Representations of the Mexican Revolution in US Literature

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REPRESENTATIONS OF THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION
IN US LITERATURE

The Revolution has hardly any ideas. It is an explosion of reality: a return and a
communion, an upsetting of old institutions, a releasing of many ferocious, tender
and noble feelings that had been hidden by our fear of being. And with whom does
Mexico commune in this bloody fiesta? With herself, with her own being. Mexico
dares to exist, to be. —Octavio Paz, The Labyrinth of Solitude (149)

AT THE BEGINNING of the novel El Vago (1983) by the Mexican American
author Laurence Gonzales, old Agustín, formerly a fighter in the Mexican
Revolutionary War but now living in the United States, wonders how he
might make young Paco comprehend the nature of that war. The following
is part of their conversation:

[Paco:] “In this Mexican conflict of yours—[. . .]. How come we never hear
about it if it was such a big war?”

“The European war,” Agustín said. “That was much. Much, much, much. That
involved the most powerful countries, the ones with the most money
and the most newspapers and people who talked to one another of their own
importance. And it was a bigger war. They killed ten million. We only killed
two million.”

“Two million!” Paco said. “You exaggerate.”

“We killed one out of every eight Mexicans—one out of every eight people
in the entire Republic of Mexico—in ten years’ time. And we did not have
tanks and airplanes to do it.”

“Me cago,” Paco whispered. “How is this possible?”

Agustín thought, How is it possible? How, indeed? It takes a great deal of
work to kill two million people, as Hitler had found out. And if one out of
eight in Mexico were killed, how many wounded, maimed, blinded, crippled,
and how many related to one who was killed or maimed or crippled? It had
been no conflict, as this boy called it. It had been something else entirely.
Agustín had been there, yet he still had no idea what it had been. In the century
between independence and the time Agustín had left his country to live in the
United States, there had been seventy-three presidents of Mexico, and one of them had ruled for thirty years. (*El Vago*, 10–11)

When Paco asks, “On whose side did you fight?” Agustín answers, “On my side.” And when the boy says “No comprendo” (11), the old man has to admit to himself that he doesn’t understand it either. He can only try to make Paco get an idea of that war by telling him his life story—the resulting narrative takes up most of the novel. But only when it turns out that Agustín’s stepbrother, with whom he lived as a bandit for some years, was none other than the man who later, as a revolutionary, called himself Pancho Villa, can Paco connect the report to his own range of knowledge. He says, “Villa was a hero,” and is immediately corrected by Agustín: “No. He just liked to have people shot. And he was in the right place for doing this” (84–85).

Comprehension takes place within the epistemic and informational range open to the individual. It is thus necessarily hindered by stereotypical notions and, on a more comprehensive scale, by the discursive system one belongs to. On the other hand, it can be furthered by narrative. As we have seen, stories are the most relevant repositories of information or tools for the retrieval of information. Historical narratives are the most essential form of storytelling in the discursive establishment of group identity because they structure and give meaning to the communal experience of time through the demarcation of beginnings, middles, and (at least implicitly) ends. This process of selection and structuring in turn highlights the supposed existence and continuity of certain group values and characteristics and thus provides orientation for practical behavior now and in the future. As we have seen with regard to the narratives concerning Columbus and the Age of Discovery, these identity elements will change over time, but there is sufficient continuity for the society’s consensus that this world historical event has in some way shaped the role of the nation. However, while narrative is a dominant mode of defining the identity of one’s own group, it is less common in the discursive conception of alterity. The exclusionist nature of discourse as sense making manifests itself in the reduction of the complex reality of the Other by the denial of historical development and change. The Other is seen as far more static than the Self, and the stories concerning the former are much simpler. This may account for some of the deficiencies of American narrative literature on Mexico, and the Mexican Revolution is a case in point.

In the United States, there has been a specific Mexico-oriented discourse as a special variety of Latinamericanism since the early nineteenth century, with significant discriminatory additions during the Mexican-American War of 1846–48. Apart from the war period itself, the principal textual manifes-
tations of this discourse occurred around and especially after the turn of the twentieth century, during the decline of the Díaz regime and the subsequent revolutionary period, when the Hearst press clamored for drastic measures in order to protect American citizens, property, and interests. Obviously, this has to do not only with developments in Mexico but also with the prominence of nationalism and imperialism as the then dominant macro-discourses concerning the we-group and the rest of the world.

Mexico has always been a favorite alterity pole for the United States in the dialogic process of identity formation. For a long time it was considered to be a territorial competitor. Its population combined the heritage of two cultural groups particularly alien to and mistrusted by the Anglo-Saxons. One was the Southern European tradition stereotypically defined by Catholicism, that is, church dominance and hence the suppression of knowledge and enlightenment; by the lack of political liberty; by moral and political corruption; and by an overall resistance to progress. The other was the cultural tradition of the American Indian associated with savagism or, at best, with great cultural achievements accomplished at the expense of barbarous suppression and cruel heathen rituals, a tradition incapable of surviving in the modern world. The mixture of both made Mexicans a hybrid people—very different from the American notion of a WASP-dominated melting pot and hence necessarily victims of American civilizing imperialism. Backwardness, moral laxness, and a lack of trustworthiness were among the principal charges leveled against the Mexicans, enough to justify the proposed annexation of what was left of their territory after the Mexican-American War, if we are to believe the jingoist papers at the turn of the century. The other side of the coin was a certain exotic attractiveness or even seductiveness, which manifested itself in the beauty of landscape, nature, and women, and one of whose components was the allegedly harmonious Mexican way of dealing with death. The American discourse concerning Mexico thus comprised interdiscursive elements of nationalism, racism, sexism, and cultural-ideological superiority.1 It was a concomitant of American expansionist power and justified the use of force against the southern neighbor, whose negative qualities were summarized in the largely imaginary concept of a destructive or at least unproductive, uncooperative, and chaotic counterpower that one might use, at best, for temporary escape from the more rigid American way of life.

Nothing fits this discourse better than the Mexican Revolution. The last invasion of the mainland United States before September 11, 2001, took place on March 9, 1916, when revolutionary general Pancho Villa raided the city of Columbus, New Mexico, and killed seventeen of its citizens. But this event and the subsequent (unsuccessful) punitive expedition under General
Pershing soon slipped from the public memory: Mexican counter-power—in case Villa’s raid should have been intended as revenge for American interventionism—was and still is considered negligible. The motives behind the slaughter of millions have not received much attention. Where the revolutionary wars have left their traces is in the stereotype of the Mexican infatuation with death. The most notorious response of an American writer to this cliché notion was that of Ambrose Bierce, who crossed the border in 1913, at the age of seventy-one, to join Villa’s troops and who presumably met the violent end he had envisioned for himself in one of his last letters: “Good-bye—if you hear of my being stood up against a Mexican stone wall and shot to rags please know that I think that a pretty good way to depart this life. It beats old age, disease, or falling down the cellar stairs. To be a Gringo in Mexico—ah, that is euthanasia!” (Bierce 196–97). The Bierce myth quickly became part of the general myth of the revolution and has survived even the deconstructive aspects of its last major literary rendering in Carlos Fuentes’s \textit{Gringo Viejo}, of which more will be said in the next chapter.

Not much can be said here about the revolution, which, after all, was one of the most significant social upheavals of the twentieth century. It followed upon thirty-five years of comparative political stability under the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, a period of economic and technological modernization with an enormous influx of foreign investments, a development that took place under the benevolent eyes of the United States and the major European powers. However, progress and profit were made at the expense of brutal repression, the expropriation of the rural Indian or mestizo population, and the mutual enrichment of landowners, foreign investors, the administration and the church by widespread corruption, and the exploitation of virtually anybody else. That the colonial victimization of the majority of the people had been followed by a capitalist variety that was often even worse explains the inevitability and the violence of the revolution as well as its strong anti-gringo component. But the centuries of oppression also explain the informational deficits among the population and the lack of concepts defining remedies for a host of problems, and thus account for some of the more chaotic aspects of the coming events.

The revolution, a series of rebellions and civil wars lasting roughly from 1910 to 1920 (with political instability for many years to come), cost about 2 million lives. It was fought by a series of leaders and their armies (often including women and children) for personal gain and/or for the benefit of certain parts of the population. Among the principal groups were the indio farmers of the south under the anarchist agrarian Emiliano Zapata Salazar, the Northerners under the populist ex-bandit Francisco (“Pancho”) Villa, and the urban middle class under Venustiano Carranza, but allegiances and
the respective status of “rebel” or “government soldier” changed often and rapidly. Most of the leaders died violent deaths; there was heroism as well as treachery, idealism as well as inhuman brutality. The constitution of 1917 as one of the results of the revolution demanded social reforms, among other things a redistribution of landed property, a nationalization of natural resources, the right to adequate education and a reduction in the power of the church—some of these aims have hardly been achieved even now.

Finally, the revolution brought the United States to the brink of out-and-out intervention. In 1914 American troops occupied the important seaport Veracruz, and in 1916 some northern regions. Although the attack on Veracruz was also intended to destabilize the new dictatorial regime of Victoriano Huerta, both military measures served to underline the fact that the United States saw vital interests at stake, especially as far as the property rights of American investors were concerned. More than once the US government found it hard to decide whose side to take in what often appeared to be a chaotic struggle. Yet apart from the period of 1913–15, when President Woodrow Wilson tried to stabilize Mexico by supporting the more democratic forces, US policy was shaped by the view that “authoritarianism was the unavoidable destiny of backward peoples, especially those of color” (Meyer 98), and this was the category into which Mexicans were placed. The tension between the two countries after 1920 was not a consequence of the fact that “the victorious revolution [. . .] created a dominant party system that resulted in a new authoritarianism, which was very careful to preserve the democratic forms while emptying them of content” (Meyer 102). It resulted primarily from the Mexican nationalization policy, which was at odds with American economic interests.2

With all its drawbacks and disappointing sequels, the revolution has remained for Mexico one of the major events of its history, indeed the one event that eventually created a national identity because it involved all social groups and served to confirm the central role of the mestizo part of the population, thus also linking the Indian past and the postcolonial present. Mestizaje, the mixture of Indian and European population and culture, has appeared as a blemish in the US discourse of identity until quite recently, and for some until today, but it was seen as an aspect of Mexican superiority by Mexican intellectuals such as José Vasconcelos or Octavio Paz.3 The revolution has been mythicized, to be sure, but it has also been made a central topic for serious historiographic as well as fictional narratives.

For US Americans, on the other hand, the Mexican Revolution is hardly more than a footnote to history and has become an element of the alterity discourse on Mexico mainly in a trivialized version. This is in keeping with the American Mexico discourse in general, which, as I have pointed
out, emphasizes the exotic and the adventurous. And this impression is confirmed by the fact that of the 546 titles in the belles-lettres section of Gunn’s indispensable bibliography *Mexico in American and British Letters*, 118 are for young readers. What is even more significant: of 275 novels concerning Mexico published since 1910 and listed by Gunn, only 17 appear to deal with the Mexican Revolution—the others belong to the genres of the Western or the thriller, or they focus on topics such as the Mexican-American War, the situation of US exiles in Mexico, or the *conquista* and early colonial history. If one excludes the (German) novels of the mysterious B. Traven, whose place in American literature is doubtful, to say the least, the revolution has largely remained an “unwritten war” in serious US American fiction. After all that has been said, this neglect amounts to a denial of Mexican identity as a dynamic concept. Mexicans are denied the role of a people shaping its own destiny, the role of subjects of history, whereas this is unhesitatingly attributed to one’s own group.

Mexico has remained a topic for mainly popular adventure literature, yet one has to add that in certain other areas of Western high culture during the early part of the twentieth century, notably in the fine arts, the cultural achievements of Mexico were highly esteemed. However, this revaluation occurred under the heading of primitivism and thus did not influence the view of the Other as a-historical and nondynamic. All of this holds true for much of the US American literature on the Mexican Revolution as well. The topic is either ignored or reduced to the element of colorful background for an adventure story involving at least one American character, a pattern that is even more obvious in the movies.

In the following I will focus on three groups of the comparatively few US texts dealing with the revolution more seriously: those by contemporary witnesses, those written in the postrevolutionary period, and those of the late twentieth century.

**The contemporary reactions** included those of a number of journalists and travel writers, such as J. P. Alexander, Charles M. Flandrau, Frederick Palmer, and John Kenneth Turner, who wrote critically about the Díaz era or sympathetically about the revolution. Indeed, journalism forms the bulk of US early textual representations of the revolution. The most serious attempts to engage with the topic could be expected from those authors who were the most outspoken advocates of social reforms at home.4

The first was John Reed, later an eyewitness of the Russian Revolution, whose account of that event, *Ten Days That Shook the World* (1919), was to make him famous. Before he went to Europe, Reed had been sent to Mexico in 1913 by some American papers. He joined Pancho Villa’s troops and
wrote glowing reports that were collected together with other material in the
volume *Insurgent Mexico* in 1914. These sketches and narrative accounts
are fascinating, not only because of the events and characters they depict,
but also because the author is quite aware of the limitations of his own
point of view. Sometimes he simply leaves it open whether what he observes
are the strange customs of an alien people or the dissolution of such cus-
toms, and this very openness destabilizes the rigidity of the dominant view
of the southern neighbors. Still, Reed’s major tendency is to romanticize the
war and the fighting population. Above all, he paints a romantic picture of
Pancho Villa, whom he sees as a “Mexican Robin Hood” (Reed, *Insurgent*,
118). Contrary to his own Marxist notions of the workings of anonymous
socioeconomic forces, Reed thus makes Villa into an individual shaper of
Mexican history, and thereby returns to the romantic notion of individual-
ism and hence to a central tenet of the American discourse of identity. Villa
remains the self-made Western hero even as a politician because Reed mini-
mizes the role of his supporters and exaggerates his political intelligence: “It
has often been said that Villa succeeded because he had educated advisers.
As a matter of fact, he was almost alone. What advisers he had spent most
of their time answering his eager questions and doing what he told them”
(122). Thus Villa’s vague populism is never clearly shown in the context of
his tensions with other revolutionary leaders and their political positions.
Reed’s counter-discursive narrative report hardly ever leaves the structural
confines of the discourse he is trying to oppose.5

Reed is more successful in his semi-fictional story “Mac—American”
(1914), where he exposes as sheer cant the ideological system of beliefs
governing the minds of the uneducated lower classes, the ideology of the
superiority of one’s own nation, and the inferiority of the other.

“Mexican women,” said one [American], “are the rottenest on earth. Why,
they never wash more than twice a year. And as for Virtue—it simply doesn’t
exist! They don’t get married even. They just take anybody they happen to
like. Mexican women are all whores, that’s all there is to it!”

“I got a nice little Indian girl down in Torreon,” began the other man. “Say,
it’s a crime. Why, she don’t even care if I marry her or not!” (*Daughter*, 44)

The protagonist, the proto-American Mac—ex-cowboy, ex-overseer of
a Southern plantation, and ex-deputy sheriff—who is made to utter all the
current stereotypes concerning the “greasers,” turns out to have earned a
reputation as an unfair fighter, a never-do-well, and a bloodthirsty member
of a lynch mob. Needless to say, though, such simplistic satire can at best be
a first step in the establishment of a counter-discourse. The binary structure
of identity versus alterity remains intact because Reed simply reverses na-
tional clichés and unmasks the US Americans involved as a group of uneducated, racist, sexist, immoral, and violent people.

Reed’s friend and mentor Lincoln Steffens, the famous muckraking journalist, went beyond Reed by trying to open his readers’ eyes to the historical dimensions of the revolution. Steffens traveled to Mexico after having returned from Europe, where World War I had just started. He made the provocative claim that the Mexican events were more comprehensible than those in Europe, which he also saw as more barbarous. The Mexican Revolution, on the other hand, was in a line with the social upheavals starting with the French Revolution and a forerunner of the revolutions to be expected in Germany, Russia, and even England. Steffens managed to convey an idea of how US policy itself was responsible for the development. Although his equation of American bossism with the Díaz regime and his celebration of Carranza as a representative of the worldwide march of social liberation reveal that he was in constant danger of replacing the US hegemonic discourse by that of the World Revolution, his reports are among the best to reach the American papers at that point. Moreover, Steffens’s advice was instrumental in keeping President Wilson from a more massive military intervention. But he was no fiction writer, and thus did not write the stories that might have conveyed a deeper feeling for what was going on.

Such stories were expected of Jack London when he went to Veracruz in the wake of the US occupation forces. In 1911 London had published “The Mexican,” a melodramatic short story about a young Mexican in the United States who wins a boxing fight against an American champion but also against his own promoter, who has prearranged his defeat because of a betting swindle, and against the racist gringo spectators—all of this so that he can use the prize money to buy arms and thereby save the revolution. The story has been praised as “moving” (Perry 254) and a “masterpiece” (Sinclair 165), but it is stylistically weak and thematically trite and cliché-ridden: it follows the pattern of the lone underdog who wins against all odds because he is fighting for a noble cause. London sacrifices all historical probability by placing the fate of the revolution in this individual’s fists, but the contemporary events south of the border only form the backdrop for what is primarily a narrative of a single fight. Apart from some brief passages where the protagonist remembers the exploitation of the Mexican workers and the massacre of his family by the soldiers of Díaz, we get little information about the conditions in Mexico, and what we get is misleading because, contrary to London’s socialist convictions, the revolution was not primarily one of the industrial proletariat but of the rural population. Like Steffens, London applies the discourse of class struggle; like Reed, he cannot overcome his belief that the world is to be saved by heroic individuals.
Still, London could be expected to write more discerningly after he had acquired firsthand knowledge in Mexico itself. But when he went there to write for *Collier’s Magazine* in 1914, his socialist and antimilitarist opinions soon gave way to his Darwinist racism. In his reports he admires the blond US soldiers, their discipline, their cleanliness, their sense of order, justice, and honor, and he looks down upon the Mexicans, especially the Indians, with a mixture of commiseration and contempt:

What chance could such lowly, oxlike creatures, untrained themselves and without properly trained officers, have against our highly equipped, capably led young men? These soldiers of the peon type are merely descendants of the millions of stupid ones who could not withstand the several hundred ragamuffins of Cortés and who passed stupidly from the harsh slavery of the Montezumas to the no less harsh slavery of the Spaniards and of the later Mexicans. (*Jack London Reports*, 145)

London regards the peons as essentially savages with a slave mentality, the victims of “a cruel and ruthless selection” (154) by their rulers, the worst variety of whom are those of mixed blood. Therefore he favors US military and economic intervention in order to help those who are incapable of ever helping themselves, and he develops sympathies even for the US American profiteers in the Mexican oilfields. For all his efforts to work up some pity and understanding for the Mexican masses, his war dispatches are impressive testimonies of the power of the discursive order over the perceptions of even the cultural opposition. Needless to say that in the two years remaining of his life, London never wrote the novels and short stories on the revolution his readers had expected of him.

Journalistic writing was decidedly superior to the fictional versions of the events while the war was still going on. While oppositional writers like Reed, Steffens, and London managed to develop an awareness of the importance of the Mexican Revolution as a historical event, it may not come as a surprise that even they, as contemporary eyewitnesses, could not find a stance for the creation of narratives that might have formed a contrast to the dominant pattern. Romantic hero worship and exoticism on the one hand and, in the case of London’s later writings, racist stereotyping on the other made them confirm notions they would have rejected on an abstract ideological level. In other portions of their texts, they applied the ideological discourse that had shaped their thinking to events only partially comprehensible on such grounds.

The situation was entirely different for the next group of authors, those writing about Mexico after 1920. If they had any firsthand experience
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of the country during the revolutionary period, it was only of the last stages of the struggle. But all of those to be discussed here witnessed the conditions in postrevolutionary Mexico, the institutionalization of the revolutionary movement, and the creation of new, cooptative hierarchies of power including bureaucrats, union members, members of peasants’ organizations, as well as property owners and entrepreneurs. They witnessed the armed resistance of radical Catholics to the anti-church policy of the government, and other instances of violent unrest, but also the redistributive policies, the cultural renaissance, and the educational programs for the rural population.

The period from 1910 through 1934 forms the historical skeleton for Carleton Beals’s novel *The Stones Awake* (1936). Beals had taught and done newspaper work in Mexico and through extensive travel become one of the best-informed US American writers as far as Latin America was concerned. *Mexican Maze* (1931), a volume of travel reports and political analyses, is one of the most interesting books on postrevolutionary Mexico. But Beals’s forte, his ability to handle a great amount of factual material, turned into a drawback when he wrote his novel on the revolution and its aftermath. Basically he follows the realistic model: reality can be known even if it should be that of an alien society, and it can also be shown if only a sufficient number of historical and local color details are presented. Sometimes, Beals uses such material both for descriptive and symbolic purposes in order to represent the specific world order of the rural Indian population:

She wove and wove. She began thinking of straw mats—a trick the mind has of avoiding sadness and recovering tranquility.

The reeds, from out of the mire of a distant river, nearly a day’s foot-journey away, were cut, dried, then re-moistened during the weaving. A mat brought eight centavos on the hacienda, thirty in the city, but the reeds cost four, unless you cut them yourself.

She loved the rich straw odor. A freshly made mat seemed to make the body that rested on it clean and spry again. In time a mat gathered the smell of the earth on which it was laid and the smell of the body, and of the love acts performed on it. It gathered the blood-stains of childbirth. Straw mats were bed and nuptial couch, hospital and shroud.

Old mats had their death-knell uses. They were tied at the corners with maguy fiber to carry bundles. Old fragments covered crannies to keep out the chill upland air and rain. Though timber was plentiful, the hacienda owner, Joaquín de la Selva, wouldn’t let the peons fell a single tree, not even for coffins; so the corpses of loved ones were wrapped in the mats that had been their beds when they were quick; they were rolled up, just like meat in a corn tortilla, and lowered into the fresh earth. (*Stones*, 22)
This is suggestive both of an archaic lifestyle and of social repression, but it is also in danger of turning into sheer blood-and-soil mystique. Already at the beginning of the novel, we wonder about the reflective level attributed to such uneducated peasants, and the problem will continue particularly with respect to the protagonist. The characters are often mere representatives of certain social groups or political factions, and the central character, an Indian woman symbolically named Esperanza, is to experience and embody the changes the country undergoes and will, it is hoped, continue to undergo. She is introduced as the naive and ignorant orphan daughter of peons who were murdered by bandits. The plot opens with her rape by the owner of the hacienda where she lives. Later on, she marries a revolutionist and, after the latter’s death, lives with a painter and unionist in the capital before she returns to her hacienda as a schoolteacher taking part in the educational movement on behalf of the rural population. Her growing awareness of political, social, and cultural issues makes her the heroine of some kind of bildungsroman, but many of her adventures follow upon each other in the contingent sequel of a picaresque novel. This structural looseness, which is meant to mirror the open process of history, is offset by the often coincidental reappearance of other characters, notably an archetypal opportunist and a dwarf who is mysteriously linked with the ancient Aztec gods and who appears to be influencing the course of events. Indeed, some of the characters, for instance Luis, Esperanza’s lover, still seem to half-believe in the ancient divinities, in a strange mixture of social progressivism and a return to the roots, irrespective of the actual inequality of Aztec society:

“Yesterday one of the Indian woodmen down from Huetantzinco told me that when the God of the Smoking Mountain grows angered at his people, he will hurl down poisonous smoke and burning stones and boiling lava—he has done it before—and wipe them out in a single night . . . It’s coming I guess . . . When the lava cools, Xochiquetzal, Goddess of Flowers, and Flaloc, the Rain-God,7 will come strewing bronze violets and white lilies, and the lilies will be women breasted like the sun, and the violets will become men with tireless loins—a race more splendid than any. The peons will be free—no more serfs. There will be plump corn and fat deer and magic music. Then the great Smoke Mountain will waken his sleeping companion, and they will vanish from the eyes of mankind—like all things enchanted.” (29–30)

Many romantic relationships and conflicts make for suspense and turn parts of the book into a popular romance. An incident like Esperanza’s quasi-affair with a fraudulent faith healer, for instance, may contribute a little to our understanding of the deep religiosity and the gullibility of the Indian population, but its main function is to heighten the sensational aspects of
the novel. Beals unabashedly uses the point of view of Esperanza or, occasion-
ally, other main characters. It comes as no surprise, then, that the depic-
tion of the gringos follows the counter-stereotype of the Mexican discourse
on the northern Other: “The white ‘Meester,’ George Howell Caldwell, was
the manager of the big foreign-owned sugar estate [. . . He] had a ruddy if
tanned complexion that made him look like a perambulating sun, an
impression of youth and square grimness. His cold blue boring eyes were those
of a man accustomed to command” (49). Caldwell will later give the author-
itative gringo comment on the current event: “‘Tell him to watch his step.
Madero can’t last. No government that doesn’t enjoy the full support of the
United States can endure in Mexico’” (164). However, the US invasion at
Veracruz plays no role in this novel.

The clichés are less associated with the point of view of a given character
than an authorial element, as can be seen from comments like the following,
which borrows from the language of primitivism:

The Indian is ever rooted in an introspection sufficient unto itself, not like
white introspection which feeds on the subtle nuances with another person,
which leads to tortured emotional conflicts and adjustments. Her [Esperan-
za’s] introspection rather fed on life’s own roots, so that the sap flowed up
through the body and mind within the inner crust. It was tree-like. (399)

It is hard to believe that this is the same woman who some time earlier was
a member of the avant-garde Mexican art scene and defended antimimetic
modernism:

“The painter, since the invention of the kodak, has been liberated from child-
ish realism and recording. There is no significance in copying a milk jug ex-
actly when a kodak can do a better job—a silly conception to demand faith-
ful unimaginative reproduction. One doesn’t demand such boredom from a
writer. The artist has to go beyond photography—not reality but the illusion
of super-reality.” (373)

Beals himself is obviously not ready or capable of sacrificing the popu-
lar appeal of his sympathetic portrait of (post)revolutionary Mexico for a
more modernist way of writing. Instead he presents a mixture of literary
modes and genres that only partially succeeds in escaping the control of the
discourse he appears to oppose. His feeling of superiority manifests itself in
his presumption to be totally informed about the way the Mexicans char-
acters from various spheres of life experience their reality. In a chapter on
Mexican literature and painting after the revolution, published in Mexican
Maze, Beals admits his fascination with the more experimental avant-garde
of the Estridentistas and their revolutionary techniques of dealing with top-
ics related to the revolution (*Maze*, 259–83), but his own text remains fairly conventional albeit combining too many models. If anything, he presumes to be following the dominant Mexican discourse of revolutionary identity—down to the set of characters and the optimistic ending of the plot, which gives the events more meaningful coherence than many of the incidents seem to warrant.

The literary approaches of Beals’s contemporaries Katherine Anne Porter and John Dos Passos were entirely different, more aesthetically refined and complex in a modernist way. Among other things, both contributed to the basic insight that the Other cannot be known, that is, subjected to our system of knowledge, without making it lose part of its alterity. True, Porter insisted on her excellent familiarity with Mexico, and her early story “María Concepción” still pays obeisance to the primitivist part of the alterity discourse so fashionable among modernist artists. However, she as well as Dos Passos managed in several works to demonstrate the basic condition of the experience of the Other, that is, the alienity of the writing self and hence its limited perspective.

The importance of Mexico for Porter’s œuvre is well known; in the case of Dos Passos, it needs to be elaborated. In 1926, shortly after the publication of his novel *Manhattan Transfer* had established his position as one of the leading writers of literary modernism, Dos Passos made a trip to Mexico. His volume *In All Countries* (1934), which contains travel reports from several parts of the world, presents the following striking image of Mexico’s relation to the United States: “On the map you can see Mexico being pushed into the small end of the funnel of North America with the full weight of Yanquilandia crushing it down” (*Countries*, 80). Considering Dos Passos’s critical view of capitalism and of the American role in the world, it may appear disappointing that so very little of Mexico is to be seen in his novel *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), the first part of his trilogy *U.S.A.*, although Mexico City is the locale for one of the narrative plot segments. However, Dos Passos’s purpose in writing his trilogy was not primarily a reconstruction of history, but its deconstruction. The three novels cover the first three decades of the twentieth century. For the author, these decades represent the period during which the United States has lost once and for all its role of a model home of liberty, social justice, and the unfolding of the human spirit. Instead, it has turned out to be just another imperialist superpower run by industrialists, compliant politicians, and expansionist military. For this nation, the southern neighbor could hardly have any significance beyond that of a more or less useful appendix. And this is its symbolic role in the novel, as well.
In view of this degeneration of historical progress, traditional holistic storytelling that aims at the creation of consistency and of endings suggestive of an overall meaning has lost its place. Dos Passos therefore alternates between four textual modes that mutually and often ironically reflect upon each other without ever achieving anything like narrative totality. Instead, they mirror the fragmentariness, disjunction, and contingency of experienced reality.10

The first textual mode is that of the “lives”11 of a number of fictional characters. These (incomplete) biographies are cut up into several segments distributed over the novel(s). The characters act and make decisions, but placed against a backdrop of the major historical processes, they are revealed as impotent, outer-directed, and without insight into what is really going on. Significantly, only one of them, the businessman J. Ward Moorehouse, gains a modicum of history-shaping power. Equally significantly, the contrasting character, the proletarian Mac, tries to solve the perpetual conflict between his marriage and his engagement in the cause of the union movement by evading both in going to Mexico City during the revolution. Instead of joining Zapata as he had intended to or, at least, of cooperating with his political friends in the capital in order to strengthen the international Left, he drifts about, winds up in a love relationship with a young Mexican woman, by sheer luck becomes the co-owner of a bookstore, and, using the local connections of another American, turns into a bourgeois exactly at the time and place of the most violent social struggle. When Zapata and Villa threaten to take the city, Mac escapes with his household to Veracruz. He even considers returning to the States and leaving his girl behind because there isn’t enough money for both of them. But when the danger is over, his next impulse drives him back into his affair and his life as a bookseller, and fittingly it is at this point that he disappears from the pages of the novel. Needless to add, Mac never makes a serious effort to comprehend the nature of the struggle in Mexico but remains the outsider. Yet Dos Passos seems to imply that not only is this a typical approach for US Americans in the country, but that both the feeling of superiority of those sharing the discourse of power and the alienated state of the working population make it impossible to overcome the barrier of separating the visitor from what and whom he encounters. Mac is thus doubly alienated without being aware of it.

That business is indeed as usual in spite of the revolution is confirmed when Moorehouse and a corrupt American labor leader show up in Mexico City some time after Mac’s arrival there. The revolution, which Beals describes as “a drama being fought out [. . .] all over the land—a great tragedy, shaking the country from end to end” (Stones, 96), is rendered undramatic and reduced to a mere piece of decoration for Mac’s and Concha’s living
room, where two white Persian cats with the names Porfirio [Díaz] and Venustiano [Carranza] symbolize the insignificance of political positions.

What looks like a confirmation of the dominant American alterity discourse on Mexico is put into perspective by the second textual mode, the “headliners,” short portraits of real people Dos Passos considered as positive or negative representatives of the period. At the beginning of 1919, the next novel of the trilogy (1932), we find this headliner passage about John Reed:

The Metropolitan Magazine sent him to Mexico
to write up Pancho Villa.
Pancho Villa taught him to write and the skeleton mountains and the tall organ cactus and the armored trains and the bands playing in little plazas full of dark girls in blue scarfs
and the bloody dust and the ping of rifleshots
in the enormous night of the desert, and the brown quietvoiced peons dying starving killing for liberty
for land for water for schools.
Mexico taught him to write. (Dos Passos, 1919, 14–15)

The passage reveals what Mexico also meant for Dos Passos: poetry and the potential for historical greatness seeping out through the lower end of the funnel under the pressure of the “inconceivably powerful financial bloody juggernaut Colossus of the North” (Countries, 82). Reed, who is intended to contrast favorably with Mac, is one of very few to resist this colossus.

The two remaining textual modes are also used for complementary allusions to conditions in Mexico. In the stream-of-consciousness fragments from the author’s memory called “Camera Eye,” there is a passage alluding to a railroad trip his parents took through Mexico when it was still possible to hunt antelopes from the train, and when “one night Mother was so frightened on account of all the rifleshots but it was allright turned out to be nothing but a little shooting they’d been only shooting a greaser that was all” (42nd Parallel, 25)—an American recollection, indeed. And in the collages of newspaper clippings called “Newsreels,” the fragment “troops guard oilfields America tends to become empire like in the days of the Caesars” (57) yields sufficient if unintentional information about the way history develops in the Western hemisphere.

Taken together, the different presentational modes and the fragmentation of the texts achieve an impression of history as anti-history, as a series of sheer happenings in whose sequence the Mexican Revolution appears as only a digression. The American hegemonic discourse manifests itself directly in just a few passages and quotations, but the reduction of any historical counter-discourse to an apparently random collection of language
material reveals Dos Passos’s disillusionment with regard to the possibility of any serious opposition. His disillusionment also extends to the power of language or literature to change or even recapture events because, as the case of Mexico will show, the discourse of power has robbed them of their very status of event.¹²

Katherine Anne Porter spent major portions of the postrevolutionary decade in Mexico and became a sympathetic observer of the political, social, and cultural developments. It is interesting to compare her earlier short story “María Concepción” (1922) with her later, more famous story, “Flowering Judas” (1930), which will be discussed again in the context of gender issues in Chapter 7.

“María Concepción” is set at some time during the revolutionary wars, but the fighting forms only the remote background and is described only from below, as it were:

Juan did not come home that night, but went away to war and María Rosa went with him. Juan had a rifle at his shoulder and two pistols at his belt. María Rosa wore a rifle also, slung on her back along with the blankets and the cooking pots. They joined the nearest detachment of troops in the field, and María Rosa marched ahead with the battalion of experienced women of war, which went over the crops like locusts, gathering provisions for the army. She cooked with them, and ate with them what was left after the men had eaten. After battles she went out on the field with the others to salvage clothing and ammunition and guns from the slain before they should begin to swell in the heat. Sometimes they would encounter the women from the other army, and a second battle as grim as the first would take place. (Collected Stories, 8)

Fighting a war here seems to follow the premodern pattern that, say, the armies and their hangers-on followed during the Thirty Years’ War in the seventeenth century. For the rural indios who form the subject of the story, there exists no moral or political cause one might wish to fight for, not even the improvement of one’s own situation in life. They go to war as a temporary way of spending one’s life, and they walk away from it just as casually:

Juan and María Rosa, disgusted with military life, came home one day without asking permission of anyone. The field of war had unrolled itself, a long scroll of vexations, until the end had frayed out within twenty miles of Juan’s village. So he and María Rosa, now lean as a wolf, burdened with a child daily expected, set out with no farewells to the regiment and walked home. (10)

The revolution here is not an identity-shaping event in Mexican history, but at best an event in the lives of the two characters. The war is an unstructured
fabric eventually coming apart. Sure enough, the military police threatens to execute Juan for desertion, but he is saved because of the friendship between the captain and the American archaeologist Givens for whom Juan had worked. All of this is of marginal importance and confirms the notions most US Americans had of the Mexican Revolution as a remote, exotic, and chaotic event acted out by rather immature people.

What is highlighted, instead, is a private struggle no less passionate and no less immature. The story’s local setting is some Indian village; few details as to the region are given, underscoring the exemplary nature of the plot, although we learn that the eponymous protagonist comes from the Guadalajara region. Thus, maguey agaves and organ cacti represent sufficient local color. María Concepción, eighteen years old, is happily married to Juan, who is the same age. Accidentally she observes him with María Rosa, three years her junior. Her world falls apart, her whole hatred is directed against her rival, but because Juan and María Rosa leave the same day before any confrontation could have occurred, she withdraws within herself and her world of feelings. She loses her newborn child but shows no emotion, having grown, to all appearances, “‘mere stone’” (9). When Juan and María Rosa return after one year, she kills the other woman. Juan and the village community shield María Concepción from the police investigations, and when she has recovered her calm, she takes María Rosa’s newborn baby as her own and experiences the happiness of a recovered harmony of life, whereas Juan is somewhat sobered when he looks ahead to the coming routines of marriage and work.

The story is well told, with precise but economically used descriptions of significant forms of behavior, including gestures and facial expressions. Porter sheds ironic light on the condescending primitivism of Givens, the only US American character in this text, but she rests her representation on her own, positive concept of primitivism. Thus, she introduces her heroine in the following way:

Her straight back outlined itself strongly under her clean bright blue cotton rebozo. Instinctive serenity softened her black eyes, shaped like almonds, set far apart, and tilted a bit endwise. She walked with the free, natural, guarded ease of the primitive woman carrying an unborn child. The shape of her body was easy, the swelling life was not a distortion, but the right inevitable proportions of a woman. She was entirely contented. Her husband was at work and she was on her way to market to sell her fowls. (3)

Primitive life and culture—from today’s perspective an outrageous notion—are seen as harmonious, involving physical and emotional well-being. When this harmony is shattered by Juan’s carefree, equally primitive machismo,
María Concepción finds a way of restoring it by the simple means of stabbing her rival to death. After the police are gone and the baby is fed, she can return to her natural rhythms:

The night, the earth under her, seemed to swell and recede together with a limitless, unhurried, benign breathing. She drooped and closed her eyes, feeling the slow rise and fall within her own body. She did not know what it was, but it eased her all through. Even as she was falling asleep, head bowed over the child, she was still aware of a strange, wakeful happiness. (21)

Such harmony, including the blending of waking and sleeping, signifies a totality that proved to be appealing to Porter’s readers. The unity of the story is made possible by the unity of the world it represents, and this, in turn, rests on the simplicity of life, death, thinking, and feeling that US Americans like their European contemporaries associated with primitive peoples. Other than in the short stories by Porter’s contemporaries Sherwood Anderson or Ernest Hemingway, the simplicity of what is being told and the laconic way of telling it do not serve as stimuli for the readers to fill in the lacunae by thematic depth and figural complexity. True, even Porter does not assume that it is easy to reconcile Mariá Concepción’s murderous lust for revenge with her calm and easygoing character, but if anything should be considered strange in these sudden reversals, we do not ascribe it to the protagonist’s emotional complexity but to the fact that she belongs to another race. And that race can be comprehended well enough, as can be seen from the author’s ease in presenting the protagonist’s thoughts and feelings, alterity notwithstanding. What we get on the whole is a picture of simple people with simple passions that they act out in a straightforward manner, a Gauguin tableau of Tahiti with strong colors and clear-cut figures but little depth.

Porter’s representation of Indian village life in Mexico thus results from a projection of a Western concept, that of primitivism, on a certain region and culture. What gets lost in the process is most regional and cultural specifics, because the underlying assumption is one of a universally shared set of archaic forms of behavior as well as the existence of a more or less homogenous, poor Indian population in rural Mexico. If this story embodies the spirit of Mexico at that time (Gunn 107), the impression of distance from concrete reality is even heightened. And that reality was the Mexican Revolution, which in and through this story is removed into the exotic distance. The narrating voice enters not only the individual imaginary of the main characters but also the cultural imaginary of the nation, that is, the Other, thereby shedding light on a historic event that in this narration loses all its monumentality.

Porter’s approach was to change drastically in the years to come. The still turbulent situation under President Alvaro Obregón (1920–24) forms the
background for one of her most famous short stories, “Flowering Judas” (1930). Contrary to Dos Passos’s handling of the theme, the failure of Laura, Porter’s US protagonist in Mexico City, is seen not so much as representative of the decline of the West and its loss of anything like a meaningful history, but as a personal defeat in view of the discrepancy between high pretensions and insufficient fulfillment, applying to Laura’s personal role as well as to the fate of the revolution. Laura, an American teacher of Indian children at Xochimilco, lives in the capital, supports her syndicalist friends, and serves as their secret messenger. The story has often been analyzed, usually as a tale of betrayal—betrayal of the revolution, betrayal of the young revolutionist Eugenio who commits suicide in prison, betrayal of Laura’s own womanhood. The aspect most relevant here, however, is Laura’s inability to overcome her own detachment from the Other. Although she has achieved a level of participation in the political events usually denied to foreigners, she does not find what she considers the true life. She is disappointed in the all-too-human revolutionaries; she is particularly put off by the courting of a boastful and cynical revolutionary general with the telling name Braggioni, whom she finds intolerable but tolerates nonetheless.

The gluttonous bulk of Braggioni has become a symbol of her many disillusionments, for a revolutionist should be lean, animated by heroic faith, a vessel of abstract virtues. This is nonsense, she knows it now and is ashamed of it. Revolution must have leaders, and leadership is a career for energetic men. She is, her comrades tell her, full of romantic error, for what she defines as cynicism in them is merely “a developed sense of reality.” (Collected Stories, 91)

On the other hand, Laura even rejects more positive contacts and finds herself incapable of any deeper emotional commitment. At the end of the story, she dreams of the dead Eugenio who forces her to eat the flowers of a judas tree. Laura, who feels betrayed by her life as an idealist, is thereby made to realize her own betrayal of life. In fact, Eugenio forces her into a kind of communion with his living and dying, but it remains doubtful whether this experience will get her anywhere. Her detachment, in spite of her ideological closeness to the revolutionists, as well as the distance separating a hedonist and corrupted former hero like Braggioni from a young escapist from a non-ideal life like Eugenio, have become elements of her own psyche. She has internalized the contradictions, the failures and incomprehensibilities of the revolution and can therefore control her rebellious unconscious only by repression:

She is not at home in the world. Every day she teaches children who remain strangers to her, though she loves their tender round hands and their charming
opportunist savagery. She knocks at unfamiliar doors not knowing whether a friend or a stranger shall answer, and even if a known face emerges from the sour gloom of that unknown interior, still it is the face of a stranger. No matter what this stranger says to her, nor what her message to him, the very cells of her flesh reject knowledge and kinship in one monotonous word. No. No. No. She draws her strength from this one holy talismanic word which does not suffer her to be led into evil. Denying everything, she may walk anywhere in safety, she looks at everything without amazement. (97)

This fine psychological study is also a kind of psychogram of postrevolutionary Mexico where the disillusionment of the participants of the revolution contrasted curiously with the initial enthusiasm of the newly arrived foreign visitors—and this is where the text meets Dos Passos’s overall critique: “Not for nothing has Braggioni taken pains to be a good revolutionist and a professional lover of humanity. He will never die of it. He has the malice, the cleverness, the wickedness, the sharpness of wit, the hardness of heart, stipulated for loving the world profitably” (Collected Stories, 98). Even if Laura’s emotional defenses somehow match the growing political repression, we may not deduce anything like her entering the communal Mexican experience. Porter’s approach is totally different from that in “María Concepción.” The US American visitor is put into the center, not like the invaders discussed in the previous chapter, but as a witness to the alienity of what is going on. The story confirms the gulf between the two worlds, the impossibility of sharing the emerging historical identity discourse of the Other. But it also suggests that the discrepancy between the respective ideals and the respective achievements could be a structural feature of humanity in general.

DOS PASSOS ANTICIPATED POSTMODERN notions of eliminating the privileged status of historical narration and, indeed, of any dominant narrative, and Porter pointed out in some of her works how illusory any claim must be to share the (historical) experience of an alien people and impose a narrative order on it. Nonetheless, writers of the 1980s have tried to reintroduce the Mexican Revolution into the group of narratable events. Rosalind Wright did so rather highhandedly by returning to the nineteenth-century “loose baggy monster” type of society fiction. Her novel Veracruz (1986) traces the fates of an American coffee planter, his family, and a number of other characters, US American and Mexican, before and then during the US occupation of Veracruz. Time and place are well chosen: the years 1911–14 (with some flashbacks to previous events) saw the rebellion of Francisco Madero against Porfirio Díaz; Madero’s short presidency aiming at social
reforms looked on askance by the United States and those European powers having invested in Mexico; the coup d’êtat of Victoriano Huerta and the murder of Madero in February, 1913; and finally, the US invasion and occupation of Veracruz in April, 1914.

The port city and the province of Veracruz was a suitable locale because Mexican, US, and European economic and political interests came together and sometimes clashed there, and because a sizable number of Americans lived there because of business engagements. Wright introduces a wealth of historical information in lengthy passages that might have been taken from a history book or an encyclopedia. She quotes from diplomatic documents and other historical sources. Like Beals’s The Stones Awake, the book is informative—in a positivist way—about a great variety of aspects of Mexican life from political developments, social manners, and habits of speech down to cooking recipes, and it often avoids traditional stereotypes. US arrogance is exposed over and over again, as when the American journalist Dorothee Thompson is quoted as saying, “‘Somehow these people must be brought to their senses. The more intelligent among them quite naturally—the wealthier class, the ones with education—they understand that Madero must go. But there are so few of them’” (Veracruz, 315). And yet, even while the following is the view of one of the US American fictional characters, it appears like a bow to a US readership: “[A]s much as her physical features, her manner marked her as American. She had that open, friendly quality that stood out in sharp contrast when Americans were in the company of other more sophisticated or wary nationalities” (89).

The book, with its sympathetic portrayal of Mexico and the social issues that were at stake during the first years of the revolution, could have also become a text reappraising the imperialist past and hence been part of the postcolonial literary movement. Yet although there are scenes that make the revolutionary turmoil real enough, on the whole the material is not sufficiently dramatized because the focus is on the private affairs of the characters, and what an assortment they are! In many ways a successor of Beals, Wright, too, mixes authorial and figural narration without qualms about entering the minds of any of her characters, Mexican or other. The sheer mass of plotlines, themes, and ordinary or eccentric characters (among them an American spiritualist-plus-feminist), the conversations about philosophy or cultural differences, forms of racism and ethic values, and the portrayals of Mexican politicians overwhelm the book. When, at the end of the novel, the characters simply scatter in all directions, this may look like a postmodern variant of historical openness. However, many of the subplots follow the romantic pattern of popular fiction, thus clashing with the demands of literary realism that Wright evokes by the many details minutely described.
Veracruz exemplifies the quandaries that the writer of historical fiction about identity-shaping events in another culture and society will run into when he or she tries to avoid giving the impression of arranging the plot according to discursive models while at the same time claiming total insight. By an unintentional self-parody, Wright explodes her own method when she has Limbano Cox, a mysterious relative of one of the Mexican characters, a man of mixed Mexican and American descent and uncannily resembling Francisco Madero, telepathically enter not only the mind of the president, but also the world of the ancient Aztecs. After the murder of Madero, Limbano falls into a six-week coma, that is, a descent “near death” (339), during which he travels to the ancient Tenochtitlan before the Spanish conquest. This gothic excursion into the world of Latin American magical realism only helps to reconfirm cultural barriers even with respect to literary modes, even where the novel, due to the easy contacts between US Americans and Mexicans depicted, might apply a double perspective to the confusions of the revolutionary years. The line between counter-discursive subversion by means of a blending of discursive conventions and a relapse into a discourse of dominance is very thin, indeed.

Thus old Agustín’s question referred to initially has to be posed in a more specific way: What kind of narrative will make a historical event like the Mexican Revolution comprehensible? Among texts of the last decades, Agustín’s own story, that is, Laurence Gonzales’s novel El Vago, is perhaps the most successful. Gonzales introduces two time levels, namely that of a frame narrative taking place in 1945 on the day of the explosion of the first atomic bomb in the New Mexican desert and featuring the old Mexican and the young boy Paco, and, on the other hand, the events of the revolution in which Agustín took part on Pancho Villa’s side. Agustín and Paco are on a hunting trip, get lost in the lava fields, and, at the end of the book, witness the incredible event of the explosion from close enough to be blown over, but they cannot explain it and Agustín only knows that the radio announcement of an explosion of an ammunition depot must be a lie. Thus, the frame story holds the nucleus of another historical narrative and raises the problem of how and from which temporal and conceptual vantage point the principal story of the revolution can be told. The dawn of the Atomic Age is an event just as much beyond Agustín’s comprehension as the Mexican revolutionary wars are beyond Paco’s. Again and again the present situation shaping the conversation of the two men interrupts the narration of the past, indicating that all narrative is speaker- and context-bound. Much of the conversation is supposed to be in Spanish, although both speak English as well. Spanish phrases, usually with rough translations, serve to remind us of the dependence of narrative historical truth also on the potential of language.
This is from the beginning, after Agustín’s sweetheart Consuelo has been raped by the son of the hacienda owner and after Agustín’s foster brother Doroteo, who will later change his name to Pancho Villa, has shot but not killed the attacker:

“I was too afraid to go back to Consuelo. I was a coward in many ways.”
“No,” the boy scolded. “You were twelve. Come on, Tío, there are no twelve-year-old cowards.”
“I was terrified.”
“Did you shit your britches?”
“This mouth of yours. Your mother didn’t teach you that. Were you raised in a barroom?”
“Tío,” Paco said, then switched to English. “I was raised in rural New Mexico, for Christ’s sake, where every other word I hear is ‘shit.’ It’s hard to avoid.”
“Qué va,” Agustín said. “Then don’t say it in Spanish. Dirty up your English if you please. Obscenities in Spanish are more poetic, less direct.” (El Vago, 25)

Later in the book, Agustín’s narrative memories sometimes slip into a style vaguely echoing the Spanish the speaker is supposed to use, as Hemingway did in For Whom the Bell Tolls: “‘I know. Equally do I love you. But never have I said it because of Consuelo’” (El Vago, 229). And the question of language and communication is intensified when we learn that Agustín, coming from an uneducated peon family and going to learn how to read only fairly late in his life, again meets Consuelo, who has mastered this art. She has also in the meantime become a revolutionary fighter like himself, and after they have made love for the first time, she leaves him, but scratches a message into the sand that he cannot read. “I stared at the unfathomable markings with a growing sense of helplessness. Such a stupid thing, I thought, as the skill of reading—that such a small omission could mean the difference between finding Consuelo and not finding her” (108). Here, we have the condensed version of all inequality but also of the limits of communication.

Yet Consuelo will not remain a fixed star in Agustín’s life because she, like everybody else, changes roles, allegiances, life purposes. She turns into a cold-blooded sniper begging to be allowed to kill another enemy soldier, and finally winds up serving as minister of propaganda for the government that Agustín is fighting. In the meantime she has vainly tried to get Agustín to escape with her to the United States, to “‘freedom’” (204). He asks, “‘Are we not bound to stay here?’ [. . .] It had never occurred to me to escape from this world [. . .]. I was Mexican. Mexico was at war. Therefore I was at war. For my purposes I had been at war for nearly two decades. I knew nothing else.” But she answers, “‘Bound how? What have we done but make the people of Mexico more miserable that they were before?’” (205). Before
she turns completely cynical, Consuelo has become disillusioned about the revolution and above all about the revolutionary leaders in this *machista* country. “I have sought a true leader of men, but I have found only barbarians, bandits, murderers, rapists, and many, many of those who have made the ultimate act of faith and cannot be faulted” (105), that is, who have died in this war. Shortly before, Agustín tried to rape a woman:

“It was only for a moment, and only just a glance from her, but it hit me like a bullet [. . .]. In that moment I saw her entire life and the lives of all the peasant women in Mexico, who are born, who grow up in tumbledown shacks wearing rags, who have one or two brief years of beauty—a flowering in which there is a surge, like sap rising in the stalk—and then they enter the long state this woman was just entering, of widening face and widening hips from bearing children, of exhaustion and disappointment and depriving themselves of even the little they have so that their children can go through the same thing all over again.

“And like this process was the process of banditry and of revolution. They go around and around and around and can do anything at all except stop.” (102)

If this makes the gender aspect of the pervasive social injustice and the failure of the revolution to overcome it abundantly clear, Consuelo later on founds a “Circus of the Revolution,” which for Agustín means that

“[s]he has solved the riddle of how to embrace the horror [. . .]. Always, through all my years of running and fighting and suffering, through all my years of loving her, through everything I always thought that one day there would be meaning or understanding. I once thought Madero would bring it, but he did not. And I thought Doroteo might, and Zapata, and even when I found Consuelo, I thought she might. And now she has [. . .]. It brings people joy.” (255)

She, like himself, has also accepted the meaninglessness of the war, but it will take him until after the final defeat of the Zapata army to which he feels most attached, in 1919, to finally flee to the United States and begin a new life. Before that, the revolution had reached its final stage and the anomie of Mexico as a failing state was pervasive:

Now began the final sacking and looting of the Mexican nation. [. . .] The shattered remnants of the revolutionary forces raided all across the country, taking whatever could be taken, burning buildings, villages, cities. Priests and nuns, because they had always represented the worst oppression of the Mexican people—the Catholic Inquisition—were hauled out of their churches and convents and rectories and shot or hung or tortured to death. Nuns were raped. The churches, which had been ablaze with precious gems and golden
ornaments, were stripped to the stones. The revolutionists wandered, stunned, broken, venting outrage and attempting to fill the unfillable void. (277)

Before his flight, wounded Agustín is healed by an old Indian medicine man who tricks him into eating the heart of a dead enemy soldier:

[I]t took me a moment to realize what I was seeing. The soldier’s chest had been wrenched open and his heart cut out.

I was unable to control my panic as I ran from the scene and hid in the hut, shivering and weeping, certain that I had finally lost my senses once and for all. I could not stop myself from weeping. My God, I thought, there are my people, this is what I am, I have made the final leap into the abyss and have eaten my enemy to save myself. (289)

This is not an attempt at magical realism, but a gothic incident on the edge of believability. The gruesome scene literally boils all of Mexico’s history since the human sacrifices of the Aztecs into one dish of horror, but this has its inner logic, and that extends beyond the war-ravaged country still vainly hoping for salvation to encompass all of mankind. If there is a meaning to the revolution, if there is a meaning to atomic warfare, it is beyond the protagonist to figure out.

Thus, all we get is a life story containing fragmentary insights into the past and its causes. Agustín’s very limitations, however, his drifting between the armies and, later, between the two countries, his unreliability, his alternating between self-sacrificing devotion and egotistical betrayal, but also his lack of sufficient information about causes and aims of the fighting make him an adequate symbolic representative of many Mexicans at the time of the revolution but also of the human species as such. His subjective stylizations and private mythmaking turn his narrative, insufficient as it may be, into a convincing combination of history-telling and storytelling. In the Atomic Age, even Mexican Americans will find it hard to demonstrate the historical importance of the revolution to non-Mexicans, and their lack of a historical discourse is shown to correspond to a lack of power. But the construction of a new identity by narrative reinvention calls into question the survival of even the dominant discourse and is thus an articulation of cultural counter-power. In its rejection of the national discourses of both Mexico and the United States, the narrative may be part of a new dialogical identity formation. The fact that this is the text of a bicultural writer may have helped to overcome the impasses of the historical narrative discourses, but the challenge to write historical identity stories across the boundary of self and Other remains.