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THREE VOICES IN THE WAKE OF AN EARTHQUAKE

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Abstract. *Like practically every single country, Mexico has had its fair share of pain and trauma. Bloodshed and utter devastation are rife in Mexico's modern history. To civil wars and—in recent years—drug-related violence, one has to add the destruction and horror caused by earthquakes. The seism that devastated Mexico City on the 19th of September was the most destructive and painful in living memory. As an uncanny coincidence, also on the 19th of September, but in 2017, another earthquake hit the capital. Perhaps not surprisingly, Mexican novelists and poets have written profusely about their country's long history of seismic destruction. Poet and journalist Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera—who ushered Mexican letters into Modernism—chronicled the earthquake of the 2nd of November 1894. For his part, Juan Rulfo—arguably Mexico's most important fiction writer of the twentieth century—penned the “The Day of the Earthquake”, included in his collection of short stories *The Plain in Flames*, published in 1953. Rulfo uses a natural disaster and its toll as a metaphor for the unbridgeable gap between the political elites and the dispossessed. Finally, José Emilio Pacheco published a series of poems on the 1985 earthquake, the aftermath of which was felt not only in terms of human suffering, but also as a watershed event that ultimately resulted in social and political upheaval. An idiosyncratic brand of humour, trenchant criticism, and a sense of the ineffable before the enormity of utter devastation are some of the ways three of Mexico's best poets and writers have found to cope with catastrophe and trauma.*

The years 1787, 1932, 1985, 1995 and 2017 have nothing in common unless one looks at them from the perspective of Mexico's National Seismological Service. In all of these years, the country was struck by earthquakes whose magnitudes on the Richter scale were 8.1, or deadlier.

The seisms, whose epicentres were located in southern Mexico, wreaked havoc in the capital city. Mexico City is, therefore, no stranger to disasters of this kind. Almost 150, 000 tremors of various magnitudes have been recorded since the 19th of September 1985, an ominous date in the country's recent history, when a killer earthquake hit the capital. There is no scale, of course, to measure the magnitude in terms of the pain suffered by the inhabitants of an area devastated by an earthquake. Nobody knows the exact death toll of the 1985 earthquake, over 10,000 by some estimates. In any case, what most people remember is the inefficient—some would say ‘inexistent’—reaction of the federal government in the wake of the disaster:

Federal officials responded to a growing wave of protests in a manner that only stroked growing public rage. They obstructed, refused to help, and at times even

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hindered rescue efforts. They told people to go home, be patient, and did not offer help ..., insisting that the authorities were “in control”. President de la Madrid remained mostly out of sight, and refused to approach the devastation It was only after a second quake on 20th September that he began to acknowledge the magnitude of the crisis, admitting that the state did not have the resources to deal with the situation. He asked Mexicans to be patient. (Dawson 12)

The response to this was a grassroots movement that quickly spread to all levels of society and formed rescue brigades. Symbolic of this movement was Superbarrio, a hero for the victims, dressed in the trademark style of Mexican wrestlers. The brigades saved the lives of people trapped under the rubble, and provided whatever scarce resources were available in order to help the 180, 000 left homeless. This happened against a backdrop of widespread corruption, a collapse in the country’s GDP, sky-rocketing inflation and government incompetence. The aftermath of the quake is viewed by many as the moment that ushered in the demise of the old political system. “Mexicans often mark the 1985 earthquake as the nadir of Mexico’s lost decade. Perhaps not surprisingly, it is also often remembered as the moment when Mexico’s political system began to change” (Dawson 13).

By some uncanny coincidence, another killer quake hit Mexico City, also on the 19th of September 201 —32 years later to the date. For the most part, this time round the government and the people were better prepared to deal with the ensuing disaster. However, fingers were pointed at corrupt architects and engineers apt to cut corners, but mostly at corrupt officials who authorised the building of schools and other such projects, in blatant violation of construction norms and regulations.

Given the fact that earthquakes are so common an occurrence in Mexico, it is perhaps surprising that literary works based on this form of natural disaster are rather thin on the ground. By contrast, after the 1910 armed uprising that put an end to Porfirio Diaz’s 30-year-plus rule so many novels were written on the subject that literary critics refer to this movement as ‘novela de la Revolución’. Among the few Mexican poets and novelists that have dealt with quakes and their consequences are José Emilio Pacheco, Juan Rulfo and Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera. In the following paragraphs, we look at the decidedly contrasting ways in which the three use earthquakes as their subject matter. First, we take a look at Pacheco’s series of poems about the 1985 earthquake. In this elegy, Pacheco admits the impossibility for his idiom and poetry to accurately describe the full extent of human sorrow. Next, we discuss Rulfo’s satirical short story, “The Day of the Collapse”, a pitch-perfect tale showing the total disregard of the powers that for the plight of the dispossessed. Finally —to end on a brighter note— we revisit one of Gutiérrez Najera’s chronicles, written on the aftermath of yet another earthquake. Here at last some comfort can be found together with the promise that life, despite everything, goes on.

We shall start by the most sombre of the three, Pacheco. One of Mexico’s favourite writers, whose novel *Battles in the Dessert* never fails to appear in the high school curriculum, Pacheco was born in Mexico City in 1939, where he died in 2014. Among the many literary prizes he was awarded, *Premio Cervantes* takes pride of place.

Like many other poets and novelists, Pacheco has an emblematic place: Mexico City. When the 1985 earthquake hit the capital, Pacheco was in Maryland.

Three days later, he managed to return to his city and share in the plight of its inhabitants. The earthquake and the suffering it entailed prompted Pacheco to write a series of poems, in which he rebels against the idiocy of the disaster and condemns those responsible for the deaths of thousands. These poems, “*The Ruins of Mexico (Elegy of a Comeback)*”, are included in his collection *I Watch the Earth*. The title of the elegy contains an asterisked note in which, together with a list of dedicatees, Pacheco briefly summarises both the shock of being abroad while the earthquake struck and the horror he experienced upon his return.

The elegy is divided into five parts, each containing an epigraph taken from the Bible, Homer’s *Iliad*. The first epigraph is a passage of Luis G. Urbina’s long poem “*Elegy of Return*”, hence the bracketed name of the collection. Urbina was a Mexican poet that marks the transition between Romanticism and Modernism. The passage that Pacheco quotes evokes the pain experienced by exiles on their homecoming:

I will return to the city that I love the most,
After so many years that I have lost,
But I will soon become a ghost.
(Luis G. Urbina, *Elegy of the Return*).

The poet returns to a place which, for want of a better word, can only be described as surreal or other-worldly, where the laws of physics no longer apply, where everything has turned into its exact opposite, and hell and earth have traded places. The world is literally upside down, in icy contempt for matter and its properties:

Hell rises up to sink the Earth.
Vesuvius erupts from within
The bomb ascends instead of falling
Lightning sprouts from a well of shadows. (I, 5)
Day becomes night,
Dust is the Sun is dust. (I, 7)
So quickly the firmest thing shatters.
Concrete and steel begin to sway. (I, 8)

In this Dantean scene, Cosmos —the primeval order— has become synonymous with Chaos. We can pray, but to no avail. The new god, whose language is havoc, rises from the netherworld to destroy. He can only be worshipped in temples made of rubble. Words, such as ‘disaster’, whose etymological meaning used to make sense as a dictionary entry, have suddenly become literal. Likewise, idioms such as ‘to have both feet on the ground’ have been rendered absolutely meaningless in the face of the devastation. Also —contrary to Marshall Berman’s view— all that is solid does not melt into air, but crumbles:

“Feet on the ground”
we say to praise sanity,
a sense of reality.

And suddenly,
the ground begins to walk
There is no shelter:
All that was solid crumbles. (II, 5)

In the face of this and many other such disasters, it is impossible to tell the story or write the history of the city. Also, as further subversion of what once familiar, the poet is unable to recognise his own city among the ruins: he is one of the victims.

This city *has no history*
Only martyrology. (III, 12)

.....
I move closer to see what burns so bitterly in the night
And discover my own skull. (III, 5)

.....
If the dead returned,
They would not recognise you, city,
bloodstained by disaster,
capital of the void. (IV, 1)

The devastation is both internal and external, and concepts such as ‘within’ and ‘without’ are now blurred beyond recognition:

My past is over.
Ruins are crashing down inside me
There are always more, always more.
They fall but they never hit bottom. (II, 3)

‘Survivor guilt’ is the term used to refer to the pervading feeling of self-guilt experienced by those surviving a traumatic experience when others did not. Pacheco apologises to the dead for not having recognised the naked woman enshrouded in the debris (II, 7). He further apologises for the ones buried alive or maimed, and also to those who survived the collapse only to eventually die of asphyxia. He feels guilty because he was unable to give them anything and is now standing, speechless, on the edge of the chasm left by a building. Pacheco has no problem finding the exact words to express his gratitude to the countless anonymous heroes. He also gives vent to his hatred of those who profited from the disaster. He sentences them to forever hear the cries of the dead. At one point in his poem, Pacheco has to come to terms with the bane of all poets, the inadequacy of language:

With what ease yesterday’s poems spoke
Of dust, ashes, disaster and death.
Now that they are here, there are no more words
to convey the meaning of
Dust, ashes, disaster and death. (II, 10)

Pacheco says that, after a disaster, humans think they are able to decipher the many obvious signs that they failed to read and understand. Dogs, cats, ants, countless

fish and flies, many blue flies, heralded the disaster, but went unheeded (IV, 8-9). After the earthquake, the sky is devoid of sparrows and pigeons; what can be seen are swarms of buzzing bluebottle flies.

The poem ends on a more optimistic note: the inhabitants of the city will never become accustomed to living among the ruins; they will never sign a pact with the quake, nor will they forget the victims:

We will never learn to live
in this epic of devastation.
It will never be possible to accept what happened,
to make peace with the quake, say
“What happened, happened, it’s better to forget.
It could have been worse. After all,
not that many people died.”
But no one swallows these fairy tales.
No one believes in oblivion. (V, 11)

Pacheco and the people that survived the disaster are determined to rebuild their city. This decision embodies the promise of a brighter future for all:

With stones from the ruins, we must forge
another city another country, another life. (V. 12)¹

Juan Rulfo (1917-1986) is undoubtedly Mexico’s most emblematic writer of the twentieth century. Despite a literary output consisting of just one novel (*Pedro Páramo*, 1955) and a collection of short stories (*The Plain in Flames*, 1953)², plus some film scripts, like *The Golden Cockerel*, he is one of Latin America’s most celebrated writers. In his fiction, Rulfo portrays the despair, poverty and violence that constitute the lot of many in rural, post-revolutionary Mexico. This was especially true during the three years of the Cristero war, which from 1926 to 1929 claimed the lives of approximately 250, 000. This bloodshed was the consequence of the intolerant policies of president Calles against Catholics. Also present in his stories are religious bigotry, lust and violence.

The stories that make up the *Plain in Flames* are, in their brutal realism, a snapshot of the Mexico’s heart of darkness. These miniature masterpieces of narrative skill are vivid depictions of the violence (human-inflicted and otherwise) and the extreme poverty that for centuries have characterised life in Mexico. In the introduction to his translation of these stories, Ilan Stavans has this to say about Rulfo’s story-telling:

Mexico becomes the theatre where the plots unfold, although the extreme poverty that characterizes them and the way nature defines character could be found in any rural

¹ Pacheco returned to Mexico City and he also revisited his poem on several occasions. This explains why the Spanish version of his elegy, published by Era, ends as a question. By contrast, the bilingual edition quoted here ends as a confident statement. We much prefer the latter.

² Also known, and published, in English as *The Burning Plain*.

area of the globe where civilization doesn't appear to have arrived. The term *magical realism*, perversely attached to Latin American fiction, is absolutely foreign to these stories: Magic never enters Rulfo's picture. A better term to describe what these stories do is what I call *realismo crudo*, a type of realism interested in the rawness of life. (xi)

One of the stories included in *The Plain in Flames* is "The Day of the Collapse". This story—which many, with the benefit of hindsight, regard as prophetic of the September earthquakes—deals with the consequences of disaster, amplified by the sheer inefficacy of corrupt politicians and a proclivity for violence. The story—a cartoonish political lampoon—is a satirical masterpiece. Melitón and another, unnamed, narrator give their account of the events both during and after the quake. Both narrators seem to fit the Roger Bartra's description of what he calls '*homo mexicanus*' and his 'Mexican soul', the latter consisting of a line that connects "melancholy—apathy—fatalism—a sense of inferiority/violence—over-sentimentality—resentment—evasion". These points form "the path that a Mexican must follow to find himself, from Eden to the industrial apocalypse (45).³

Both narrators seem to disagree on the day (in fact the year) the earthquake hit the area. It is as if, once in the past, the exact date on which the devastation occurred were completely irrelevant. The unnamed narrator cannot say with any certainty where he was when the quake started. There is agreement only on the month of the disaster: September. The unnamed narrator goes on to say that, for the inhabitants of the region, a worse disaster seemed to be lying in store: the arrival of the governor.

He came to see what kind of help he could provide by being there. You all know that as long as the *gobernador* shows up, as long as people see him, everything is set right. The point is, at least he comes to see what's happening, and he isn't just inside his home, giving orders. With him coming, and people, even though their houses have fallen down on top of them, end up very happy to have met him. Isn't that the case, Melitón?
—Just so. (97)

Sometime after the quake, the governor does indeed come to see the area. The exact wording in the original Spanish is: "a short while after the earthquake *cayó* here el gobernador". 'Cayó' is the third person singular past of verb 'caer', Spanish for 'fall'. The governor is something that befalls the village as it were. Accompanied by a geologist and other such experts, the governor—in more ways than one—falls on the poor ignorant locals, not unlike the roofs that caved in during the quake. The ignorance of the locals is clearly shown when one of his retinue made a speech in praise of the national hero whose sculpture graces the town's main square:

He talked about Juárez, whose statue we had put up in the plaza and only then did we find out that it was Juárez, since no one had been able to tell us before who the person who was depicted in that monument was. We always thought it might be Hidalgo or Morelos or Venustiano Carranza, because on any of their birthdays, we always held an event there. Until that dandy came to tell us it was Don Benito Juárez. (98)

³ my own translation of the original Spanish.

As can be expected, this one-day visit costs the town a small fortune. The unnamed narrator says this was merely a whistle-stop tour; otherwise, it would have caused the village to go bankrupt. The locals, for their part, did seem to rejoice in the presence of the governor:

People were craning their necks so far to be able to see the gobernador and making comments of how he had eaten *guajolote* and if he had sucked the bones and how quickly he picked up one tortilla after another, spreading them with *guacamole salsa*; they paid attention to everything. And he was so relaxed, so serious, wiping his hands on his socks so he wouldn't dirty the napkin. (97)

During the meal, the governor and his entourage belt down many a demi-john of pomegranate punch. Before long, they all start belting out a song called, of all names, “You don't know the soul's hours of mourning”, which they sing over and over again. What was supposed to be a visit to share in the grief of the many turns out to be a colossal drinking binge. The punch flows and flows; in the end, even the tablecloths are all drenched in red. The party comes to a head when the governor rises to deliver a speech. What follows is Rulfo at his most satirical. Unfortunately, unlike Pacheco's crystal-clear prose, the governor's words do not lend themselves to translation. Suffice it to say, however, that one outstanding feature of the governor's speech is his trademark use of Spanish ‘esdrújulas’, words stressed on the third-to-last syllable. In Spanish—leaving aside countless ordinary words—many scientific, high-brow or indeed archaic words are stressed that way⁴. Esdrújulas can also be formed by attaching a reflexive pronoun to verbs, and the governor does not seem to be averse to this lofty-sounding use of grammar. José Joaquín Blanco, in an essay on López Velarde's style, has this to say about esdrújulas: “perhaps on account of their high-brow origins, many prestigious words ... are stressed on the third-to-last syllable, which makes them sound grandiose” (628). With his grandiloquent speech, the governor creates a linguistic barrier between ruler and people.

The effect this inflated language has on most listeners, especially on poor uneducated peasants like Melitón and the other narrator, is one of utter confusion. A few of the words the governor reels off in his speech do have an equivalent in English, such as ‘omnimodus’, ‘anonymous’, ‘munificent’, ‘ontological’ and other such flowery adjectives. As a consequence, the governor's gibberish totally distorts and perverts language. He is no longer there to express his deepest condolences, but simply to entrance an audience with a language that is—to all intents and purposes—foreign to them. A similar enthralling effect must have been achieved by Catholic priests saying Mass in Latin instead of the vernacular. The governor does indeed sound very

⁴ José Gorostiza, one of Mexico's most celebrated poets, wrote a curious poem on human vanity, describing it with a series of Spanish esdrújulas, some of which are English cognates: ‘faraónico’, ‘magnánima’, ‘deífica’, ‘epítetos’, and other such words.

priest-like. At some point in his speech he says: “On the other hand, I don’t believe God’s will was to cause us detriment, to dispossess us...” (100)⁵.

What the governor said next nobody can remember. His speech is interrupted by the rallying cries of the dandy, now inebriated. When people try to shut him up, he takes out a pistol and empties it at the ceiling. This results in a general commotion, not unlike the one felt by the locals when the earthquake started:

And the onlookers started to run as soon as he started firing. And they brought down the tables in their wake and you could hear plates breaking, and they started throwing glasses and bottles ... but they only ended up smashing against the wall. And the guy still had time to put in a new clip in his weapon and start firing again, as he feinted from side to side to evade the mass of flying bottles that they were flinging at him. (101)

Eventually one of the bottles hits the trigger-happy individual while the band plays the National Anthem. Meanwhile, on the street people have begun to hack their neighbours with machetes. The governor, who also happens to be a general, puts an end to the free-for-all. Finally, another member of his crew urges people to keep silent for the victims. The unnamed narrator asks Melitón: “For which victims did the guy ask that we all be silent? His reply: “For the ones in the brawl” (101).⁶

As the story unfolds, the presence of governor unleashes a man-made disaster, a re-enactment of the natural one. If anything, he makes a contribution to the death toll. In its simplicity and dexterous use of language, “*The Day of the Collapse*” is exemplary not only of Rulfo’s crude realism, but also of his signature brand of humour.

We now turn to Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera (1859-1895), regarded as the forerunner of Mexican Modernism. Despite, journalism being Gutiérrez Nájera’s stock-in-trade, he also published poems, short stories, theatre reviews and literary essays. In 1894, one year before his death, he started publishing *Revista Azul*, a literary journal which stands as a by-word for Modernism in the Spanish-speaking world. Pacheco himself, in his introduction to an anthology of Modernism, summarises Gutiérrez Nájera’s literary sources, which paved the way for the modernist idiom:

With critical acumen, Nájera understood that without what he called “cross-pollination”, there would be never be a Hispanic American literature. He also understood the danger for a renovation insurgency, were it to opt for unbridled imitation, thus abandoning the path of its own Spanish tradition. (XLIII)

⁵ Another alien-sounding feature of the governor’s speech is his use of ‘os’, Spanish for the object pronoun ‘you’ is a feature of everyday language in Spain; not so in Mexico, where — with the exception of scripture read in church — is completely extinct. As consequence, the overall effect of this pronoun is lost in translation’.

⁶ *Brawl*, from our point of view, is not an accurate translation. The answer, in the original Spanish, is “por las del *efipoco*”. ‘Efipoco’ is not a word; it is simply the way Rulfo’s uneducated peasants would pronounce ‘epifoco’, a term used by seismologists as a synonym for ‘epicenter’.

Unlike Rulfo, Gutiérrez Najera is a most prolific author. His literary output, up until 2003 had been collected into more than a dozen volumes which include his many chronicles. Gutiérrez Nájera's most famous *nom de plume* is Duque Job (Duke Job). It is precisely as Duque Job that he signed his poems, reviews and chronicles, whose subjects range from Wagner, to Strauss, to railways and can-can artists. Tragedy, however, excepting his essays on Shakespeare, does not feature prominently in his lexicon. Still, in his weekly column he published "A Bitter-Coloured Chronicle [The Earthquake]", in which he describes the disaster that struck Mexico City on 2 November 1894. What Gutiérrez Nájera has to offer, however, is not a description of the horror and devastation caused by this quake. Instead, he gives us comfort and hope in the wake of the catastrophe.

Written in the aftermath of the June 1882 earthquake is characterised by its subdued tones quite unlike the grandiloquence Martí displayed in his 1886 *North American Scenes*, "The Charleston Earthquake", to describe a cataclysm of greater magnitude. Nájera's chronicle is remarkable as a joyful anecdote of a most introspective tone. (Gutiérrez 610)

In this chronicle, the earthquake has just finished; the last tremors can hardly be felt, if at all. A male narrator starts a monologue offering solace and comfort to his female companion, who regains consciousness after fainting on account of the shock. This kind of setting existed in a century when unempowered women collapsed and had to be brought round by their level-headed male companions. As though the lady were the tectonic plates underneath the city, the narrator says to his lady: "Tremble no more", to which he adds:

The birds, scared off in every direction, are now resting on ledges and the crosses atop church towers; trees no longer shake their tragic manes, while the dormant titan that dwells in the bowels of the earth is lying there, disjointed, tame and mute: a lunatic after a seizure⁷. (241)

The blue lamp hanging from the ceiling gradually comes to a complete standstill, like "a playful girl falling asleep on a swing" (241). The black hands of the clock are still pointing to 'the hour of terror'; but the narrator can set the clock's pendule back in motion and everything will be fine again: "Tremble no more". On the street, life, as a mighty river, is flowing unbridled once again. "Would you like me to lace your tisane with a drop of cognac?"... the giant is asleep and the impish elves gingerly take a look at the pitch-black sinkholes of the mines. Light is laughing at us. Drink your tea" (241).

It has often been said that Mexicans make light, or indeed fun, of their sorrow. Like most stereotypes, this one must be taken with a pinch of salt. Still, there must be a grain of truth in it. The fact remains that —possibly on account of some defence mechanism that sociologists and anthropologists can no doubt explain— Mexicans tend to have a rather idiosyncratic way of dealing with sorrow. This chronicle is a clear example of this bizarre mixture of tears and laughter:

⁷ All Gutiérrez Najera quotes are our own translations, which in no way does justice to the quality of his prose.

If only you had been able to behold what a spectacle the city was at that moment! The grimace of tragedy and the wink of comedy looked at each other in bewilderment, as in a Shakespearean drama ... the tramway rails, shaken by the quake, slithered like two shiny silver snakes ... out came throngs of robed-clad men and ladies barely covered in skimpy peignoirs ... atheists suddenly believed in God ... Some cried: 'Jesus!' Other, the most strident Spanish profanities ... The Cathedral resembled a fabulous hippo about to crash the tree-tops with its hooves ... in that moment of horror, I saw the statue of Columbus playing ball with his globe. (243-4)

The night after the earthquake, churches are packed to the rafters while lovers get the kisses they were denied during the quake. Life resumes its normal course.

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