



**Bandidos, héroes y corruptos
o nunca es bueno robar una miseria**

(Bandits, Heroes and the Corrupt,
or It Is Never Good to Steal a Pittance)

Juan Antonio Rosado

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More than a century separates us from the pens of three men fundamental to Mexican letters: Ignacio M. Altamirano, Manuel Payno and Luis G.

Inclán. Reading their work over the years has prompted the use of a profusion of pen and ink but only occasionally do we meet up with pro-active evaluations, free from easy parallels and sterile reflection.

In *Bandidos, héroes y corruptos o nunca es bueno robar una miseria* (Bandits, Heroes and the Corrupt, or It Is Never Good to Steal a Pittance), Juan Antonio Rosado presents us with an interesting reading of three of these authors' representative novels: *El Zarco* (Blue Eyes) by Altamirano, *Los bandidos de Río Frío* (The Bandits of Río Frío), by Payno, and *Astucia, el jefe de los Hermanos de la Hoja o los Charros contrabandistas de la rama* (Astute, the Head of the Brothers of the Blade, or the Smuggler Horsemen of the Branch), by Inclán. The young writer and academic —recipient of a “Young Creators” grant from the National Fund for Culture and the Arts, classified by writer Adolfo Castañón as one of the generation of young essayists who seek to “season history so their stories will be neither aesthetically nor intellectually insipid”—brings these novels face to face with their own times and realities which, despite the historic distance that separates us from them, have not lost their timeliness for Mexico in the twenty-first century.

In his essay's three chapters, Juan Antonio, who argues for eliminating old quarrels between history and literature, develops a reading that pays homage to three aspects: the social, the ideological and the mythical.

At the beginning, Rosado says, “Studying the nineteenth-century Mexican novel is more than attempting to better understand the history of our literature; it also means approaching our historical and social past from a viewpoint interested in characters and situations taken from real life.”

That past is what makes way for the reading Rosado proposes. “From Reality to the Novel” is the title of the essay's first chapter. Here, Rosado presents Payno's, Altamirano's and Inclán's works, which he says possess great social sensitivity in the historical context of nineteenth-century Mexico. They are novelists who wrote in the midst of a nation going through the paroxysms of social and political chaos. That historical reality is the leitmotif upon which the different strands of their thinking, their ideals, denunciations and criticisms are woven.

That is how the young essayist puts it, and, in the third chapter, entitled “Civilization and Barbarism,” he broadens the literary spectrum under a lens that looks into the ideological positions and social proposals linked to a national project. With that, he discards the possibility of adopting a

position that isolates artistic expression from the exterior world. Our author observes, “Yearning for autonomy in art in all aspects may be the result of a non-thinking and even unconscious attempt to mutilate it....It would definitely be an attack on the spirit of art itself, against heterogeneity and plurality; it would be to limit it to a mere aesthetic or ‘aestheticizing’ function.”

The second chapter —which I have deliberately left until the end— is entitled “The Generous Offended One.” The existence of a common horizon from which the three novels make their start implies the existence of points of convergence inside them. One of these meeting points is the figure of the bandit hero, a character who in his actions becomes an instrument of social demands. It is these social bandoliers who became what they are because of injuries they received, who personify the ideological expectations, the concerns and the judgments that Altamirano, Payno and Inclán expressed about their time. In them, thanks to a process of social mythmaking, the mechanisms of the hero who achieves justice, protection and order for the community, and social mechanisms that recognize and give validity to the hero's actions despite official condemnation, all come together. They form the bridge between “reality and the novel” and “civilization and barbarism.”

Rosado's thesis goes beyond anecdotal comparison and the speculative games among forms. By centering on the social, ideological and mythical universe in which each of these three novels —or rather, as he calls them, modern national epics— develops, he makes us look at nineteenth-century Mexico with new eyes.

What are Altamirano's, Payno's and Inclán's concerns in a society wavering between chaos and order? What ideologies oil the wheels of their criticisms, evaluations and proposals? How and on what basis is the idea of the social hero constructed? With what shades of grey is the figure of the bandit portrayed?

All these questions, previously shunted to one side in favor of aesthetic evaluation and historical precisions, find an interesting voice in *Bandidos, héroes y corruptos*, an essay in which Juan Antonio Rosado paints the profiles of nineteenth-century Mexico with the invariably passionate brushes of letters.

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