

MDD-9

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Two Novels of Bogotá.

March 23, 1965.
Bogotá, Colombia.

Mr Richard H. Nolte,
Institute of Current World Affairs,
366, Madison Avenue,
New York 17, New York.

Dear Mr. Nolte,

Altamira is set apart from the rest of the world, even from the country whose capital it is, and it despises everything except itself; Paris is corrupt, London is backward, New York is ridiculous, Rome is very old. Poor Altamira, the poor city does not know that it is more provincial than the most wretched village on the coast.

Ignacio Gómez Dávila: El Cuarto Sello.

Bogotá, city of palaces and fountains...

H.G.Wells: The Country of the Blind.

How can the atmosphere of this high, airless, claustrophobic city be conveyed to those who have never been there? Resting from it in the wide spaces of tierra caliente, flat land as nerveless as Bogotá is nervous, or even half-way down the mountains where it should be easier to remember that somewhere above it is still there and its life goes on, it is hard to believe that Bogota exists. It figures in the memory as a bad dream, itself a 'Country of the Blind', a Firbank tropical fantasy totally reversed. There are no palaces, no fountains, no prancing niggers, no orange blossoms, no hummingbirds. Creole though the city technically is, it has none of the warmth or the beauty loosely associated with that word.

Its climate is autumnal, its colours are the dull greens of fir trees and eucalyptus, the greys of cement and city dust. The dress of most visible women and of all men is sober. Masculine styles are conservative and English. Suits have waistcoats; even the suits of the beggars have waistcoats. The poor wear on top of theirs a piece of blanket with a hole in the middle for the head. This is their only concession to the folclórice, and never was the picturesque made so

drab: the colours are a heavy brown or dirty black.

They are not a vivid poor in any way. In their own sober slums, the drinking-places are yet more lugubrious than the surroundings. They do not drink much, and the drunkenness of too much thin beer is not very noisy. It seems not to bring release but greater gloom. The bottles spread out over the table — the drinker hopes that the empties in front of him will help him keep the account — until the drinker spreads out beneath it. There are a great many prostitutes, hard to distinguish from women who work in other ways and adding no colour. There is little gaiety in parks and open spaces, "where housemaids go on their days off," as their more fortunate employers describe them. Sad indeed is the Bogotá housemaid's holiday: one day a week, sometimes half a day a week, sometimes only one a month, the little money to spend, the expensive respectability, the fixed hour for the return. This restrained mood, loosened a little at bull-fights and at cock-fights giving way to the most noisy avarice I have ever heard, is the mood of the unconfined Bogotá crowd. The city produces few crowds, and the individuals that would make them up are more restrained still. When their work demands and often when it does not, they still use complicated phrases of deference: "Siempre a sus órdenes para servirle" — "Always at your service for anything you may require." It can be polite. But it has nothing to do with Hispanic dignity; it is a phrase very little used by those who hear it most, and it is servile.

The most peculiar of Bogotá's societies is its rich. In referring to the rich as a society I am immediately wrong. A mistake is the easiest beginning, to admit it the second step that all beginners must take. "I saw," writes the foreign narrator of Los Elegidos, "that all that counted was money. There were no old families, there was only old money." No sooner has he begun than he must qualify what he has written. He is given some assistance by the city's one licensed cynic:

"Here, as in Europe, we have several distinct classes of nobility. We have our Imperial nobility, for example, those who made their money recently in industry. ... Then there are the really good titles, the feudal ones you might call them in a country as young as this, which come from gold mines or the old booms in quinine or indigo. Think — nearly a hundred years ago! Others got enobled at the beginning of this century exporting coffee before the government started taking its cut in the profits. Not such a good title as quinine or indigo, but better than sugar or aguardiente."

Alfonso López Michelsen: Los Elegidos (The Chosen Few), Mexico, D.F., Editorial Guaranía, 1953.

All nobility is confirmed by buying a finca close to the city: "It's like buying a title from the Pope,... a certain sign of social and economic standing."

But, as happens in Europe, titles die out. The right finca is found and bought. "The sons, generally less capable and industrious, pretend to farm the land. The third generation ends up having to sell it to someone coming up in his turn. It is an iron law, and has been so as long as the republic has existed." This is true. The pattern described in Los Elegidos was noted some sixty or seventy years before by Medardo Rivas in LOS TRABAJADORES DE TIERRA CALIENTE. The novelist goes on:

"If any man has got what it takes he can climb as high as he likes..."

"Then why was Ayarza blackballed for the Country Club?"

"Ah, because he did not know how to behave; he hadn't acquired the manners of good society." Entry into that good society may be paid in various currencies, in cash, in conformity, in talent, in patience, in marriage... (the last three necessarily backed by the first two). The families that make it up may change continually -- one generation of prominence confers here the equivalent prestige and antiquity as three in England -- but good society and its manners evenly persist. Here there is no leaf-shedding season for deciduous trees: the leaves fall imperceptibly all the year round. The history of the Colombian rich, with their habits of spreading their interests and of buying land, is equally lacking in sharp autumns and blights. It has the continuity symbolized in the city trees.

It is with the manners and attitudes of this class that these two novels of my title* are concerned. How good are they as novels? It is difficult for someone who has lived in Bogotá to answer that question for someone who has not. Neither has that mixture of landscape writing and progressive politics that has given many Latin-American novels a brief and undeserved international success. It is hard for foreign readers to appreciate the greater accuracy of a more muted style. Nuances cannot be shouted, so they go unnoticed, and those who cannot notice them will find the books empty or naive. And in describing a society that has many naivetés, it is often hard for the author not to appear naive himself.

Alfonso López Michelsen: op. cit.

Ignacio Gómez Davila: El Cuarto Sello. (The Fourth Seal) Mexico, D.F., 1952. (No publisher given)

"Cómo podemos ser nosotros mismos si aquí no hay nada? — How can we be ourselves if there is nothing here to be? What culture, what race, what tradition, what on earth do you mean by 'ourselves'?" one character pertinently asks. The Colombian Left makes much play with the word auténtico, authentic, meaning here national rather than imported, original rather than imitative. But Colombia does not offer the fortunate, as some few other countries do, the choice between living in a national or an international style. Since Independence, the tradition of the Colombian rich has been to live as much as possible with imported drinks, imported architecture, imported furniture, imported books, imported ideas. Occasional frolics in a luxury version of what little auténtico can be found have all the excitement of fancy dress, a sort of cultural transvestitism. With the increasing ease of communication with corrupt Paris, backward London, old Rome and ridiculous New York and with the modernization of Colombia herself, the international veneer has covered more and more. In this sense Colombia is more of a colony than ever before. It is not an atmosphere propitious for the writing of good novels. For me, the achievement of both authors in distancing themselves from the egotism of this city, in letting some air into its suffocating society, in catching its elusive peculiarities, is apparent on every page.

The pride of Bogotá sustains them. Bogotá imitates, but it imitates in its own way, without shame and without much humility — "... the poor city does not know that it is more provincial than the most wretched village on the coast." It imitates the best models; take the moment of truth of the protagonist of El Cuarto Sello :

"It came upon me in a great wave. I wanted to change the names of Dior, Patou, Lock, Anderson & Sheppard, Fifth Avenue, Cadillac, etc., which had made up my vocabulary up until then, which had been my ideals, I wanted to change all of them for names I had once half-known years and years before: Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Rousseau, Kant, Bergson, Toynbee, Russell... . I wanted to know why I existed, why I thought, why I suffered." For these importers, no whiskey is too expensive, and no thinking too high. Such arrogance and confidence save these two novels from the ~~coyness~~ of most provincial writing, and from the abject filling-out of the formula to which I referred above. For that, they are better reflections of Bogotá.

Los Elegidos yearns after Proust. The author plays with the alternative title of Du côté de La Cabrera, after the district that was then the St. Germain of his city. Its deliberately absurd aspiration, the elaborate nostalgias of the exile narrator recalling Europe while lost in the "jungle" of Bogotá, measure the society under observation against its own pretensions. This is a subtle, witty, and accurate mode of attack, and it makes a novel out of what is usually material for a dreary and eroneous tract.

Ignacio Gómez Dávila writes in the style of Radiguet. El Cuarto Sello is the bare story of a disastrous marriage, of such a disaster in the Bogotá manner. It is brought about by upbringing and environment. The Colombian child becomes an adult without much of an adolescence, but in escaping that he is also in danger of avoiding maturity. His informal and formal educations mix sophistication and ignorance to what sometimes seems to the foreigner the point of schizophrenia. Then the moral atmosphere that prevails in this Andean canton is composed of highland Catholic puritanism, the Latin double standard (part of the puritanism here is that this is never admitted, even when it would be quite safe to do so; Bogotanos are very secretive), and imported moralities for those that can afford them. It is not an easy air to breathe, and the characters of the novel are effectively gassed.

It would be wrong to judge it a naive or melodramatic book. There is something imported about its objectivity — the author was a well-read and well-travelled man — but it is focussed on Bogotá lives. The borrowing of superior insight, nowhere available in the national literature, has not led to making the narrator's past self or his characters more sophisticated or aware than they were. It is a weird and disturbing achievement, a member of the best Bogotá society describing the wreck of his life and another's, with an imported vision that was his at the cost of the wreck. All imports are expensive.

Both authors are fine observers of detail. There is the perennial conversation about the water taps:

"You have to watch out, the taps are the wrong way round: the cold comes out of the hot."

"It's all right, I won't forget, it's the same with mine."

"You can never get them to put them on the right way...."

Then there are the easy expressions "me fascinan ... me apasionan ... me encantan" that are the particular mark of the Bogotá ignoramus, the universal local adjectives "lindo" and "rico" (of such vagueness no translation is necessary or possible). Nicely portrayed too is the very prevalent habit of disclaiming any interest in politics while remaining fascinated by them, and the cultural disorientation that so alarms the newcomer (Classicos Inolvidables: Obras Completas de Aldous Huxley ; the extraordinary number of Colombian translations of The Ballad of Reading Gaol ; the inexplicably widespread possession of Count Keyserling's Travel Diary of a Philosopher). From El Cuarto Sello :

"December 12th. Today I had the most marvellous opportunity of meeting the American novelist Thornton Wilder. What a charming, what a cultured, what a very great man. What can he be doing in these distant parts? ..."

The familiar figures move in the familiar city: "Of every ten I meet in the street, four of them know me. Two of the four go around criticising me and the other two despise me. All ten are jealous of something: Altamira and envy are synonymous." There are the possessors of confidential information, usually false, with their murmurs of "es muy amigo mio, es íntimo amigo mio — he's a very good friend of mine, he's my intimate friend." (Sometimes, to one's enormous surprise, he really is, but the phrases are said like the rosary, and the person to which they refer is usually as distant.) There is the presence of large sums of money in polite conversation. There are the English-educated: "They learnt (not what they were meant to learn but) many things: how to address servants, which tailor and which shirtmaker to go to, never to open their umbrellas even when it rained. They were acquainted with the nobility of the nightclubs, and they saw the Prince of Wales get drunk at Biarritz. ... But they had to come back here to this city on its peak in the Andes. They returned beautifully dressed, each with a signet-ring on the little finger of the left hand, speaking in Oxford voices with a light Latin accent, playing a decent game of golf. ... They had to work, the first few months were hard, but they had seen much and studied little, and that helped. Altamira has absorbed them back again, and the years of youth are only a happy dream."

Some individuals are recognizable prominent Bogotanos. It is typical of their society that both books are therefore universally regarded as mere amusing romans à clef. So self-regarding Bogotá defeats her critics. The characters see each other in these mirrors, and wave and point, and do not notice what is ugly or tragic or a lie. Such deathly amusement has a sureness about it that even England might envy.

The unwary reader will conclude that the vaunted culture of Bogotá is a rotten imitation, that the manners of its good society are a fraud, and that life in Bogotá is impossible. Ignoring intellectual scruples — that no culture is wholly without imitations or originality, that manners and fraudulence have their necessary connections, that life ... — I am frequently tempted to agree. But the conclusions to which the novels point are somehow denied by the novels themselves. They could not have been written anywhere else in the world, they are two novels of unique Bogotá, and they are not ashamed of that. They are ultimately only the most conscious and uneasy part of the Colombian act of faith, by which the population continues amid so much unreality.

Any reader will learn that Colombian society is no simpler than any other, and that few things are what they seem.

For example, a finca some way out of Bogotá is not only a certain sign of social and economic preeminence. Those who have lived here, and those who read these novels with care, will know that it is also a psychological necessity.

Yours sincerely,

Malcolm Deas

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