

Mariano Azuela and the scenes of the Mexican revolution

LUIS FELIPE VALENCIA TAMAYO¹

Article received on July 21, 2019, approved for publication on September 1, 2019

Abstract

In order to review the reasons behind a masterpiece of Mexican literature, this text is a tour of the work: *Los de abajo* (1915) of Mariano Azuela. No doubt, his narrative values stand out, but the key to his historical survival is in his portrait of the revolution. And to that extent, the strength of the characters that remain in the collective memory is highlighted thanks to their defense of human values, their resistance to different forms of power. It may well be thought that this revolution, which the novel draws, is an excuse to enter the finest portrait of the Mexican people.

Keywords: Literature; Revolutionary culture; Mexican Revolution.

A centenary of the publication of the novel *Los de abajo* (1915, *The Underdogs*), by Mariano Azuela, has been completed. Perhaps this is the literary work closest to the social characterization of the Mexican Revolution and, therefore, it is usual that we find both its reissues and its translations. We still want to understand what has happened and, in that interest, literature guides a disquisition about history, of the passage of time, of things that seem to be gone, but that, strangely, are part of the story for more than the centuries pass.

A title as eloquent as, *Los de below* seems to summarize in itself the content of Mariano Azuela's novel. When one hears it or when one reads it, it seems that there is no need for more because everything is said in the images that come to mind thinking of a well-known story: the history of oppression and the struggle in Latin American peoples. Patience is filled, the cup is filled, it cannot stand any longer and events and calamities are triggered that, like everything that goes into the spectacle of history, cannot be measured accurately. It is true that each country of the American continent has its own accounts in this regard, but no less certain is that the chapter of the Mexican Revolution has had a much more vast and, likewise, read literature. In this way, the names of Pancho Villa, Venustiano Carranza, Victoriano Huerta, Francisco Madero, Porfirio Díaz and many other protagonists of the history of Mexico are not strangers to us. So let's not be sure of the roles that these and those had, the mere mention

1 Writer, professor of Literature and Humanities at the University of Manizales. Master in Philosophy of Science and Language (University of Caldas), with research interests in art, philosophy, history, languages, literature, sociology, among others. Professor at the School of Social Communication and Journalism at the University of Manizales. Author of the book *Historia e Historiadores*. Email: lufevata@hotmail.com

refers to an image of the *maintop* people in which violence and the parties were shown together in the landscape.

The doctor Mariano Azuela begins to publish his novel *Los de abajo* (Those below) in 1915 under the striking method of deliveries or brochures. He had already been part of the revolutionary faction that Julian Medina led in the population of Hostotipaquillo and knew, as a doctor, the future of a bloody struggle that did not have a clear conscience when it came to acting and much less when approaching the power. Several can be, thus, the relationships of the author's personal life with what is read in the novel: on the one hand, the desire to bring readers closer to the most intimate scenes of the revolution - from the judgments and ways of to be one of the leaders who begin to rise up to the anguish of those who lose love and reach a power that they do not know how to handle - and, on the other, the life of a cultured man, as a doctor is, in the path of struggle navy. In the novel one does not meet the historical subjects that appear in encyclopedias as an object of consultation, no; in the ones below, the meeting takes place with those who go through the investigations anonymously and then join the number of unimportant victims. Undoubtedly, the novel reaches its relief by what it tells us about these people, by the ways of being of the characters who go armed and hungry going to meet the federal army and by the expressions, curses and sayings of those who seemed to go through the silent story.

Revolutionary novel? antirevolutionary novel? It would be a mistake to highlight one of the two aspects. Azuela has played the role of a realistic novelist who does not let him see what he feels for what he narrates and when there is the case in which he shows himself an enemy of one side then comes another in which he can show that the front troops are not less noble. What can be gathered is that Azuela has tried to show scenes of the Mexican Revolution and through the chapters of her novel she manages to convey what was lived in those years. Sounds simple, but the exercise is complex.

All part of the day when Demetrio Macías had to leave his house because of the stalking of the officers and noncommissioned officers of the Porfirista army. The violence of the feds perches on the brave man, ends his house and kills his dog, separates him from his wife, and he, without political creed and transpiring courage, undertakes a revolutionary path in which he will be surrounded by death, infamy and festivity. Together with the dead, mezcal, tequila that is offered to all, good and bad, and that makes the penalties of combat more bearable. In the footsteps of Demetrio, other characters, no less desolate, join together and proudly gather to replicate those above: "Well, -said Demetrio-, you see that apart from my thirty-thirty, we only have twenty weapons. If they are few, we give them until we leave one; if there are many, even if it is a good scare, we must take them out".

The adventure of this revolution is, once again in the history of the letters, the great metaphor of a journey in which all obstacles appear and few satisfactions are achieved if it is not by force of great sacrifices. As such, it is oblivious to a clear or conscious political content and immerses itself in the sense of more than a personal resentment for the pain caused. Demetrio and his fighters do not talk about John Locke or his natural rights or even the famous right of insurrection of the subjects postulated by the English philosopher; they have no conversa-

tions about the political reality of Mexico, nor do they cite the enemy intellectuals also of the Porfiriato, nor do they know of the philosophical positivism that the president liked so much, none of that; after combat, there is only room to honor the dead, drink and love. Perhaps in some moments words are heard that are not completely understood, such as those of Curro to his general Demetrio:

We have not risen in arms so that a certain Carranza or a certain Villa will reach presidents of the Republic; we fight in defense of the sacred rights of the people, trampled by the vile chieftain. [...] and just like Villa, Carranza, and no other have to come to ask for our consent to pay for the services they are providing to the Homeland, we don't need to ask anyone's license either.

On this trip, the crew does not know where it is going. You start with revenge and then the road has no return. Revolution without more political notions than those that combatants consider worthy of claiming. The combat is reached because there is an initial offense, it is true; But the struggle continues because there is no other, because prisoners of great inertia, the revolutionaries would not know what to do without their thirty-thirty, without their rifles. In addition, the leaders are confused, lost in their ambitions, threaten each other and spread all their troops from their sufferings, who at many times do not know which way to go. Everything overflows, in a short time Demetrio is able to end a federal troop in Zacatecas and his followers are able to kill humble peasants for inattentions or for serving bad food dishes. In both the federals and the revolutionaries, weapons spread a desire to be increasingly superior to any human being. Children grow up without fortune and every woman loses her modern charms for the sake of a return to her animality. Disenchantment is painted on the faces of some of the members of those below, showing, I think, the same disappointment that Dr. Azuela bore when accompanying Julian Medina's troops.

If something can be this novel is that, the story of a disenchantment. The devotion that the people initially had for revolutionary ideals in the end is transformed into hatred; there is no longer music at the entrance of the revolutionaries in the villages, there are no more cheers or flags of solidarity with the cause; Everything has gone wild like a horse without a bridle. It is the novel of a very precise time that stealthily walks in the company of the revolutionaries who came out in the days when Madero is killed until the days when Villa was defeated in Celaya: "A disaster! Villa defeated in Celaya by Obregón, Carranza triumphing everywhere. We ruined!"

Thus, Azuela's novel leaves interesting questions not only about the causes, developments and outcomes of the Mexican revolution, but about the possible relations with the Latin American revolutions.

Los de abajo is frequently cited as the mother novel of the novels of the revolution and although in detail that is not true, the truth is that it can be in strength, style and encounter with the characters who, as much as they suffer, enjoy the days and the nights of the early twentieth century Mexican. We can also cite the chronological precedent in the work of Heriberto Frías, *Tomóchic* (1894), a text about the indigenous insurrection against the Porfiriato, and the novels that subsequently make up the work of Martín Luis Guzmán (2000), such as *The Eagle and the Snake* (1928). Undoubtedly is the role of the revolution in the work of Mexican

intellectuals and writers, from the members of the Athenaeum, such as Alfonso Reyes, who has told us so much about the “Tragic Decade”, including Rulfo and his approaches to the so-called Revolution cristera, and reaching the most recent narrators and chroniclers of Mexican lyrics, like Monsivais.

As has been said, the title *Los de abajo* translates a fundamental interest in highlighting the realistic objective in the narrative. And in this same consideration the fact that Azuela's novel had been translated into English as *The Underdogs* in 1929 is more than anecdotal. Many things can be suspected of this title, including the novelist's complicity in allowing the title change, but it is well noted that the connotations may be different from those of text *To* in Spanish. The same happens with another novel that accompanies the most recent edition of *Los de abajo*: *Mala yerba* (Azuela). The same, because it was presented in English, rather than translated, like *Marcela* in 1932.

Mala yerba is a novel prior to the novel of the revolution but maintains some of its particular guidelines: approach to characters who go unnoticed while events and historians pass; search for a realistic narrative style not lacking in Latin American modernism; interest in dialogues that translate the thinking and acting of Mexican traditions. These and other things are part of *Mala yerba*, a 1909 novel.

As expected in thirty years of reign, Porfirio Díaz is part of the beings and things that are known and spoken on a plot of land like La Mesa de San Pedro. There the novel develops, but the interest is not so much the one of the revolution, as the one of the discovery of a town, its violence and its devotions, like the horses and the women. Marcela Fuentes, the protagonist, is the object of desire for the men of *La Mesa*, especially for the patron, Don Julián, who does not want to see her flirtatious with any pawn. The woman is primitive, wild, lends to love as to the violence unleashed by her variant, hate. It is clear that, as Azuela narrates: “The appetite is spurred by the resistance of the female” and that the males want to be “tamers of maidens”.

And if it seems that the order was imposed by men, Azuela is constantly in charge of making us see that everything that happens has already been thought by women and that in life they are always the ones who have the advantage. It is not the man who conquers, it is the woman who prepares to play and let herself be conquered; It is not the man who decides, it is the woman who imposes herself with her tenderness and reveries. Disturbing are the fragments in which Azuela shows the woman, the image of a race, as men see it:

Always the same: indefinite repetition of the type with its two main variants: the vulgar, rough and coarse species, so devoid of physical attractiveness that makes it doubt that for its deplorable garments a drop of blood can be spilled, which forces us to think that acts to which she has bordered her lovers have both criminals and tears the meat she intends to sing in her dunghill, the eternal triumph of the fort and, sometimes, very rare, the sensual and knowledgeable girl of the power of her fresh and tasty meat; the fiery woman who provokes conflict because in them she recreates herself, which leads her worshipers to danger in solace; refined in vice and with the intuition that recklessness whips desire and intensifies pleasure.

The latter is Marcela Fuentes, the one who plays her employer with pawns, a typical employee who is known attractive to her masters. The woman that everyone wants and to whom no one can recognize her attractiveness; It is too strong, with a broad back, but emanating sweet heat from its body. This is how Azuela shows her leaving a love meeting place:

From the jacalucho a girl hurried out, clenching her eyes as if the light hurt her pupils. He took the shaggy chomite skirt in a handful and ran along the edge of the sown. Her stubborn pubescent body wiggled like filly legs, his flat and bare feet chattering on the ground with a mountainous firmness of an animal that does not feel stony or weeds. He threw himself in the neighborhood, gathering tepetates in a wide blue apron.

Even a beautiful, beautiful, but unattractive woman is presented in the novel, or as it is commonly said: from bad in love. “Mariana, exquisite, exotic and rare flower in the uncultivated fields, contrasts for its finesse and slenderness, for its neurosis of civilized people, with all those female bellies, piercings and stubborn breasts of Swiss cows”.

As in *Los de abajo*, Marcela’s novel is a portrait of an era and a town in which men and women love each other in stables and pastures, those who watch over the dead drink mezcal and pulque, those who suffer put candles on every saint and those who bless make anathemas to any sign of diversion. The norms of the strongest, of the powerful are imposed; there are no clear notions of justice, and if there is justice it is not bandaged in their eyes, in addition, the witnesses have cataracts; the language expressed by pawns and revolutionaries revises the words when they are administered lightly: here the lord is ‘*siñor*’, the experience is ‘*es-periencia*’, still ‘*toavía*’, *pues* is ‘*pos*’, *ahí está* is ‘*ahista*’, *nadie* is ‘*naiden*’, *bueno es* ‘*güeno*’, *creo que* is ‘*croque*’, *así* is ‘*ansina*’ and *viceversa* is ‘*visconversa*’. Novels of a people and of a time that write down what in official history cannot be said, because only literature can pass through the thoughts, intuitions and words of those who pass easily unnoticed.