

**MYTH AND LITERATURE:
AN ANTIDOTE TO ALIENATION,
OR POLITICAL MYSTIFICATION?**

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One of the most striking features of contemporary Spanish American literature is its obsession with myth. Writers and critics alike have talked of 'magic realism' as the expression of an inherently Latin American identity, as an antidote to the alien imposition of European culture. They have talked of the need for the writer to express his political commitment by projecting on the future the myth of a Paradise Lost. Latin America's problem – they have insisted – is her lack of roots: she can overcome the alienation of history only by rediscovering her 'authentic essence'. The future – it is implied – is to be found in the past: in an original time prior to history.

Such arguments – because of their denunciation of imperialism as an alien imposition – have been greeted as 'radical' or 'revolutionary'. Certain Anglo-Saxon critics have, more cautiously, noted that this proclaimed political 'radicalism' is hard to reconcile with the fatalistic depiction by so many Spanish American writers of history as a closed circle 'doomed' to failure¹. Such caution is fully justified: it is not just that contemporary Spanish American literature shows an extraordinary political ambiguity, but that this political ambiguity is directly reminiscent of that of the majority of Spanish writers of the first half of this century. The argument that national identity is to be found by returning to an original 'essence' is unpleasantly familiar to Spanish ears. I would suggest that something can be learnt by viewing the rejection of history for myth which has come to be seen as the hallmark of the Latin American 'boom' in the context of the search for essences that characterized the thought of both right and left in Spain from the 1898 Generation to the early 50s: a search for essences which has shown unfortunate signs of revival – possibly this

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¹ See in particular D.L. Shaw's article 'Concerning the interpretation of *Cien años de soledad*', *Ibero-Amerikanisches Archiv*, III (1977), 317-29.

time, by way of revenge, under Spanish American influence – in recent years. To what extent the Spanish American obsession with myth should be seen as the result of Spanish influence is hard to say: certainly, the influence in America of Ortega has been enormous, while the intellectual contribution of Spanish republican exiles in the 40s: – for example, Américo Castro and Claudio Sánchez Albornoz – has yet to be assessed. In the absence of more detailed knowledge, it seems wisest to speak, not of influences, but of ‘curious similarity’ between the political ambiguity of the majority of Spanish thinkers of the first half of this century and that of many postwar Spanish American writers, and that the source of this political ambiguity lies in the common recourse to a myth of origins.

In some cases (Paz, Fuentes) the ambiguity takes the form of the use by apparently left-wing writers of arguments which in Spain – in the hands of the 1898 Generation – began as a radical critique of official values but can now be seen to have formed the basis of the fascist ideology which developed in the 30s and 40s. In other cases (Neruda, Carpentier, Cortázar) the ambiguity takes the form of a contradiction between an advocacy of myth and a simultaneous critical awareness of its dangers. In a few cases (Rulfo, García Márquez) I would suggest that it is not so much an internal contradiction as a contradiction between, on the one hand, the writer and/or critics’ interpretation of his work as an advocacy of myth and, on the other, the critique of myth which the work actually offers. Many Spanish American writers have – in their insistence on the importance of myth in their works – been their own worst enemies. The critics who have given them an international reputation have, in many cases, done so by wilfully simplifying or distorting them.

The relationship between the contemporary Spanish American obsession with myth and the earlier Spanish search for ‘essences’ may not be immediately obvious. I should like to begin by showing how both are forms of a common myth of origins.

The most persistent – and appealing – feature of the debate on what came to be known as the ‘problema de España’ was the suggestion that the last 400 years of Spanish history (from 1492) had been a mistake. The implication is that Spain’s history has been a corruption of her essential destiny. The failures of Spanish history can thus be dismissed as ‘inauthentic’, miraculously dissociated from the authentic ‘national soul’ that lies intact waiting to be awoken from its slumbers. The failures of history are not Spain’s fault, but something that has ‘been done to’ her. This idea is the basis of Unamuno’s notion (in *En torno al casticismo*) of ‘intrahistoria’: historical events form only the agitated ‘surface’ of the ocean of time, whose ‘substance’ is to be found in the stillness of its depths. Spain’s ‘true’ history lies not in ‘lo que pasa’, but in ‘lo que queda’. This is a brilliant device for dismissing historical failure as ‘superficial’: the consequence of such a notion is the suggestion that Spain should abandon any attempt at historical change and opt for what Spanish fascists were to call ‘eternal values’: in Unamuno’s words, ‘la tradición eterna’. This ‘eternal tradition’ is to be found in the depths of time: in an essence lying both before and outside of history. What Unamuno is pleading for is the abandonment of history for myth.

The same idea is found in Ganivet’s *Idearium español*, with his only apparently deterministic suggestion that a nation’s history is determined by an ‘espíritu territorial’ or telluric force. I say ‘only apparently deterministic’ because Ganivet then goes on to suggest that Spain’s problem is that, instead of acting in line with her ‘true’ territorial spirit (the independence which Ganivet arbitrarily gives as the characteristic of peninsulas), she mistakenly took herself to be an island and embarked on an ‘agressive’ pursuit of empire that was doomed to failure because it was an inauthentic deviation from her ‘essence’.

The same idea recurs in Ortega, with his suggestion – in *Meditaciones del Quijote* – that Spain must reject traditionalism, not in order to be progressive, but in order to recover the original essence that has been corrupted by her historical tradition: ‘De entre los escombros tradicionales, nos urge salvar la primera sustancia de la raza, el módulo hispánico, aquel simple temblor español ante el caos’ (whatever that may be). Spain’s history is again conveniently dismissed as ‘inauthentic’: as the betrayal of an ‘original’ destiny.

The name dismissal of historical failure as an ‘alien’ imposition is found in the work of the exile historians Sánchez Albornoz and Américo Castro, despite their famous disagreement as to whether the Moors and Jews had been a good or a bad thing. Both coincide in a racial view of history: defined for Sánchez Albornoz (in his *España: un enigma histórico*) by the Castilian racial mixture of Celtiberian, Roman and Vizigoth; or for Castro (in *España en su historia*, better known by its later title *La realidad histórica de España*) by Spain’s Semitic heritage. Such racial theories of history had also been put forward by Baroja and Ortega, for a belief in essences paradoxically goes hand in hand with a belief in ‘la raza’: paradoxically, because such racial determinism is invoked to account only for what should have happened in Spanish history but didn’t. What did happen is attributed to the mistaken intrusion of the Moors and Jews and/or ‘los Austrias’ and ‘los afrancesados’. The alien intruders may differ, but the theory remains the same.

The culmination of such theories is found in Américo Castro’s definition of the Spanish national character as a ‘vivir desviviéndose’: ‘Los españoles (...) son tal vez el único pueblo de Occidente que considera como nulos o mal venidos acontecimientos y siglos enteros de su historia. (...) Se vive entonces como si la vida, en lugar de caminar adelante, sintiera la necesidad de desandar, de comenzar nuevamente su curso’. Castro was an implacable opponent of the Francos regime, but his definition of the Spanish national character coincides exactly with the emphasis in Spanish fascist ideology on the need to ‘undo’ the corruption of history by cleansing the nation of alien influences and returning to an original ‘essence’. The definition that José Antonio Primo de Rivera gave of fascism expresses this well: fascism is ‘el retorno a la propia esencia’. Contemporary historians have shown conclusively how José Antonio and other early fascist thinkers (such as Giménez Caballero) took their ideas directly from the work of the 1898 Generation and Ortega: indeed, Giménez Caballero and, after the war, the falangist Laín Entralgo quite openly declared themselves ‘nietos del 98’. In the same way, the falangist ideologue of the 40s and 50s, García Morente, openly recognized his debt to Ortega and Américo Castro.

The rejection of history for a myth of origins (or essences) is basic to the thought of both right and left in early twentieth-century Spain. It is a regressive idea, not only because it is concerned to ‘undo’ history, but because it necessarily implies the need for authoritarian political structures. This need some explanation.

A myth of origins postulates a biologist analogy between the life-cycle of a nation and that of a man: it arises when a nation feels itself to be decadent and in need of rejuvenation. It is not a demand for maturity, but for a return to childhood: to innocence. Innocence is to be found by delegating responsibility to parental figures. The analogy found in both the 1898 writers and fascist ideology (not only Spanish) is that of the State as Father, the Nation or Race as Mother, and the Citizen as Child. Both Father and Mother are seen as simultaneously protective and terrible because they protect the child by taking power upon themselves. Fascist ideology advocates a return to the Freudian situation of the Primal Horde.

The protective but terrible Mother finds its perfect symbol in the barren (not

live-giving) landscape of the Castilian meseta, whose destructive power is revered in the landscape descriptions of Baroja and Unamuno. The Castilian meseta is the mother of the race, but – because she gives birth to an ‘original’, ‘untainted’ essence – she is a Virgin Mother: a Virgin Mother who finds her emblem also in the forbidding figure of Isabel la Católica. The nation’s wayward offspring must cleanse themselves of historical failure by returning to the Virgin Mother’s womb. The implied ideal of both the 1898 writers and fascism is incest.

Because the Virgin Mother is the founder of the race, she is symbolized by rock or stone (the Castilian meseta). The stone metaphor is used also for the father-figure, who founds the nation not by giving birth to it, but by giving it the ‘tablets’ of the law. Francoist rhetoric is full of Matriarchal and Patriarchal imagery. The demand for ‘un hombre’ (alternatively called ‘caudillo’, ‘cirujano de hierro’, ‘redentor’ or ‘mesías’) has been a depressing constant of both right- and left-wing political thought in Spain from the 1898 writers onwards. The religious terminology is no accident. For a myth of origins – being based on a view of history as corruption – necessarily supposes a search for redemption. It is concerned to return to the innocence of the womb as a way of ‘undoing’ guilt. It has been pointed out by the historian Richard Herr that the insistence by Spanish thinkers on explaining historical failure in terms of the corruption of an original essence supposes that Spanish history is vitiated by a ‘pecado original’². It is a doctrine of impotence, not only because it suggests that Spain is under a curse, but because it is based on an explanation of historical failure in terms, not only of corruption, but also of the necessary penance that must be suffered to expiate that corruption. In a circular argument, history becomes the expiation of itself. Expiation is a doctrine of impotence because it supposes that one is impotent to free oneself from guilt and that absolution can be found only by supplication to a redeemer. A view of history as corruption necessarily leads to what in Spain came to be known as ‘mesianismo’: the demand for a protective but terrible father who will offer redemption by imposing penance. The messiah paradoxically claims to free the citizen from history by making him suffer it. More than one Spanish intellectual has justified the Civil War with such argument.

The emphasis by 1898 writers and Ortega on history as alienation has led critics to call them ‘existentialist’: they would be better called ‘essentialist’, for their solution to the alienation of history is a return to a lost but enduring essence. The term ‘existentialist’ has also been applied to writers such as Paz, Carpentier and Cortázar. I should now like to move on to apply my analysis of the search for essences in Spain to the Spanish American obsession with a myth of origins. I shall insist that the emphasis of certain Spanish American writers on history as alienation cannot be called ‘existentialist’ if it implies a view of history as the corruption of an original essence. What I wish to question in particular is the claim that the rejection of history for myth is the ‘radical’ discovery of a new, specifically Latin American cultural identity. The claim that Latin America needs myth to affirm a unique identity sounds suspiciously like the old Francoist slogan that ‘Spain is different’.

It has been pointed out that in Spanish America – unlike North America – national identity was from the start seen in racial – and not in historical – terms³. The emphasis on congenital spiritual values in Rodo’s *Ariel* corresponds exactly to the

² R. Herr, ‘La inestabilidad política de la España moderna’, *Revista de Occidente*, Vol. 36 (Feb. 1972), 287-312.

³ See A. Hennessy, *The Frontier in Latin American History*, London, 1978.

emphasis by the 1898 writers on 'lo castizo'. In Spanish America, as in Spain, racial determinism is invoked precisely in order to reject explanations of national identity in terms of contemporary history. The national – or continental – character is again seen as the product of an 'original' landscape which is terrible but chaste, inviolate to history: in this case, the American jungle or the pampa (*La Vorágine*, *Doña Bárbara*, *Martín Fierro*). The appeal to landscape has no doubt been so strong in Spanish America as a way of avoiding the obvious problems inherent in an appeal to an indigenous racial heritage. It also has the advantage of giving the national character a spatial – as opposed to temporal – definition thus attributing it with a false appearance of permanence and solidity: it is an appeal to the endurance of rock, an attempt to 'freeze' time.

The rock (or stone) motif occurs in Spanish American literature with a staggering frequency. It needs pointing out that it is often used in a way that implies a critical awareness on the part of the writer of the dangers involved in the concept of original essences. García Márquez's use in *Cien años de soledad* of the image of ice to represent a freezing of time (fluidity) is, I suggest, a satire of the view that Spanish America's identity is founded on a solid essence: Macondo succumbs to the waters and winds of time as the ice on which it is founded proves to be only a false imitation of stone. In Carpentier, petrification imagery is used constantly to comment critically on man's attempts to immobilize time. It is important that Carpentier's favourite natural image should be, not stone, but the seed: an image of origins which contains the notion of change. What the protagonist of *Los pasos perdidos* finds on his return to the eve of Creation is not rock, but a fluid, amorphous plant life. Neruda – in this case the Critics have been more perceptive – modified his attempt in *Las alturas de Macchu Picchu* to found Latin America on the solidity of stone, recognizing that stone is, in turn, founded on blood: on the fluidity of human life. Or rather: that the fluidity of human life has been turned to stone. In Rulfo, stone is quite unequivocally associated with death: Pedro Páramo is not founding father, but, in his attempt to turn time to stone, he becomes an agent of destruction who will himself finally crumple like a pile of stones which proves to be, not solid, but collapsible. The search for the foundation stone, such metaphors imply, leads to the tombstone.

The analogy is apt, for the rejection of historical determinism leads to the dead-end of an even more intractable racial or telluric determinism. It is in order to get out of this dead-end that history has to be chopped up into a 'before' and 'after': Mother America genetically determines the 'original' race, but not the race that has subsequently been responsible for the failures of history. It is unfortunate that the conquest of America by Spain should have provided a tempting analogy with the myth of the Fall, not only because it naively postulates a pre-Colombian paradise, but because it introduces the idea of female treachery as an explanation of historical failure (a comparison with the Spanish myth of La cava would, no doubt, be instructive). The Virgin-Mother become the Whore: it is the treachery of the female (*La Maliche*) that is stressed, rather than the violation by the male invader (Cortés). This is no doubt partly because there is no direct equivalent of Cortés in the Genesis myth; but also because the emphasis is on the loss of continuity with the original Mother. The historical Latin American is a 'huérfano' or 'hijo de la chingada' (as Paz and Fuentes have called him) not because he is not the legitimate heir of his Spanish father, but because he is not son of the original Virgin Mother⁴. The fact

⁴ See Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad* and Carlos Fuentes, *La nueva novela hispanoamericana*.

that the historical Latin American is the son of a Whore condemns him to expiating and redeeming the crime of his Mother-Race in order to restore her lost purity. The mother's betrayal condemns the son to the recuperation of a mythical past. The betrayal them is another constant in contemporary Spanish American literature: Vargas Llosa's genuinely existentialist insistence on the need to 'dirty one's hands' with the impurities of existence seems to me to be much more healthy than the regressive search for redemption that dominates the work of Paz, Fuentes and (up to point: we shall say more about this later) Cortázar.

The blame for such views must be laid squarely at the door of Paz's *Laberinto de la soledad*: its analysis of the Mexican character suffers from all the defects for which critics of Spanish literature have attacked the 1898 Generation. Paz is possibly the one Spanish American writer whose use of the stone image (in *Piedra de sol*) is entirely uncritical: even Cortázar, despite his insistence on the search for purity, paves the way to 'el Cielo' with a 'piedrecita' (in the *rayuela* game) which is all-too mobile. Paz's notion of history as a 'máscara' is the exact equivalent of Unamuno's notion of 'intrahistoria': Mexico's history is a mistake, an inauthentic deviation from her essence, which however persists somewhere in the depths. Paz makes a travesty of existentialism by linking the concept of alienation to that of guilt via the Genesis myth: for Sartre, guilt arises from the attempt to deny the alienation (lack of an essence) on which existence is founded; for Paz, it is man's separation from his essence which is the source of guilt. Wholeness is to be recovered by a ritual transgression, whereby the corruption of history is 'undone'. Two negatives may make a plus in mathematics, but in ethics this is tantamount to using two wrongs to make right: to 'undoing' what is already an 'undoing'. Paz may insist that he sees national character as a historical creation, but it is only the inauthentic mask that is a historical creation: the result, as in Spain, of the imposition of 'afrancesado' ideas (it is noticeable that it is this, and not Spanish influence, that he attacks). Paz ends with the same distinction Unamuno makes at the end of *En torno al casticismo* between 'individualidad' (the false historical mask) and 'personalidad' (the authentic essential self), in order to finish (like Unamuno) with the unconvincing suggestion that the search for the nation's essence (being a rejection of a false 'casticismo histórico') is not a nationalistic pursuit but a declaration of solidarity with humanity at large. Paz ends by asking his fellow-Mexicans to 'soñar con los ojos cerrados': one can only ask if this is any different from the retreat into introspection and wishful-thinking of which the 1898 writers have been accused even by their admirers.

I have suggest that Cortázar's attitude to the search for origins is complicated. On the one hand, it is hard to see any difference between Oliveira's insistence on the need to 'desandar la civilización' and Américo Castro's notion of 'vivir desviviéndose'. Like Paz, Oliveira advocates transgression (the 'undoing' of an 'undoing') as a means to redemption. Cortázar – and critics – have talked about the novel as a mystic quest. I would, however, suggest that Cortázar – despite his statements about the novel – is presenting Oliveira critically: what Oliveira sees as a 'camino de perfección' can be seen by the reader, not only as a decent into the hell of madness, but as the creation of a monster of egoism. The novel is much more complicated than a straightforward quest: it is a quest, but it is also based on an ironic awareness that the circle is zero, that purification is dehumanization. If any message emerges from the end, it is that Oliveira can find 'el Cielo' only by 'falling' into it, for heaven is to be found, not in the empty space of the *rayuela* game to which only madmen have

access, but in the imperfections of human relationships (Talita and Traveler's embrace): a return to roots only in the sense of coming down from the clouds of idealism. *Rayuela* is as much a critique of the search for origins as Gonzáles Echevarría has shown Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos* to be⁵. Oliveira does not recover a childhood paradise, but regresses into infantilism. If one tries to see him as a quest hero in the second part of the novel, he cuts a poor figure; and we must ask whether Cortázar did not intend him to do so.

The use of the circular quest structure in so much Spanish American literature has been seen by critics almost unanimously as implying an advocacy of mythical time. This is certainly true in the case of Paz, and probably that of Fuentes (though novels like *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* show the corruption of history to be not without its merits). But, in other cases, the most striking feature is that the final return to origins is a return to a dead order. Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos* stands in a halfway position: man has to go back to his roots to discover the seeds of the future, but the paradise he finds is no more free from crime, disease and death than history. The end of *El siglo de las luces* has been seen by critics as a return to childhood which similarly points to the future: however, one cannot help but feel uneasy about interpreting such a negative end as anything more than a depiction of tragic waste: a return to origins which leads not a rejuvenation but a death. All Carpentier's novels insist on the value of myth (the memory of previous failed endeavours) as an impulse to revolution, but the revolutions about which he has chosen to write are all failed revolutions: if the memory of failure leads only to further failure, we are bound to conclude that Carpentier is either criticizing the obsession with origins or (more likely) slipping into the stoical idealization of failure that characterizes the novels of Baroja and Unamuno. The most obvious cases of a mythical return to origins leading to death are García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* and Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*. In these two cases, I shall suggest that — far from advocating myth, as critics have said — the writers are quite unequivocally showing myth to be a destructive force.

The two novels complement one another in their stress on matriarchal and patriarchal figures respectively. *Cien años* offers a view of Latin American history as incest; *Pedro Páramo*, as submission to the father of the Primal Horde. In both cases, we have the reduction of the citizen to infantilism. Both novels deny their characters any hope of redemption: Latin America is doomed to living out history as the expiation of a 'pecado original'. But is this the authors' view, or that of the characters? What is striking about *Cien años* is that incest is not only portrayed as an attempt to recover the innocence of the womb destroyed by a 'pecado original', but it is also the 'pecado original' on which history is founded. The message seems to be that it is the incestuous desire for an original purity that is itself Latin America's original sin: Macondo condemns itself to an eternal regression because it insists in seeing history as expiation, as an attempt to 'undo' history. It condemns itself to cyclical time because, in a vicious circle, it resorts to incest to 'undo' incest. García Márquez is openly hostile to his characters' 'vicio hereditario de hacer para deshacer', explicitly described by the narrator as 'un círculo vicioso exasperante'. The Buendías' increasing obsession with guilt leads them further and further away from reality, back to a paradise which does not offer redemption but annihilation and damnation: a 'paraíso decadente', 'paraíso de desastres', 'paraíso de miseria'. The family's obsession with mythification leads them by the end to an idealization of

⁵ See his excellent book, *Alejo Carpentier: The Pilgrim at Home*, Cornell, 1977.

historical disaster: even the 'diluvio' sent by the Banana Company becomes transformed in their minds into a 'paraíso perdido'. García Márquez's depiction of Latin America as a decadent civilization is historically quite inaccurate (since Latin America has never 'risen' in order to be able to 'fall'): it makes sense only as a criticism of Latin America's tendency to regard herself as decadent, to regard history as the corruption of an original essence. One wonders whether *Cien años* is anything more complicated than a satire of Latin America's obsession with myth. *El otoño del patriarca* confirms this suspicion: far from advocating myth, it uses it in order to expose it as a source of political mystification. The matriarchs of *Cien años* find their corollary in the patriarch whose power is founded on a return to infantilism.

The same connection between patriarchal power and the return to infancy is found in *Pedro Páramo*. As in *Cien años*, there is a suggestion (with the incestuous couple) that it is incest that is the original sin the characters are expiating. In this case, it is incest between brother and sister, while with Susana San Juan there is a hint of incest between father and daughter. Rulfo is not concerned with mother-figures, for he concentrates on the search for redemption via submission to a castrating patriarchal system. *Pedro Páramo* is a more political novel than *Cien años*, not in the sense that it is a study of social exploitation as some critics have maintained but in the sense that it links the search for redemption with the perpetuation of autocratic structures which has vitiated Spanish American history as much as that of Spain. Pedro Páramo is the father of the Primal Horde, monopolizing all the women and monopolizing all the land. Freud's antidote to the father of the Primal Horde was, of course, parricide: the novel ends with a parricide, but it is a confused, drunken parricide which does not overthrow the patriarchal system to institute a fraternal society, but is merely an explosion of impotent resentment. What is interesting is that Rulfo not only shows the motives behind the submission to patriarchal figures (the search for redemption via supplication to a saviour), but the motives behind the patriarch's destructive abuse of power: Pedro Páramo too is obsessed with the recuperation of a paradise lost, not in the sense of redemption, but in that of the restoration of an infantile world outside of time when hope had not yet turned to loss. Pedro Páramo is attempting to turn time to stone (to prevent the transition of hope to loss), just as others look to him as a foundation stone to compensate for their own insubstantiality as 'sombras'. The founding father does not offer redemption from history, but destroys history. Rulfo may not explicitly criticize this destructive urge to freeze time (as does García Márquez), but he is certainly not advocating it as an antidote to history.

It was noted earlier that there has been a revival of interest in myth in Spain in recent years. As in Spanish America, the recourse to myth by the so-called 'nueva novela española' has been hailed by critics (many of them Latin American) as a sign of cultural 'renovation'⁶. Here, too, it needs pointing out that, if a novel like *Tiempo de silencio* uses mythical references, it is in order to satirize the obsession of this characters with security: with founding their lives on the permanence of rock (the Escorial). Like *Cien años*, *Tiempo de silencio* uses incest as a symbol of a society that traps itself in a vicious circle of historical failure; like *Pedro Páramo*, *Tiempo de silencio* relates this incestuous search for the innocence of the womb to the prostration to saviour-figures: a regression to an infantile dependency on

⁶ See in particular the Chilean J. Villegas' chapter on *Tiempo de silencio* in *La estructura mítica del héroe*, Barcelona, 1973.

matriarchal and patriarchal figures which does not offer relief from historical failure but compounds political (and economic) dependency. Marsé's *Si te dicen que caí* – like *El otoño del patriarca* – uses myth (rumour, fable, memory) in order to expose political corruption. Myth does not offer an antidote to the corruption of history, but reinforces it. If Marsé opts for myth, it is not because he is searching for purity (the idealism of both right and left is denounced as a regression to infantilism) but because – like Vargas Llosa – he is putting a convincing case for the need to make the most of the corruption of history. Benet – the writer whose name has most frequently been linked to myth – is a more complex case: his novels do show a retreat from historical failure into myth, but – as in Rulfo, whose presence in Benet's novels is overwhelming – myth does not bring salvation but destruction (Numa). Myth is preferred to history precisely because – unlike politics – it makes no claim to 'save' man: or rather, because it 'saves' man only in the sense that it delivers him from the false promises of salvation offered by history, confirming destruction as the only 'essential' order. The curse from which Spain suffers in Benet's novels is not the violation of an original essence, but resides in a geological – an psychological – substratum going back to prehistory. To present such writers as advocates of myth is to ignore the destructive or corrosive role it plays in their novels.

This is not to say that Paz and Fuentes do not have their counterparts in contemporary Spain: the obvious example is Juan Goytisolo. Goytisolo's trilogy explicitly links Américo Castro's notion of 'vivir desviviéndose' with Paz, Fuentes and Cortázar's emphasis on the 'undoing' of history via (firstly) a return to roots and (secondly) transgression. *Señas de identidad* can be seen as an anti-mythical novel, inasmuch as it shows the futility of the attempt to find innocence via a return to origins; Goytisolo, however, seems to have learnt nothing from the lesson, and in its sequels indulges in an orgy of purificatory destruction which may be intended to liberate man's eroticism from the alienation of history, but which only leads to a narcissism of the most infantile kind. Goytisolo seems unaware of the irony of his equation of pleasure with sterility. That Goytisolo should have achieved an international reputation is no doubt due to be ease with which he can be fitted into the stereotyped image the European reader has been given of the Latin American novel. That Goytisolo – and Sánchez Dragó, with his lamentable *Historia mágica de España* – should have become best-selling authors in post-Franco Spain is a sad indication that nothing much has changed since the 1898 Generation. Goytisolo – like Américo Castro – may be concerned to 'undo' a different bit of Spanish history from the 1898 Generation, but his method is the same.

To conclude: I suggest that the majority of critics have failed to appreciate the degree of critical awareness shown by many contemporary Spanish American – and Spanish – writers in their use of myth. That some writers, and so many critics, have put myth forward as an antidote to the 'nightmare of history' is understandable at least in Latin America – whose history has been dominated by imperialism – for the temptation to dismiss history as an 'alien imposition' and 'corruption of an original essence' is great. The result is, however, a retreat into a myth of origins as a way of dissociating oneself from historical failure. As I hope to have shown, it is not only in former colonies but also in ex-colonial powers that such myths arise. It is only artists – and critics – who have idealized myth as a rejuvenating force: anthropologists have always taken it for granted that the function of myth is the preservation of authority: the neutralization of change by its assimilation into a fixed 'essential' order. All myth – whether of the right or of the left – is regressive in that it sees

historical change – of whatever kind – as the violation of a fixed, essential order. History may be alienating, but myth is a more serious form of alienation (in the classic sense of the term) in that it puts forward as 'natural' and therefore 'essential' what is only man-made: the mythical *in illo tempore* by definition has never existed except as the product of man's frustrated imaginings.

The contemporary Latin American – or Spaniard, or anyone else for that matter – is alienated not because he is cut off from his roots, but because (to keep the botanical metaphor) society does not give him room to grow. He is alienated, not from his origins, but from his end. It is noticeable that the need for roots has been most stressed by Latin Americans of European stock (and Europeans) when talking about the Indian. Arguably, the Indian is the one Latin American who does have roots; his problem is that roots is a form of mystification designed to distract the citizen (and particularly the Indian) from his need to grow (to develop). All nationalisms are dangerous in that they postulate a myth of origins as a compensation for historical failure: a compensation which can all too easily become a justification.

Literature is not a political tool, but neither is it politically innocent. One can at least hope that it will prefer 'desmitificación' to 'mistificación'. If some contemporary Spanish American and Spanish writers are advocating myth, this seems to me to be politically dangerous; if others are, on the contrary, using myth in order to point to its dangers, they should be given credit for what they are doing and not praised for the wrong reasons.