

Brian L. Price. *Cult of Defeat in Mexico's Historical Fiction: Failure, Trauma, and Loss.*
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In a conference delivered at the Sorbonne on March 11, 1882, Ernest Renan famously said that “suffering in common unifies more than joy does. Where national memories are concerned, grief is of more value than triumphs, for they impose duties, and require a common effort” (“Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?”). It is a powerful idea no doubt and one that resonates throughout Brian L. Price’s recently published *Cult of Defeat in Mexico’s Historical Fiction; Failure, Trauma, and Loss*, in which the author contends that this awareness of suffering together as a nation has become something of a cult in Mexico, an argument that scholars of things Mexican would be hard put to contradict. One of the most salient examples of this phenomenon, and one to which Price refers in the beginning of his study, is the cult of *Los Niños Héroes* (The Boy Heroes), whose memory every school child in Mexico is taught to venerate. According to the Mexican historical imagination, during the battle of Chapultepec, on September 12 and 13 of 1847, six boy cadets were able to fend off for hours a vastly superior army of U.S. invading forces led by General Winfield Scott, who was intent on overrunning the Military Academy at the Chapultepec Castle. In the end, however, these cadets, were immolated one by one as, they bravely stood their ground and fiercely defended the Castle. The story goes that the last of these cadets, Juan Escutia, wrapped himself up in the Mexican flag and jumped to his death lest it be trampled by the American troops. Immortalized in murals and in monuments scattered across the nation, the story of *Los Niños Héroes* cannot be corroborated by documental evidence. Yet, despite its questionable historicity, it continues to hold a permanent place in the Mexican imagination. What matters here is that these narratives of defeat and defiance, of humiliation and pride, of resignation and self-possession in the face of defeat, imbued as they are with tragic poeticity, woven together, are an integral part of the fabric that bind Mexicans together as national subjects. Indeed, it could be argued that it would be impossible to speak of Mexico as a nation without these stories of defeat.

The path of inquiry that scholars like Brian L. Price and John Ochoa (*The Uses of Failure in Mexican Literature and Identity*, 2005) are opening up before us is no doubt promising. The thorough study of this phenomenon in its multiple dimensions and cultural expressions will no doubt require

many years of toiling in archives and libraries and a small army of scholars. Yet, it is sometimes necessary for one lone scholar to be at the vanguard and to lead the way through uncharted territories, torch in hand, and this Brian L. Price has managed to do superbly well in *Cult of Defeat in Mexico's Historical Fiction*. As the title clearly states, the focus of Price's study is the Mexican historical novel as a mode of cultural expression in which Mexican writers explore the nature of failure at the national level and the full range of its poetic, psychological, political, cultural dimensions and potentialities. By looking closely into a number of historical novels, Price is able to discern a number of narrative devices and strategies that constitute what he calls "a rhetoric of defeat"; by this he means, taking his cue from Kenneth Burke, "the use of words by writers to form attitudes or induce action in others" (4). The use of this "rhetoric of defeat" on the part of the writers is not accidental as Price tells us: it is the product of "deliberate narrative choice." And yet, to what aim, to what effect? one might ask. The reasons are myriad: "to revise history, to explain failed utopian ideals, to undermine opposing political ideologies, to promote platforms of social change, to consecrate messianic missions with martyrdom, to express pessimism about the future. Failure narratives often mediate between lofty aspirations and unsatisfied goals. They seek to ameliorate the psychological trauma resulting from loss . . . As authors employ the rhetoric of failure, they reinterpret the nation's foundational moments and at times this serves to challenge official stories in an attempt to invite citizens to rethink their nation, their history and their commitment to progress" (4). The wide spectrum of possibilities enumerated by Price is a testament to the power of a mode of expression that takes failure as its source of inspiration, its map and its compass. Yet, paradoxically, what is ultimately sought in these narrations is not failure or defeat but its transcendence.

One of the historical narrations studied by Price that manages to harness the power of the rhetoric of defeat to constructive ends is Jorge Ibarguengoitia's *Los pasos de López* (1982), to which the first chapter of *Cult of Defeat* is devoted. A satirical portrayal of the 1810 Mexican Independence Movement, Price proposes to approach this work critically as if it were a comedy of errors played out in narrative form. This novel paints a dismal portrait of Father Miguel Hidalgo, instigator and leader of the Mexican War of Independence. Consecrated as *El padre de la patria* by the successive leaders of post-revolution Mexico and immortalized in countless monuments, the Miguel Hidalgo who wobbles and stumbles through the pages of Ibarguengoitia's novel is a far cry from that larger than life promethean-like icon that appears in José Clemente Orozco's mural at the Governor's Palace in Guadalajara with a burning rod in one hand and the other hand held aloft leading the masses triumphantly towards freedom. What Ibarguengoitia's offers instead is the caricature of a

petty man, a drunkard and gambler at that, a man whose incompetence and recklessness as a military leader brought about senseless chaos and wanton destruction to Mexico and many of its citizens. By rewriting the War of Independence as a series mistakes and failures, Ibargüengoitia is able to recast an episode of Mexican history, which has been represented officially as a glorious episode, as a riotous tragicomic farce. In undertaking this venture of iconoclastic demystification, Ibargüengoitia endeavors to cast aside the layers and layers of official triumphalist rhetoric and mythologizing that have sanitized the historical Miguel Hidalgo of flesh and bones in order to turn him into saintly figure, indeed a self-sacrificing martyr. As Ibargüengoitia shows us, and there is ample historical and archival documentation to corroborate it, *El padre de la patria* was far more imperfect than is usually recognized. And like Miguel Hidalgo, the Movement of Independence he (mis)lead was also unmistakably flawed.

By bringing these shortcomings to the fore, Ibargüengoitia thus openly calls into question the *oficialista* version of the events, espoused and propagated by the Mexican government and its institutions which were controlled by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional or PRI for 72 years. In Ibargüengoitia's eyes, this official mythology of the Nation had been used by an oppressive regime to legitimize, bolster and exert its power over its citizenry and stifle any sign of opposition. Through this carnivalization of historical events and his characteristic brand of corrosive humor, Ibargüengoitia asks his readers to reconsider the Mexican nation's mythic birth and, perhaps more importantly, to reconsider it in terms of the present. As Price says, "Ibargüengoitia recognized independence as a massive theatrical flop because the scripts was poorly conceived, the directors could not provide clear leadership, and the actors could not follow direction or adapt when things went wrong" (57). The author represents Mexico's past as a hyperbolic farce so that his compatriots may too see it as such and so they might also come to recognize that the spectacle of contemporary Mexico is a farce as well. It is in urgent need of a new script, new directors and actors; it is up to the citizens to carry out the casting.

If, in the previous chapter, Price looks closely into the work of a writer who strives to bring down to scale a figure that looms absurdly large in the Mexican imaginary, his second chapter is devoted to the novel of an author who endeavors to accord Maximilian I and his wife Carlota a degree of humanity and dignity that has been largely and unjustly denied to them in Mexican history. In *Noticias del Imperio* (1987), Fernando del Paso sets out to paint a nuanced and well balanced picture of the Habsburg prince and his princess wife who arrived in Mexico to establish the Second Mexican Empire (1863-1867) and who have been portrayed traditionally as the greedy

lackeys of foreign imperialistic powers bent on pillaging and taking advantage of a feeble and unstable nation. Indeed, in the eyes of many Mexicans Maximilian and Carlota are the very embodiment of the evils of foreign intervention in Mexican affairs. As Price tells us, many critics have in fact read *Noticias del Imperio* as an indictment of colonialism and foreign intervention. Yet in Price's view, del Paso wished to go beyond this condemnatory framework by making an argument in favor of Maximiliano's Mexicanness and in favor of opening up a space for him in the "Mexican pantheon" and, by so doing, "balancing the scales of a national history dominated by liberal accounts of the past by offering an olive branch to the legacy of conservatism" (61). In this, Price's assessment is in line with the work of such revisionist historians as Erika Pani and Robert Duncan who have argued for a more balanced view of Mexican nineteenth-century history, one that takes into account the importance of conservatism in Mexican political and cultural life. The exclusion of Maximilian from the "Mexican pantheon" thus only highlights Mexico's unwillingness to come to terms with a full account of its past; it is an injustice which del Paso, according to Price, seeks to redress in his novel. It is not only a matter of historical necessity, but of the utmost urgency in terms of the present and the future of the nation. For, how can Mexicans understand the shortcomings and challenges of contemporary Mexico without taking into account those of the past? It is only by exorcising those ghosts that haunt us that we can move forward. This is why del Paso, according to Price, must give Maximilian and Carlota a proper burial in the pantheon of Mexican history; what he carries out in his novel is thus a type of exorcism as well as an act of poetic justice.

Yet there are other characters in Mexican history who will forever haunt us no matter how many times we bury their bodies or, for that matter, their limbs with full funeral honors. Such is the case with the infamous General Antonio López de Santa Anna who in the Mexican imaginary is the very personification of everything that is and has gone wrong in Mexican history, and who has been the subject of many a biography and work of fiction. The third chapter of Price's book is dedicated to one of the most successful of such literary treatments, *El seductor de la patria* (1999) by Enrique Serna. The nontraditional structure of this fictional autobiography makes for an intriguing exercise in interpretation; there are three narrating voices, besides that of Santa Anna himself, that vie over control of the narrative: Santa Anna's son Manuel, his *aide-de-camp* Manuel María Giménez and an anonymous historian-compiler. According to Price, Serna's narration does not limit itself to providing an alternate version of history, a counter-narrative to the official story; although it does so in the same way that Ibarra and del Paso do in their novels, Serna goes further by providing "a manual for reading and interpreting historical and political narratives" inviting readers

to “sort through biases and concealed historical and political narratives” (101). That is, Serna’s novel is in many ways an open invitation to his readers to delve into labyrinthine contradictions and incongruities of archival memory in order to arrive at their own truths. What Serna is offering, in short, is a way around the monologic discourses emanating from the voice of the Master/Dictator and his army of sycophantic and self-serving scribes.

Furthermore, Price also argues for reading the novel within the context in which it was written, namely the unfortunate circumstances and events that preceded the downfall of the PRI’s seventy-two year dominance in Mexico. He argues that in Serna’s view the follies, defects, shortcomings, missteps and failures of Santa Anna reflect, and are in fact in many ways parallel to, those of Carlos Salinas de Gortari and Ernesto Zedillo. In other words, Serna wants to draw a direct line of continuity between Santa Anna and his technocratic avatars of the twentieth century. In this sense, Serna hyperbolically deforms Santa Anna for the purpose of not only criticizing the tyrant but also of censuring the citizens and exposing the conditions that made Santa Anna possible and that put him in the presidential chair no less than eleven times. That these same conditions still exist today explain to a large degree why the PRI was such an inexorable and powerful reality in Mexico for so many years. It is these same conditions that have created a “sense of disenfranchisement and lack of Civil Society” in Mexico which has in turn hampered its progress along with that of its citizenry (106).

In the last chapter of the book, Brian L. Price undertakes the analysis of three different novels: Francisco Martín Moreno’s *México mutilado* (2004), Guillermo Zambrano’s *México por asalto* (2008) and Ignacio’s Solares’s *La invasión* (2005). All of these were written and published in a period of bilateral tensions and difficult relations between Mexico and the United States. In all of these one finds a shared critical view of the United States and its foreign affair policies and interventions; lurking in the background are, of course, as Price points out, the U.S. military interventions in Irak and Afghanistan, which were largely unpopular in Mexico. In sum, the time was ripe for these novels about the U.S.-Mexican War to hit the market with the force that they in fact did (Moreno’s *México mutilado* alone sold more than one hundred thousand copies within its first three months in bookstores). According to Price, these novels exhibit a deliberate desire to reopen the wound of the U.S.-Mexican War, one of the most painful and traumatic episodes in Mexican history. The first two of these novels, *México mutilado* and *México por asalto*, expose what to Price are the potential pitfalls of the rhetoric of defeat. That is, they submerge their readers into traumatic historic memory without ever offering a way to move beyond the trauma. If, on the one hand, they are interesting in finding

fault and placing blame, on the other, they are unable to transcend this to arrive at “a lessons-learned attitude” or to suggest “a new course of action” (137). In contrast to these novels, in Ignacio Solares’s *La invasión* there is a visible attempt to work through national trauma through confession and writing” (137). The writing and reading of the novel thus offer a sense of catharsis, a way to alleviate the pain and trauma of defeat.

In all, Brian L. Price has done a magnificent job at delving into the uses of defeat as a rhetorical instrument and a mode of enlightenment in Mexican historical fiction. *Cult of Defeat in Mexico’s Historical Fiction* is a serious, well researched and theoretically informed and insightful work of scholarship. Price’s analytic forays into the darkest recesses and moments of Mexican history shed light onto the fictive representations of those “momentos estelares” of Mexican History which according to Carlos Monsiváis “tienden a ser fracasos”. Yet not all is lost, for as Price deftly shows us, in retelling these “fracasos” writers can find ways of turning them into victories.