character grows in importance, pushes Marta into the background. Among the various different novels which form the cycle, I do not find any novel in which Marta could figure. On the other hand, María appears in The Rounds of Time, a novel about the world of finance, and in The Creation." Helmy F. Giacomán, Homenaje a Agustín Yáñez, Anaya, Madrid (without date), p. 35.

⁵ José A. Portuondo writes: "The Edge of the Storm is a novel whose aesthetic value with survive the effacement of the grave social problems which forms its backbone." Homenaje... (see N.4), p. 257.

⁶ "The chapter 'Victoria and Gabriel' is an unexpected interlude which confuses and displeases the reader because its melodramatic harmony" Elaine Haddad, "The Structure of The Edge of the Storm," Homenaje... (See N.4), p. 268.

⁷ Another of Emmanuel Carballo's questions to Yáñez was: "If certain novels announced the proximity of the Revolution during the Porfirio Díaz regime, don't you think that today's novels

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foresee the revolution of the renewal of the political institutions of the country?" Answer: "The novel portrays a circumstance; it is a quest for overcoming the vices rooted in the structure of the country. It discloses a state of affairs which asks for an immediate remedy." Homenaje..., p.40.

⁸ Carballo also asked: "Did you have in mind this recollection the interruption of Madero's military forces in Cuquío when you describe in The Edge of the Storm the entrance of the revolutionary forces into the town?" Yáñez answered: "Yes, the solders stayed in the same inn where we were lodging. I watched them closely, meticulously. I also witnessed the fear they inspired in the townspeople." Homenaje..., p. 24.

⁹ Joseph Sommers sees don Dionisio defeated at the end of the novel: "Don Dionisio appears as a true matyr who desires earnestly to accomplish the impossible; to change the trends of human nature and history. He is destroyed at the end. The final paragraphs of the novel--after the revolution has irrevocably touched the town, causing the escape of his dear niece--show him foresakenly celebrating Mass. His parishioners await with hostile looks the imminent signs of his collapse." "Genesis of the Storm: Agustín Yáñez," Homenaje..., p. 29.

¹⁰ Ramona Lagos sees with more optimism don Dionisio's last

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moments in the novel. "Tentación y penitencia en Al Filo del Agua de Agustín Yánes," Homenaje..., pp. 162-190.