

Violating the Image of Violence: Ibargüengoitia's *El atentado*

BRUCE-NOVOA AND DAVID VALENTÍN

Violence is a key element in Mexican Revolution literature, reaching somewhat the standing of a cult. Not many question the historical authenticity of the subject;¹ campaigns were bloody and destructive, and between the murders of Zapata (1919) and Obregón (1928), Mexican politics seemed to be one of rule by assassination. The literature often takes issue, implicitly or explicitly, with the slaughter, lawlessness, and indiscriminate destruction, but generally the impact is the mythification of violence as a necessary and vital revolutionary force, that, in spite of particular cases of suffering and injustice, comes to assume a legitimate, positive significance. The legitimizing agent was rhetorical.

The rule of violence extended itself past the actual revolutionary period and became the accepted procedure for the legal authorities at all levels, a situation at times lamented by Mexicans, but much more often cynically shrugged off as an everyday fact of life, as normal as the infamous *mordida* or extorted bribe—itself a minor manifestation of violence. Post-revolutionary violence was justified through the rhetoric developed during and immediately after the Revolution and institutionalized by the ruling party. Recent illegal incidents, such as the Tlatelolco massacre in 1968 and the appearance of the *Halcones*—civilian-clad shock troops of trained and armed thugs used to repress student activists during the Echeverría regime—were rationalized by appeals to the defense of revolutionary ideals.

In literature, the image of violence follows somewhat the same development. Mariano Azuela criticized purposeless violence in *Los de abajo* (1915), but it was simply part of the upheaval engulfing the nation. Demetrio Macías, Azuela's protagonist, died a pointless but seemingly heroic death in the famous last scene. Years later, when the Revolution for a time became a prime topic of Mexican prose, innumerable victims followed in his footsteps. In 1929, Martín Luís Guzmán portrayed in *La sombra del caudillo* the callous utilization of revolutionary

rhetoric to justify personal vendettas, the violent resolution of political rivalries, and the general dictatorial character of Mexican politics. *La sombra* revealed the corruption behind the rhetoric just a decade after the end of the most active period of the Revolution. Yet General Aguirre passed into the Mexican psyche as another ill-fated hero who *died like a man, a lo macho*. Like Macías of *Los de abajo*, the character ascends to the godly heights of revolutionary hero through his violent, pointless death, and in spite of the author's attempt at irony. Even Carlos Fuentes' ambiguous protagonists, Federico Robles and Artemio Cruz, can be seen as combinations of critique and tribute to the violent revolutionary. Though his writing comes close to debunking official rhetoric, his works essentially validate the system by reflecting it so closely in his own systematically violent language and structure. Moreover, his utilization of violence with its concomitant machismo, as inherent Mexican characteristics, leaves violence firmly established. He might state that the revolutionary ideals have been betrayed, but the rhetoric is employed by those who are portrayed as the controllers of society.

In drama, Usigli's *El gesticulador* best exemplifies this process. César Rubio, a down-and-out history professor, passes himself off as an ex-general and long-lost revolutionary hero. When killed by his competitor for governor, violent death consecrates Rubio as a hero, leaving his identity unchallenged. Ironically, his death also guarantees his murderer's election by creating a representative of revolutionary ideals, who, once dead, can be utilized safely by his enemies—traitors to the Revolution—for their own benefit. They will do it through rhetoric. *El gesticulador* turns on the creative, mythologizing power of the word, first, and violence, second, while at once questioning the reality of the revolutionary images, especially that of the hero. Usigli, however, with his often exhibited Unamunian influence, knows that man's fate, his ultimate truth, lies in the lasting image held by the public, which does not necessarily correlate to "reality." César Rubio is yet another victim of glorious—though ironic—violence, which does immortalize him.

Examples could also be drawn from the popular arts of cinema, comic books, the *corrido*, and television. For our purpose, however, the foregoing examples from fiction and drama amply demonstrate that Mexican literature has, at times deliberately and others unwittingly, forged an image of violence as part and parcel of the larger image of the Mexican Revolution and modern Mexico, an image seriously treated in most cases, even when criticized.

Into this situation steps Jorge Ibarguengoitia, Mexico's leading humorist, who proceeds to attack that image, not with denials of the raw historical data, but by satirizing the rhetorical and literary process of the image creation. With respect to his most widely known work, the novel *Los relámpagos de agosto*,² the Casa de las Américas prize winner in 1964, Marta Portal characterized Ibarguengoitia's intention as, "superar la mexicanidad revolucionaria, o bien superar la mexicanidad revolucionaria literaria. Liberar el polo opuesto de percepción de la Revolución: ni drama nacional absurdo [corrupt but still valid, like Usigli], ni movimiento popular traicionado [i.e. Carlos Fuentes], una gran charada."³ Ibarguengoitia sees the Mexican Revolution as a historical farce, manipulated by the winners and glorified through literature. In *Los relámpagos* he ridicules the solemnity of the novels of the Revolution, parodies their rhetoric, repeats clichéd

scenes as if they were expected and unavoidably fixed patterns, and through allusions and intertextuality cites other literary texts. Even his narrator is highly aware of existing narratives of the Revolution and sees himself as a chronicler of his participation, writing within an established genre. Ibarguengoitia manages to reduce the images, and that of violence among them, to commonplace motifs whose value is overrated. Portal inventories his techniques: "forzando la expresión; adoptando el modo solemne en acontecimientos ridículos; aire inocente en decisiones crueles; ingenuidad y bondad en perversiones maliciosas; exagerar el tono, alzar la voz, en . . . mayúsculas innecesarias . . . reiteraciones de frases políticas, ahuecándolas al máximo para hacer más patente el vacío del contenido . . . la repetición de situaciones típicas de la novela de la Revolución, con el ánimo de volverlas tópicos" (p. 235). Thus he demystifies the revolutionary rhetoric of the literature, and in the process, undermines the ruling party, PRI, which still utilizes it to legitimize itself.

In the theatre, *Los relámpagos* has its counterpart in *El atentado*,⁴ a three-act play about the Obregón assassination. A brief plot summary follows for those unfamiliar with the work. Act I: Borges (Obregón) returns from retirement to run for a second presidential term. After he wins, a bomb explodes in the legislature. The terrorist is captured, tortured, and deported. Pepe, the terrorist's friend, is advised by a priest and a nun to find a way to serve his faith, the nun hinting at the assassination of Borges. Pepe practices with his friend's gun. Borges refuses to abandon his policy of religious oppression. Act II: Pepe stalks and murders Borges. Vidal Sánchez (Calles), the ex-president, persuades Pepe to name the conspirators. Borges' burial is followed by the arrest of the alleged religious conspirators. Act III: Trial and conviction of Pepe. Accord reached between Church and State. The plot is simple; only Ibarguengoitia's handling of the material distinguishes it to the level of interest.

In his introductory remarks the author calls the work a documentary farce,⁵ and sets the tone for his assault on the revolutionary imagery. "Advertencia: si alguna semejanza hay entre esta obra y algún hecho de nuestra historia, no se trata de un accidente, sino una vergüenza nacional" (p. 5). Although the author warns against treating the play as fantasy, he does insist on its reality as a play, a representation which creates its own spatial-temporal dimension. Time will be accelerated at will, i.e., a train is seen leaving the station in a slide projection, immediately followed by a slide of a train arriving; Borges has gone and returned, a period of two years elapsing in seconds (p. 10). With simple announcements of hours, in a matter of moments twenty-four hours fly by (pp. 36-38). Slide projections, both fixed and moving, are used, at times combined with music. Three actors play sixteen characters, at times changing roles on stage—"Baz, Paz, y Raz [reporters] se ponen bigotes retorcidos y se convierten en Balgañón, Malagón y Gavaladón, tres diputados" (p. 10)—or they exit and return immediately as Nazario, Macario and Rosario, secret police (p. 36). Or one actor is all of the witnesses in the trial. The rhyming names lend a comical touch, breaking down the mimetic reality of the performance, as do the slides and the accelerated time.

The burlesque atmosphere is underscored at times with music. Borges' funeral is done entirely with slides, music, and three silent actors:

Música: Marcha fúnebre.

Proyección: Personalidades haciendo guardia a los lados de un féretro.

Proyección: Cortejo fúnebre.

Proyección: Una multitud.

Entran tres oradores. Gesticula el primero al compás de una trompeta.

Proyección: Otra multitud.

Gesticula el segundo al compás de un clarinete.

Proyección: Otra multitud.

Gesticula el tercero al compás de un saxofón (p. 42).

The change from funeral march to jazz trio, accompanied with a change of crowds, is the descent from serious to casual, then to vulgar obscenity, if we consider the occasion. It serves, however, to underscore the obscenity of the seriousness of a state funeral for a dictator, revealing its true character. At the same time Ibargüengoitia is commenting on the Mexican penchant for vulgarizing the serious, the *relajo*, which on such occasions as a funeral produces a kind of black humor.⁶

These techniques, like the ones Portal inventoried, serve to divorce the action from reality, transporting the actions to another space in which their truth, their reality, depends on their interior logic, their capacity to impose themselves as images, and not on the mere fact that they actually happened. The tension between the irreality of the stage, where anything and everything is possible, and the so-called historical reality, is heightened by the author's explicit intent to set the play in the specific year of 1928 and his references to well-known events and places. Yet the events, places, and the historical figures alluded to are not realities, because of the emphasis on their quality of representations, or signs subject to manipulation. By reducing them to commonplace "words," Ibargüengoitia casts the shadow of farce on the accepted images and the literature that perpetuates them. He never denies historical fact, but successfully undermines the mythologizing rhetoric employed to institutionalize an official interpretation of them.

The play's title is itself ironic intertextuality in that it alludes not only to the historical assassination of Obregón, but also to Book IV of Martín Luis Guzmán's novel *La sombra del caudillo*, titled "El atentado," in which there is an attempt on the life of General Aguirre's right-hand man by the Obregón-Calles *caudillaje*. Thus the play sets the stage by evoking another literary work as its frame and space, announcing that it is to be taken as a commentary on the literature of the revolutionary period, and, by extension, the Revolution itself. Significantly, Ibargüengoitia chooses *La sombra del caudillo*, which was also a denunciation of the caudillo's image through subtle satire, paying a tribute to Guzmán, while at the same time calling attention to the novel's role in the mythologizing of violence and the murdered hero.

In "El atentado" the caudillo's henchmen attempt to kill Axkaná by forcing tequila down his throat. This assault, which is both humorous and macabre, precipitates a series of escalations which throw the country into turmoil, culminating in the assassination of Aguirre and eleven of his staff. The narrative is based on two separate assassinations of Obregón's opposition candidates. Violence, both in the narrative and in reality, triumphed over law.

Ibargüengoitia, while paying Guzmán the left-handed compliment of allusion, refuses to treat the material with respect, because it has itself become part of the accepted myth, in spite of Guzmán's irony. The election campaign and assassinations which form Guzmán's novel are reduced in the play to one brief scene:

La Lucha Electoral

Los diputados se quitan los bigotes y se convierten en manifestantes. Borges se ha retirado. Los manifestantes sacan un cartel que dice: "Viva Gámez." Luego otro que dice: "Viva Gómez." Luego otro que dice: "Muera Borges."

Proyección: Simultáneamente tres fotos; Gámez, Borges y Gómez, diciendo acalorados discursos.

Ruidos. Dos descargas cerradas.

Proyección: Las fotografías de Gámez, y Gómez son reemplazadas por las de dos sepelios. La de Borges continúa.

Se descubre a Borges solo en escena, diciendo un discurso.

BORGES—La lucha electoral ha terminado, señores. El pueblo soberano ha expresado su voluntad y no me queda más remedio que someterme a ella tomando las riendas del poder durante el próximo cuatrienio. (*Aplauso delirante.*)

Oscuro. Se escucha un ruido que va en aumento, hasta terminar en una explosión (p. 11).

The irony and comic effect need no explanation, nor does the cynicism of Borges' speech, nor Ibargüengoitia's work. We are transported far from the heroic die-like-a-man death scene in *La sombra*. It is difficult to miss Ibargüengoitia's point. The techniques he utilizes in *Los relámpagos* are repeated here: solemn mood and high sounding rhetoric in the face of comic visual effects and cruel actions; political phrases juxtaposed to reality to expose the hollowness of the clichés. The techniques prevent mystification or spectator evasion.

After the above cited scene the play proceeds beyond the temporal frame of *La sombra*, but the explosion, which ends scene 1 and marks the beginning of the play's *atentado*, sets off a satire of *La sombra*'s Book V. In that section of the novel the *caudillo* escalates the violence with an attempt to kill Olivier, leader of Aguirre's opposition party. It culminates in a magnificently narrated battle in the House of Deputies. Guzmán's description of the struggle is itself a parody of the Mexican muralists' propagandistic art, which was in the process of mythologizing the Revolution in such places as the National Palace. Although the assassination is aborted, and Guzmán's irony strikes at the *caudillo*—especially in Chapter 1, Book V, where he satirizes political rhetoric—the fact remains that the novel succeeds more in impressing us with the violent struggle than ridiculing it. Ibargüengoitia's specific task, on the other hand, is to ridicule. What Guzmán portrayed as a battle, Ibargüengoitia reduces in his play to the explosion of a poorly made and ineffectual bomb that destroys only one stall in the men's room of the House of Deputies. And he continues to ridicule in the subsequent interrogation scene, in which banal details are narrated by the man who detonated the explosive by pulling the toilet chain. After an entire page of polite arguing over which of the three deputies—Balgañón, Cavaldón and Malagón—should speak first, one delivers a long speech, which we quote at length only to convey Ibargüengoitia's hyperbolized trivia:

BALGAÑÓN—(*Se aclara la garganta.*) La tarde en que ocurrió el atentado, la sesión de la Cámara terminó a las seis y treinta y cinco. Antes de salir de la sala estuve hablando dos o tres minutos con el diputado José Juan Sánchez. Luego, tomé el portafolio que acostumbro llevar a las sesiones y con él bajo el brazo, me dirigí al lugar en donde se encuentran instalados los servicios sanitarios del edificio, pues desde hacía ya rato tenía la intención de hacer uso de ellos. Penetré en el recinto donde se encuentran los servicios que mencioné, fui hasta la puerta de uno de los gabinetes y traté de abrirla . . . todo fue inútil. Estaba cerrada herméticamente. Me alejé unos pasos y noté que por abajo asomaban unos zapatos cafés. Comprendí entonces que había una persona haciendo uso del aparato en cuestión; poco después descubrí que lo mismo ocurría en el de junto, así que llegué al tercer gabinete, que es el que colinda con la pared sureste del edificio de la Cámara, lo abrí, entré en él, dejé el portafolio en el piso, me despojé del saco y de la corbata, prendas que colgué en un perchero y me instalé. En los momentos que transcurrieron después pude darme cuenta de que había un diálogo entre las personas que ocupaban los otros dos gabinetes. Puse atención y me pareció que lo que se decía era en apariencia inocente y hasta baladí. Cuando terminé de hacer uso del sanitario y después de tomar las medidas higiénicas que consideré necesarias, me puse la corbata, luego el saco, recogí el portafolio y salí a los lavabos en donde me lavé las manos convenientemente. [He relates that upon leaving the restroom, he realized that he had forgotten to flush the toilet. After some consideration he decided to return and do so.] Caminé unos pasos, entré en el gabinete, tiré de la cadena, y en ese mismo instante se produjo una explosión tremenda, que me hizo perder el sentido (pp. 13-15).

Terrorism is reduced to the final sentence in a string of tasteless trivia. The character is not the only one who could "perder el sentido" at this point; Iburgüengoitia risks our boredom to achieve the ridiculing effect—success depending on humor, and probably on the actor's ability to convey the satire.

The culprit is arrested, tortured and deported, but only because the president and the president-elect discover that neither one of them ordered the bombing—then the insignificant act becomes a threat. The author reduces terrorism to little more than an intramural sport among *caudillos* who consider it a laughable matter as long as it remains their game, but regard it as a crime when the terrorist is an outsider to their circle. Political rhetoric transforms a ludicrous event into a national menace, as the following series of exchanges among the politicians clearly illustrates:

BORGES—Esto es un ataque a las Instituciones.

VIDAL SÁNCHEZ—Y a la vida política del país.

B.—Si los representantes del pueblo no están seguros en su propio recinto, ¿dónde van a estarlo?

v.s.—Hechos de esta naturaleza son los que llevan a la parálisis de toda actividad cívica, que es la muerte de la democracia. ¿No te parece, Nacho?

B.—¡Claro, Vidal!

v.s.—Y si la democracia muere, puede decirse que la Revolución ha fracasado. ¿No te parece, Nacho?

B.—(*Decrescendo.*) ¡Claro, Vidal!

V.S.—Y nuestro trabajo de veinte años se va al diablo, y al diablo también se van todas nuestras esperanzas, nuestras ambiciones, nuestras ilusiones . . . ¿no te parece, Nacho?

B.—Claro, Vidal (pp. 19-20).

Ibargüengoitia first reduces the violent act to insignificance, then demonstrates the hyperbolic potential of rhetoric, undermining as well the literary image to which he alludes. Violence remains violence, but its significance reveals itself as a matter of the words applied to it—propaganda.

In Act II the violence assumes a more serious dimension with Borges' assassination, but Ibargüengoitia applies the same procedures of distortion through a series of reductions and rhetorical manipulations, until the act itself is buried under mythologizing.

Act I closes with Borges talking bravely about facing death; he even has his dying words prepared: "muero bendiciendo la Revolución" (p. 31). Act II closes with Vidal Sánchez convincing Borges' assassin that his crime was a glorious tyrannicide. And in Act III it is built up as a Catholic plot. Yet Ibargüengoitia subverts all this elevating rhetoric with trivialization. When during the trial we hear three witnesses, Borges' death is anything but glorious. His last words actually were, "Estoy muy lleno. No me traiga cabrito, sino unos frijoles" (p. 45). The second witness describes Borges' face as if he had tried to tell him "aquí te encargo." The witness then hid under the table. The third witness did not see the crime—as actually none of them did—but relates how he allowed the assassin to enter the restaurant, then later joined in beating him. The entire trial is reminiscent of the earlier speeches quoted above, full of banal details, trivia such as a brief argument over the defendant's drawing of the assassinated man, or the third witness' preoccupation with who used the bathroom the day of the incident.

Vidal Sánchez's glorious rendition of the crime is also undermined by placing it between his elation over being rid of Borges and his callous firing of the police chief with whom he was sharing his joy. Also, we are informed that Sánchez must convince the assassin to name someone in the plot to clear himself of suspicion. None of the rhetoric was sincere.

The religious plot is not denied by Ibargüengoitia, who faithfully includes the superficial details about the killer, but again he trivializes it. The motivation was not primarily religious. In Act I, scene 5, Pepe seeks the counsel of his confessor concerning his inability to satisfy his ardent young wife. The priest refuses to even consider the possibility of women having sexual desires and tells Pepe to forget the problem by performing some act for his religion. Later the *abadesa* implies that perhaps Borges should be killed. Thus Pepe is led from sexual frustration to political assassination, and in so doing Ibargüengoitia's irony is scalpel sharp. While ridiculing both the fanaticism of the Catholic reactionaries and the subsequent cult, pro and con, concerning the Obregón assassination, he attacks sexual mores and machismo, real and serious causes of much Mexican violence.

The play ends with Vidal Sánchez and the Bishop making peace, after the bishop has declared that Pepe is not a martyr. The Church and State unite in

an embrace and the play ends with "Amaos los unos a los otros, dijo Cristo. *Dianas. Apoteosis*" (p. 56). All's well that ends well, Ibargüengoitia seems cynically to say, but by then no one can take anything seriously, except the author's satirical intent.

Ibargüengoitia has taken the literary and historical image of violence, with its serious trappings, from revolutionary rhetoric, and committed the ultimate violence upon it. He converts respected images into arbitrary signs, and finally turns a nation's hallowed history into hollowed, burlesque satire, conscious of itself as façade. With some techniques reminiscent of Brecht, Ibargüengoitia distances his audience from its symbiotic relationship with those images—we might even say self-images—and forces evaluation. His ultimate aim is to violate that sacrosanct imagery that still appears to predominate in Mexico. Ironically, his violent cynicism serves to underscore the Mexicans' particular penchant for black humor, but in the process he creates one of Mexico's most interesting combinations of experimental theatre and traditional Mexican themes.⁷ "La vida no vale nada," the popular song goes, and Ibargüengoitia would probably agree; but he might add, "pero una muerte sí vale un chin. . . , ah, o sea, una farsa documental."

Yale University

Notes

1. Revisions of the history of the Revolution may soon reduce our estimate of the degree of violence involved, as well as limit the numbers of participants and regions affected. Friedrich Katz and John Womack, panel on recent research on the Mexican Revolution, "Mexico: Present and Future" symposium, Yale University, Feb. 25, 1978.

2. Jorge Ibargüengoitia, *Los relámpagos de agosto* (México: Joaquín Mortiz, 1964).

3. Marta Portal, *Proceso narrativo de la revolución mexicana* (Madrid: Ediciones Cultura Hispánica, 1977), p. 233.

4. J. Ibargüengoitia, *El atentado*, en *La Revista Mexicana de Literatura*, Nos. 11-12 (noviembre-diciembre, 1964). All of the quotes will come from this edition and will be cited in the text.

5. To avoid confusion, we must be careful not to take Ibargüengoitia's term *farsa documentaria* too strictly, because the play does not fall solely within the genre of farce. Certainly it uses techniques associated with farce—exaggerated rhetoric, accelerated movements and time, sudden changes, repetition of actions or words, the abstraction of violence to mere irritation, the sublimation and acting out of frustrations in violent acts, and even scenes which approximate the silent movie, which Eric Bentley emphasized in "The Psychology of Farce," (*Let's Get a Divorce and Other Plays*, New York, 1958). However, the techniques are not restricted to farce. And when we consider that the events are historical, then the reduction of them to the commonplace or the comical becomes burlesque, not farce. As will be seen in the article, the play relates to a specific novel, *La sombra del caudillo*, so it is also parody, but since *La sombra* already parodied political rhetoric, and since *El atentado* debunks *La sombra*, we are again in the realm of burlesque. Though certainly no one should interpret our meaning as pejorative; this is serious literature.

In fact, Ibargüengoitia's serious intent raises another objection to the play as farce, which is generally accepted as a genre whose "object is to provoke the spectator to laughter, not the reflective kind which comedy is intended to elicit but the uncomplicated response of simple enjoyment" (*Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Princeton, 1974, p. 271). Or as Barbara Cannings states, "farces poke fun at someone or everyone, but with no particular axe to grind" ("Towards a Definition of Farce as a Literary Genre," *Modern Language Review*, vol. 56 (1961), 559). Well, Ibargüengoitia not only grinds a particular axe, he buries it in several particular heads. So if the question is one of intent, we cross over into comedy, because Ibargüengoitia seeks a Brechtian-style application of the "message" to Mexican reality, or into *soiie*, with its bitter satire, stylized language, and the symbolic significance of the events and some of the characters. Ibargüengoitia combines elements of farce with burlesque,

parody, comedy, and *sotie*. Yet in the final analysis we come back to Cannings' differentiation: "If it is about people [slices of life dramatically and comically distorted but still very close to reality] it is farce, whereas if it is about political, historical or religious ideas, if its significance is symbolic rather than personal, or if it is merely a display of verbal pyrotechnics, it is not a farce" (p. 560). *El atentado* is all of those things, and, thus, not strictly a farce.

Ibargüengoitia utilizes the term beyond literary concerns. He seeks to reduce history itself, and its political usages, to a farce in the everyday use of the word: "a ridiculous or empty show . . . something so much less than it could or should be as to constitute a mockery" (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, Chicago, 1966, vol. 1, p. 823). To do so he exceeds the generic limits of farce whenever the purpose demands.

6. The best treatment of the *relajo* is Jorge Portilla's *Fenomenología del relajo* (México: Ediciones Era, 1966), an important reference for all students of Mexican literature.

7. In an unpublished interview, the Mexican director Juan José Gurrola stated that there were only two contemporary Mexican plays that merit being considered modern, Juan García Ponce's *Doce y una, trece* and Ibargüengoitia's *El atentado*.