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Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies



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Latin American Literature in Translation

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The Underdogs:
Mariano Azuela, Writing,
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The Underdogs:
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with Jon Beasley-Murray

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The Mexican revolution was a messy affair, involving many different factions featuring rival leaders with distinct aims and agendas, some of whom turned on each other, prolonging the upheaval.

Azuela's novel puts us in the middle of things: a point at which much of the initial enthusiasm for revolutionary change had already turned to disenchantment, and yet the turmoil showed no sign of abating. The revolution was becoming a way of life.

The twin problem of how to narrate the revolution: how to turn it into a story that made a kind of sense, while acknowledging that the conflict was not one thing but many, not one story but many stories, and that it could (still) have many different and perhaps contradictory outcomes age.

And how to do justice to people's experience of a period that often did not seem to make sense, before a narrative arrived to construct order and impose a chain of causes and consequences?

Sense-making is a matter for writers, for intellectuals and politicians, who are almost always late to the scene and neither fully part of it nor able entirely to transcend or rise above it. In Azuela's novel, such ideologues are supplements, who stir up trouble as they idealize the fighting, but who also fade away, defeated by it.



Azuella reveals aspects of the Revolution that are apolitical, anti-political, or even *infrapolitical*, in that he depicts it in terms of drives and emergent habits that have not yet fully coalesced into political form.



FROM AFFECT TO IDEOLOGY

“I spit on his beard ‘cause he wouldn’t mind his own business, and tha’s that, there’s nothing else to tell.” (40)



3804. (5) F. VILLA Y SU ESTADO MAJOR.

The revolution is almost a game to them:
“We’re just about ready to tell Villa
and Carranza to go off and play
without us” (128).

“His famous marksmanship fills him with joy. He hits everywhere he sets his eye.” (134)

“I am a believer of the same ideals
and [. . .] I fight for the same cause
as you and your men.’

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as you and your men.’

Demetrio smiled.

“I am a believer of the same ideals and [. . .] I fight for the same cause as you and your men.’

Demetrio smiled.

‘Well, tell me, then: what cause exactly are we fighting for?’

“I am a believer of the same ideals and [. . .] I fight for the same cause as you and your men.’

Demetrio smiled.

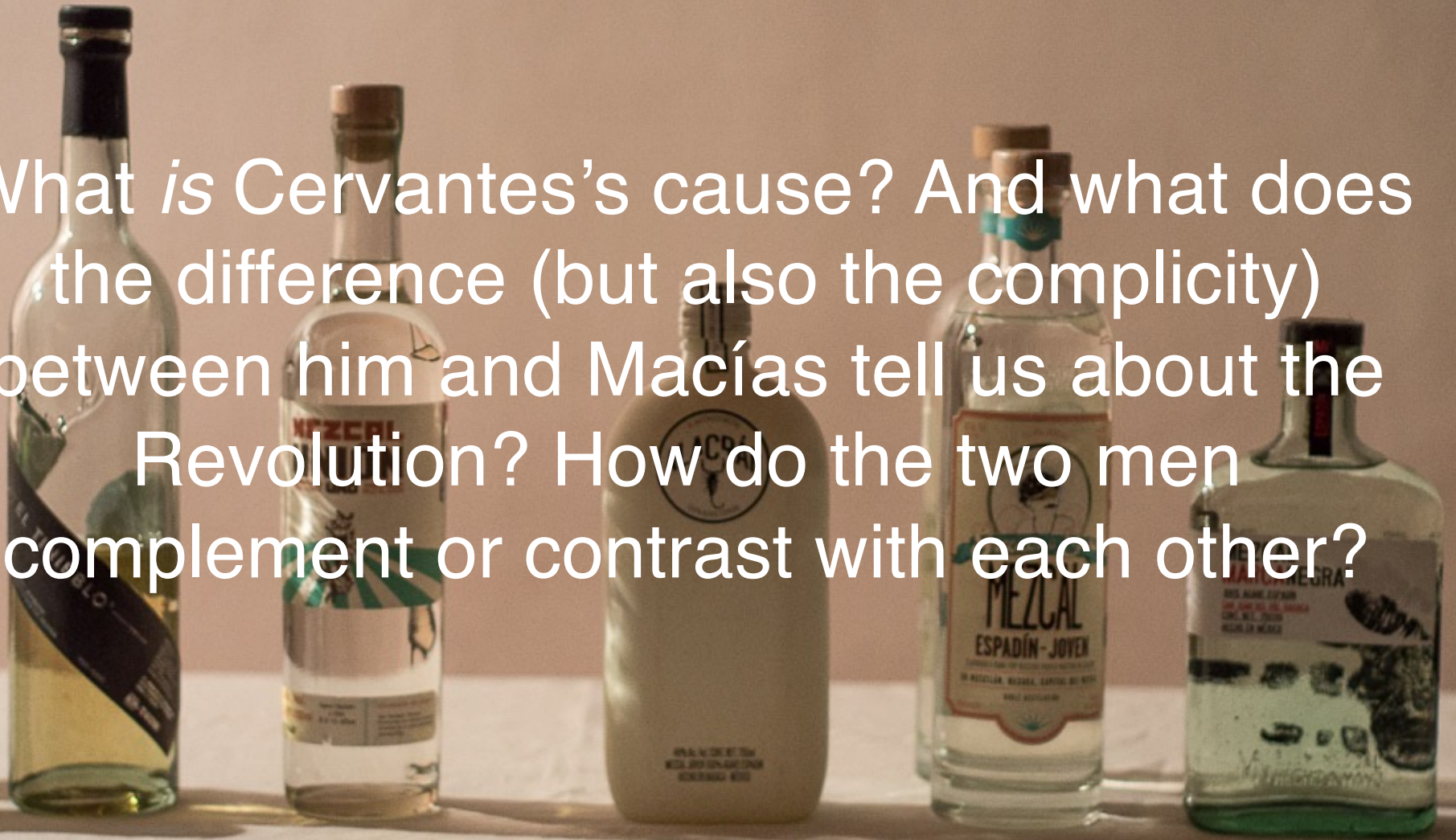
‘Well, tell me, then: what cause exactly are we fighting for?’

Disconcerted, Luis Cervantes did not know how to answer.” (20)

“It is dedicated to my children and grandchildren [. . .] they wouldn’t even bother to open it. It was written for them, but I am leaving it to you. You read it if you want to, but don’t show it to anybody. [. . .] This is the portrait of my memory. I leave it in your hands.” (12)

What *is* Cervantes's cause? And what does the difference (but also the complicity) between him and Macías tell us about the Revolution? How do the two men complement or contrast with each other?

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“What separates Demetrio’s reality from Luis’s is literacy.” (Patrick Duffey)

“There is [a] conflict between the situational, concrete thinking of the oral culture represented by Demetrio and others, and the generalized, abstract thinking of the literate culture represented by Luis and others.” (Duffey)

Macías and his men are often actively hostile towards the technology of writing.

“Quail had the pleasure of lifting the machine in his hands and hurling it hard against a big stone, where it shattered loudly.” (62)

This is an indignant protest
against machine culture.

This is an indignant protest
against machine culture.

But there is also a specific animus and
suspicion towards the written word
and all that comes with it.

At the same time, there is a complicity
between Cervantes and Macías,
and between orality and literacy,
that goes both ways.


Macías and his men recognize that
there is power in literacy.

Macías and his men recognize that there is power in literacy.

“Truth is, he’s one of those who understands things good, since he knows how to read and write.” (43)

“You have risen up against the cacique system itself, the system that is devastating the entire nation. We are constitutive pieces of a great social movement that will lead to the exaltation of our motherland.” (42)

Cervantes is able to articulate the discontented energies of the rural revolutionaries and frame them as a coherent political project. He translates revolutionary violence into lofty sentiment. He makes ideology out of affect.



**FROM SUBLIME
ARTICULATION TO
INFRAPOLITICS**

It is not just among the revolutionaries that we see the transformative power of discourse that takes material facts of violence and presents them as something almost sublime.

“Well satisfied with himself, he began to pace back and forth and to think about the official dispatch he would write in his rendering of events. [. . .] ‘It is my pleasure to congratulate you, esteemed Minister, for this triumph on behalf of the troops of the Republic. Long live His Honor General Don Victoriano Huerta! Long live Mexico!’” (78)

It is startling how quickly the story of the revolution—even competing stories—begin to ossify and become entrenched in political form.

“A wonderstruck ‘So *that’s* what it was.’”
(Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari)

“Demetrio was charmed as he heard the recounting of his exploits, composed and embellished in such a manner that he himself almost did not recognize them. In fact, the tales sounded so good that he ended up recounting them in the same way and in the same tone, and even believing that that was how they had actually occurred.” (60)

In the process, they become political subjects, and not simply objects of a narrative that has been woven for them in line with a pattern set elsewhere.

Azuella repeatedly returns to these moments of articulation, points of inflection in which the revolutionary subject becomes political, as though to try to understand how they work, knowing that in the end they explain nothing.

“Villa? Obregón? Carranza? X . . . Y . . . Z!
What do I care? I love the revolution like I
love an erupting volcano! I love the volcano
because it is a volcano and the revolution
because it is the revolution!” (124)

“Demetrio raises his eyebrows, absentmindedly picks up a small rock, and throws it toward the bottom of the canyon. [. . .] ‘Look at that rock. . . how nothin’ can stop it now.’” (132)

The revolution has its own logic, its own ceaseless energy, which might be better seen not as political but as “infrapolitical.”

“Infrapolitics is the absolute difference between life and politics, therefore also between being and thinking. Of which no expert can speak. Of which you can speak only while not speaking.” (Alberto Moreiras)

“He thought he had found a symbol of the revolution in [. . .] clouds of smoke and dust rising fraternally, embracing each other, blending together and then dissipating into nothing.

“He thought he had found a symbol of the revolution in [. . .] clouds of smoke and dust rising fraternally, embracing each other, blending together and then dissipating into nothing.

‘Ah!’ he exclaimed suddenly. ‘That’s it.’ (69)

The revolution forever escapes its political articulation; it lurks beyond the horizon of representation.



MUSIC

Fósforo,
“Cochabamba”



PRODUCTION

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