

Mediations

Journal of the Marxist Literary Group



Volume 29, Number 2, Spring 2016 • **Dossier: Lukács 2016**

Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado. "Novel, War, and the Aporia of Totality: Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* and Azuela's *Los de abajo*," *Mediations* 29.2 (Spring 2016): 47-64.

www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/novel-war-and-the-aporia-of-totality

Novel, War and the Aporia of Totality: Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* and Azuela's *Los de abajo*

Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado

The near coincidence in the centenary of Mariano Azuela's *Los de abajo* (*The Underdogs*, 1915), the foundational work of the twentieth-century Mexican novel, and György Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* (1914-1916), the departing point of the theoretical task known as the "sociology of literature," reminds us that both were born out of the same concern: the impact of an Evental war in the experience of modernity inherited from the global expansion of capitalism in the nineteenth century.¹ *Los de abajo* occupies a contradictory place in Mexican literary and cultural modernity and a double temporality in literary history. It was written in 1915, in El Paso, Texas, in the middle of a whirlwind of revolutionary turmoil, as distinct political forces were reorganizing in the wake of the Aguascalientes Convention. Although typically read as a book, it was in fact originally published as a serial in the border town's newspaper *Paso del Norte*.² A reluctant revolutionary, Azuela had already written a few novels on the subject, but *Los de abajo* represented a major formal and intellectual leap in Mexican literature. The novel is not quite a realist chronicle of the revolutionary movement, nor a properly vanguardist book of the kind that would flourish after 1920. Rather, it crystallizes the moment of revolutionary indecision into a form tinged with both anachronistic *modernista* gestures and forward-looking avant-garde techniques. Azuela deploys these estranging techniques to narrate not a chronicle of the Revolution or a personal history within it, as many novels would do a decade later, but rather the baffling experience of being modern when the uneven nature of capitalist modernity explodes and renders visible and material the traumatic remnants of its inequality. Its formal novelty was such that the novel circulated in a near-underground manner for a decade, until 1925, when a group of conservative intellectuals discovered and reclaimed *Los de abajo* as a model for a national literature to come, an institutionalized literature that, in Jorge Aguilar Mora's description, sought to exalt an abstract Revolution to undermine the real Event.³ This would ultimately put under erasure *Los de abajo*'s

true revolutionary nature, which has generally been confined to its position as a foundational text of the “novel of the Mexican Revolution,” an unremarkable genre of texts generally aligned to officialist ideology. If there is any sense to re-read it in its one-hundredth anniversary, it stems from the need to reclaim the intellectual strength of its narrative against the grain of Azuela’s limits as a revolutionary, and the elements that allowed the book to enter the space of hypercanonicity.

The Theory of the Novel was an equally baffling and revolutionary text, written in a moment of historical and aesthetic indecision similar to the one that informed Azuela. In many ways, the book was still caught in the most abstract legacies of a nineteenth-century romantic worldview, although grounded in a not-yet-Marxist awareness of the historicity of intellectual experience. It is generally recognized as the first book in a lineage that turned the relationship between form and historicity into a central strain of literary criticism, but its flustering abstractions lack the intellectual focus of his Marxist *oeuvre*. This has undoubtedly led to a history of baffled readings of the *Theory*. As Arpad Kadarkay documents, Karl Jaspers complained of the book’s “transcendental topography” and the demanding austerity of his thinking, Ernst Troeltsch also lamented the difficulty of a book “full of abstractions.”⁴ This theme — the purportedly forbidding difficulty of the text and the futility of its abstractions — remains very much present in today’s criticism. In a text apropos of its centenary, Franco Moretti writes:

When György Lukács is still mentioned nowadays in connection with the study of the novel, it is either for *The Theory of the Novel*, composed between 1914 and 1916, or for *The Historical Novel*, written exactly twenty years later. Either, or: because the two books couldn’t be more different. *The Historical Novel* is a very good book — a very useful book — written by a serious Marxist professor. The *Theory* is not useful at all. It is an “attempt” [*ein Versuch*], declares the subtitle; but “Essay” would be more to the point.⁵

From Jaspers to Moretti, *The Theory of the Novel* is faulted for not delivering either the pedagogical definition of the genre necessary for his book to become part of a high-theory toolbox, or the kind of positive characterization of a politico-revolutionary novel form that would emerge with post-1917 theory, not only in his own works on realism and the historical novel, but also in the writings of Viktor Shklovsky and other Russian formalists. This lineage has delivered undeniably fair criticisms at what can only be described as the *Theory*’s diffident and imprecise formulations. Yet, to fully gather its theoretical strength, this skepticism must be bracketed in order to unfold Lukács’s gesture. Like Azuela’s novel, the *Theory* is one of those texts that we do not historicize enough: reading it as method fails to account for the radicality of its form and premises vis-à-vis the Event of the First World War.

Indeed, as Lukács himself states in his 1962 preface, the *Theory* “was written in a mood of permanent despair over the state of the world.”⁶ Although Lukács was yet to reach the illumination that the October Revolution provided to his thinking, the story of “metaphysical dissonance” is, like in *Azuela*, an account of being modern when the war-inflected collapse of nineteenth-century modernity (both The First World War and the Mexican and Russian Revolutions) rendered visible a rift in the fabric of Being and the experience of totality.⁷ Both texts represent the experience of collapse of nineteenth-century culture in a peripheral site of the world-system, as well as the failure of literary form to fully account for the complexity of the Event. Lukács’s historical account modernity, as David Cunningham has noted, substantially coincides with that of the *Communist Manifesto*, and his history of the novel can be thusly characterized as a conceptual grasp of the “immanence of an actual idealism to the modern social relations refracted by the novel (as materially lived), for all that the novel’s relation to capitalism is more clearly foregrounded as a central problematic within the latter.”⁸ If anything, the *Theory*’s style is unable put forward a “useful” methodology for the study of the novel, precisely because the book was picking up on the paradigmatic exhaustion of idealism. Lukács’s account concludes with the undeveloped affirmation of a “new world” present in Dostoevsky’s work, after discussing Tolstoy’s “polemical, nostalgic and abstract” intimations of a possible break-up with Romanticism.⁹ In a way, one could affirm that *Los de abajo* presents one of the most important and suggestive representations of the fall of the “epoch of absolute sinfulness,” given that its detached yet intimate account of the Mexican Revolution is almost a demonstration of one of the key Lukácsian injunctions: “the great epic is a form bound to the historical moment, and any attempt to depict the utopian as existent can only end in destroying the form, not in creating reality.”¹⁰ *Los de abajo*’s location in a historical moment of intense undecidability offers a glimpse of the consequences of depicting the utopian without grasping it. What it destructs is not so much the form in general, but the form’s self-reflective relationship with metaphysical dissonance.

Los de abajo is fundamentally structured in the dialectic between its two protagonists: Luis Cervantes, a medical student and *Azuela*’s *alter ego*, who becomes part of the Villista contingents after deserting the federal army, and Demetrio Macías, a Zacatecan peasant who joins the Revolution unwittingly when the local *cacique* tells the *federales* that he was plotting an uprising. As Ángel Rama has painstakingly argued in a magisterial essay on *Azuela*, it is patently obvious that the novel is set up from the get-go as a representation of a particular form of class struggle within the Revolutionary ranks.¹¹ On the one hand, Cervantes, like *Azuela*, was part of an educated middle-class intelligentsia that formed under the auspices of the capitalist boom fostered by the Porfirista regime and who saw in the movement led by Francisco I. Madero the possibility to challenge a social stratification that excluded everyone but the highest bourgeoisie from the control of the means of production. Macías,

on the other hand, belonged to a peasantry exploited by longstanding structures of land ownership, in many cases dating back to colonialism. From this perspective, it is clear that the novel's narration is as much a story of the Mexican Revolution as it is a representation of the consequences of the redistribution of the means of production that may emerge as a result of the historical movement. This, of course, never happened, given the movement's devolution into factional conflict. Yet, this never-materialized future is a central part of Azuela's story. As both Rama and Max Parra point out, Cervantes is motivated by greed, realizing that the ulterior victory of the revolutionaries would leave spoils of war to be collected by people like him.¹² And, since Azuela's perspective functionalizes Demetrio's story to Luis's rationalizing perspective, the legitimacy of the petty bourgeoisie to ultimately overtake control of both power and the means of production is indeed a central message of the novel.

This ideological operation is what allowed *Los de abajo* to become an ideologically expedient document for the purposes of Mexico's conservative intelligentsia. As Parra argues, "the antithesis between popular revolution and intellectual rationalism (or nature versus culture) in this canonical text once again establishes the structural limits on how the revolutionary phenomenon may be interpreted." Intellectuals like Octavio Paz would ultimately consecrate through a crucial narrative behind Mexico's twentieth-century political institutionalism: "the campesino masses are an invigorating force, but they are not nor can they be the brains of the revolution."¹³ This ideology-critique does say a lot about both Azuela's own stance and about the ulterior uses of his novel as a foundation of official national culture. I would nonetheless contend that *Los de abajo*, as a novel, has elements that cannot be fully accounted for by this analysis, but that become legible when we read the book centering not in its overt ideological message, but in the terms established by the moment of ideological undecidability when it was written.

Like *The Theory of the Novel*, *Los de abajo* is a book always already mediated both by the history of its reception and by post-factum authorial revision and commentary. Both texts were written in the heat of war, and subject to revisionisms that better suited the ulterior ideological trajectory of their authors, as well as a myriad of a posteriori reinterpretations of the historical Event of their concern. Many contemporary readings of the *Theory* echo Lukács's own revision in 1962, where he denounces his book as "a typical product of 'intellectual science' [that] does not point the way beyond its methodological limitations."¹⁴ A similar fate takes place in *Los de abajo*: the original 1915 publication in installments was generally lost and forgotten until Stanley Robe recovered it in 1979, and our contemporary text, the one canonized in 1925, dates back to a significantly revised 1920 edition. I will not get into a philological argument here, particularly because the tracing of versions has already been done in Spanish editions.¹⁵ But, among the changes that led to the final version of the novel, mostly occupied in fixing issues related to the rushed nature of its original writing, two stand out: an intensification of phonetic mimesis in order

to better convey the popular (and thus perceived as uneducated) orality of lower-class characters and the crucial rewriting of the novel as thoroughly narrated in the past tense, when the original edition, written in the heat of conflict, had many passages narrated in the present. Besides the general stylistic precisions which had to do with Azuela's own aspiration to become a recognized writer, it is clear that these two modifications have a clear ideological consequence: the assertion of the difference between the rationality of the lettered class and the barbarism of the troops, and a change of the novel's "reality effect" from the experiential sense of the present to the preterit's connotation of established history.¹⁶ In both cases, canon-inflected readings put under erasure the war-informed undecidability of both their form and content. In the ulterior alignment of the texts to the demands of both literary history and political ideology, the richness of the books' respective inner dialectics becomes erased. As Aguilar Mora points out, in one of the theoretical problems set forward by the Mexican Revolution (and one could indeed argue that this is also the case of Lukács and the *Theory* vis-à-vis the First World War), literature surrounding the event is defined by a "horizon of failure" that "does not proceed from a historical horizon, but from the recognition that a collective consciousness of the events did not take place, much less a renovation of language."¹⁷ Nonetheless, the ulterior failure of the historical event does not cancel the utopian potential of the source text: the "horizon of failure" is the historical limit of both Lukács's and Azuela's inescapable historicities, but does not cancel the conceptual openings that sought to point towards the Event.

At the core of *Los de abajo* and the *Theory of the Novel* resides a sense of the crisis of the modern subject in the early twentieth century, as armed conflicts betrayed an exhaustion of the very forms of political subjectivity that structured bourgeois dominance in the nineteenth century. In the 1962 afterword, Lukács states that

the immediate motive for writing [the *Theory*] was supplied by the outbreak of the First World War and the effect which its acclamation by the social-democratic parties had upon the European left. My own deeply personal attitude was one of vehement, global and, especially at the beginning, scarcely articulate rejection of the war and especially enthusiasm from the war.¹⁸

Lukács's reminiscence has two fascinating moments. First, he recalls a conversation with a friend who tried to challenge his rejection by telling him "of individual, concrete acts of heroism." Second, after describing his predictions for the conflict, Lukács describes his younger self wondering "who was to save us from Western civilization?"¹⁹ The aporia in Lukács's thought resides in the philosophical question of totality: the historical crisis of modernity was the subject's extrication from the whole, but the philosophical instruments at hand (at least before the Russian Revolution) belonged to the same intellectual tradition that propitiated that crisis

and the awareness of it. This is why, as Eva Corredor describes, Lukács was drawn to Ernst Bloch, who expressed “the utopian belief that nature and society would ultimately overcome their imperfection and come close to the achieving material, spiritual and cosmic unity.”²⁰ Ivan Boldyrev further observes that, in his dialogue with Bloch, Lukács “somehow depicted in the *Theory of the Novel* all the moments of the crisis experienced in his times: disintegration of unity, the loss of subject, the collapse of traditional literary forms.”²¹ Beyond the specifics of intellectual genealogy, what is clear here is that Lukács’s *Theory* confronts a philosophical problem of the wartime present with a diagnosis of a cultural *malaise* that has always already been at the heart of modern subjectivity. The cultural anxiety resulting from the awareness of this intellectual task (a significant departure from the possibility of identification between soul and form that he described in his 1911 letter to Leo Popper) projects unto the novel a double historicity: one regarding the macrohistorical status of the form as the site of “metaphysical dissonance” and the temporal location of its theorization within a historical period that renders such dissonance painfully visible.²²

In the chapter entitled “The Romanticism of Disillusionment,” devoted to nineteenth-century French novelists, the novel appears as one of the last stances in which that unity could be configured into form. Apropos of Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education*, Lukács poses that the “victory” of an accomplished form “is rendered possible by time. The unrestricted, uninterrupted flow of time is the unifying principle of the homogeneity that rubs the sharp edges off each heterogeneous fragment and establishes a relationship — albeit an irrational and inexpressible one — between them.”²³ This explains, in Lukács’s account, why some nineteenth-century novels managed to overlap with the epic. But they do so with a twist. While “drama, lyric poetry and the epic, whatever the hierarchy in which we may place them, are not the thesis, antithesis, and synthesis of a dialectical process,” given that each form “appears positive because it fulfills its own structural laws,” the novel can ultimately capture a form of secular totality, because “the objective structure of the world of the novel shows a heterogeneous totality, regulated only by regulative ideas, whose meaning is not prescribed but given.”²⁴ This is one of those particular passages that illustrate why Lukács would eventually find his answers in Marxism. Flaubert’s book, published only two years after the first volume of *Capital*, sought to make sense of the historical Event of 1848, and Lukács’s description very much suggests the possibility of a novel form able, in itself, to recognize the laws of history as manifestly immanent to its own material reality (“regulative ideas whose meaning is not prescribed [i.e. transcendental] but given”) confined within a totality whose heterogeneity is the condition of possibility of dialectical engagement. This coincides with a 1919 text, in which Lukács very much describes Marx’s theory as informed by a similar impulse: “the primary truly epoch-making significance of Marx’s social theory is that the development of social consciousness has been effected in this way within, and only within, the confines of society.”²⁵ While Hegel created a “world system” characterized

by “its view of nature and history as one great homogeneous process,” Marx was able to search, and find, “consciousness” precisely “in the process of homogeneous development of society.” Marx triumphs where the novel fails, in providing a form, class consciousness, that would ultimately reconcile subject and history and deliver the experience of totality.

The *Theory*, we must not forget, preceded this corollary. In reading Leo Tolstoy, Lukács begins by pointing out that the “immanence of form” is disrupted when “it imputes a substantiality to the world it describes which that world is in no way capable of sustaining and keeping in a state of balance.”²⁶ The war (and the great Russian novel as some form of civilizational symptom of its genealogy) was precisely the sign of a world incapable of delivering the utopian expectations of the modern subject, which explains why the young Lukács, at least in the account of his older self, was unimpressed by his friend’s purportedly epic accounts of individual heroism and moved to wonder as to whether humanity could be saved from Western civilization. One could find guidance here in Timothy Bewes’s essay on *The Theory of the Novel* and Lukács’s writings on cinema. Resisting the stark division between a pre-Marxist and a Marxist Lukács, Bewes argues the centrality of the “promise of immanence” in his intellectual trajectory, something that coincides with the continuity between the *Theory* and the 1919 essay described above. Bewes argues that Lukács’s reading of Tolstoy leads to the conclusion that the “new world” mentioned at the very end of his book “is achievable precisely as a mode of reading, one that ‘binds’ the work to the world in a relationship that is far more intimate than that of depiction or presentation.”²⁷ If one accepts this reading, it is possible to claim that Lukács was not so much articulating the idea of a nostalgic return to pre-modern times or even to the epic nature of the nineteenth-century novel, but rather formulating the philosophical crisis raised by the historical insufficiency of form. If the novel is a “perspective,” as Bewes argues, the First World War amounts to a moment of civilizational turmoil that questions the historical manifestations of the form as a suitable vehicle to immanently restore the lost totality. The revolutionary stance that would more adequately deliver an answer to this question was yet to take place, which is why Lukács’s philosophical reflection operates at this point in time as basically an aesthetic program. Later, in the *Studies in European Realism*, he would reinterpret Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education* as the first adequate representation of a “darkening of the horizon” tied to nineteenth-century bourgeois culture which, presumably, found its moment of crisis in the War.²⁸

This older Lukács does recognize something that remained a blind spot in the *Theory*, the relationship between war, civilizational collapse, capitalism, and the novel. *Los de abajo* is the novel that emerged from the coincidence of diverse crises and interregna, a book that responded, perhaps unwittingly, to the sudden erosion of literary forms organic to nineteenth-century Mexican capitalism. The work that preceded it as the archetypal national novel, Federico Gamboa’s *Santa* (1904), was a naturalist text inspired by Émile Zola’s *Nana*.²⁹ In his famous dismissal of Zola, Lukács derides his

“‘scientific’ method in which society is conceived as a harmonious entity and the criticism applied to society formulated as a struggle against the disease attacking its organic unity, a struggle against the ‘undesirable features’ of capitalism.”³⁰ This is what made Zola so appealing to a conservative writer like Gamboa, who, without lacking certain departures from official ideology, was nonetheless as much an organic intellectual of Porfiriato as there ever was. Without belaboring on Gamboa, the notable thing about his novel is that literary form operates as a way to imagine the disciplining of excessive bodies, through the story of a prostitute that personifies the immoral excess of urban modernization.³¹ Even though Gamboa seems to be an aesthete rejecting the modern noise brought forward by capitalism, it is important to remember that Latin American literature between 1880 and 1910 directly resulted from the expansion of capitalism in the region, and that the *modernism* that ruled literary aesthetics at the time was a manifestation of a larger-scale process in which culture democratized to incorporate newly ascendant middle sectors while embracing aristocratic values.³² This is the world in which Azuela, who was nearing forty years of age when the Revolution began, was raised, and his earliest works definitely fell within well-established *modernista* aesthetics. The point to be made out of this is that, when he writes *Los de abajo*, Azuela was facing the civilizational collapse that rendered *modernista* aesthetics outdated, but, like the historical juncture that informed Lukács, had yet to produce the forms that would eventually convey the ideologies of an emerging order. However, unlike the spiritual orphanhood shown by Lukács, Azuela is able to resolve the exhaustion of nineteenth-century form by unfolding the hero into two distinct subjectivities: Cervantes and Macías. While it is true that this division responds to the historical experience of class struggle within the revolutionary movement itself, the glimpses of political subjectivity in *Los de abajo* envision a contemporaneity fundamentally different from the one Lukács experienced.

The historical juncture that led to the writing of *Los de abajo* was the moment in which the Revolution threatened the very heart of Mexican sovereignty as such. In 1914, after the overthrowing of Victoriano Huerta, the peasant armies of Villa and Zapata (and Azuela among them) acquired control of Mexico City and an agreement between the factions was sought at the Aguascalientes Convention. However, the factional struggle would eventually prevail, leading to the US recognition of Venustiano Carranza’s constitutionalist movement and the persecution of both Villa and Zapata.³³ The struggle between “rational” intellectuals and “barbarous” revolutionaries at the core of Azuela’s novel was in fact a fight for economic resources. The Carrancistas were in control of Mexico’s means of production, and sought to use the revolution as a platform for introducing new forms of capitalist modernization. The Zapatistas and Villistas, in contrast, remained active due to the revolution’s failure to deliver land reform, and the general redistribution of resources monopolized by entities still very much exercising colonial and neocolonial modes of domination. 1914, nonetheless,

was a traumatic historical moment for intellectuals like Azuela, because it is the one year in which the possible rule of the masses becomes palpable. As Gareth Williams describes, the “space of mutual contamination and indeterminateness between sovereign law and peasant insurrection in 1914,” as embodied by the famous picture of Villa sitting in the presidential chair, “is the very ground of the emergent political subjectification that lies at the heart of the Mexican Revolution’s social curve.”³⁴ The allegorical mode that dominated the Mexican and Latin American novel in the nineteenth-century, and that Doris Sommer has called “foundational fictions,” was constitutively unable to account for this new form of political subjectification.³⁵ What I want to suggest here is that, after experimenting himself the paradigm-shaking turmoil of 1914, Azuela became one of the first Mexican writers to fully assume the exhaustion of naturalist and *modernista* narrative paradigms. *Los de abajo* was profoundly intertwined as a text with the historical development of this period in the Revolution to the point that in November 21, 1915, the very day when the final installment of Azuela’s novel was published in *El Paso*, a Villista newspaper printed the “Naco manifesto,” the document in which Villa denounced the US endorsement of Carranza.³⁶ At that juncture, more so than in the moment of its canonical consecration in 1925, it was clear that the fundamental task of a novel like *Los de abajo* was in articulating a form that could account for the fundamental rift of the Revolution, and for the political subjectification that was out of reach for intellectuals like Azuela but nonetheless visible in the Villista and Zapatista armies.

In *The Antinomies of Realism*, Fredric Jameson observes that “war offers the paradigm of the nominalistic dilemma: the abstraction from totality or the here-and-now of sensory immediacy and confusion.” Jameson thusly argues, in an analysis of Stendhal’s *The Charterhouse of Parma*, that war narratives may introduce estrangement, in the Russian formalist sense of defamiliarization, “in which a preexisting stereotype is dismantled and brought before us in all its nameless freshness and horror. Whether this is to be grasped as an essentially modernist operation, or on the contrary to something all the realisms are by definition called upon to do is a question we will for the moment leave open.”³⁷ Azuela’s response to this question is that both alternatives are actually simultaneous: a realist novel must indeed be called upon to operate this estrangement, but in the concrete historical juncture of the Mexican revolution this was only possible by a radical, if at times hesitant, rendering of a new novel form. This was not in itself achieved by the precariousness of its original distribution, since installment novels in the press were a common feature of late nineteenth-century Mexican literature. Rather, it resides precisely in the construction of perspective. In the *Theory*, Lukács characterizes *Don Quixote* as a novel in a historical transition, where the values of the epic order had vanished but there was not yet a full awareness of it.³⁸ The consequence of this is that the hero is not a subject who can think totality, but rather a man for whom totality is not longer thinkable nor sensible, which, in turn, renders visible the limits of his historical position. That Azuela harnesses this

in his alter ego is patently obvious, announced by the use of the name Cervantes. But Azuela's novel recognizes that the underlying revolutionary force calls for a totally different symbolic economy in his narrated world. Even if one notices that Azuela and his narrator are on the side of a bourgeois rationality as the only possibility to found the sovereign in a new Mexico, it is also true that "los de abajo" as a social subject are no longer available for the sovereignty of the bourgeoisie. Don Quixote, an *hidalgo*, a mid-society man who does not quite belong to the aristocratic rule, can nonetheless rely on Sancho Panza's rationality and fidelity. Luis Cervantes, in contrast, is always seduced by, and secondary to, the epic of Demetrio Macías. When they first meet in the novel, Cervantes's subjective privilege is promptly deflated. After deserting the army, he is arrested by Demetrio's forces:

Demetrio did as a matter of fact want to find out what was going on, so he had the prisoner brought to him.

"It's a disgrace, dear leader, just look, Look!" Luis Cervantes exclaimed, showing Demetrio the blood on his pants and his swollen mouth and nose.

"Enough, enough. For God's sakes then, just tell me, who are you?" Demetrio demanded.

"My name is Luis Cervantes. I am a medical student and a journalist. I was pursued, trapped, and made a prisoner — all for having said something in favor of the revolutionaries."

The story that he proceeded to tell of his most recent adventure, in his bombastic style, made Pancraccio and Lard double over with laughter.

"I have sought to make myself understood, to convince your men here that I am truly a coreligionist."

"A co-re a... what?" Demetrio inquired perking up his ears.

"A coreligionist, dear leader, which is to say, that I am a believer of the same ideals and that 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.³⁹

The notable element in this exchange is the utter inability of Cervantes to articulate any possible ideological stance vis-á-vis Demetrio and his soldier. His identity as a member of the bourgeoisie, as a fellow revolutionary, as a political prisoner, as a coreligionist, gets erased in just one gesture, laughter, puncturing the fantasy of the very Maderista version of the revolution that Cervantes (and Azuela) represented. Demetrio is no Sancho: his refusal to even entertain Cervantes's chivalric fantasy is the crucial detonator of the narrative. Rather, the quixotic bourgeois revolutionary ends up at the service of this popular subject. The key element of the war trope in *Los de abajo*, the fundamental "estrangement" that is brought to us in all its "freshness

and horror,” to cite Jameson’s formulation, is a popular subjectivity, born out of the revolutionary interregnum, that no longer folds itself to the philosophical musings of the modern subject lost in the world, like Sancho, nor embodies a “national allegory” of the “foundational fiction” kind or an allegory of the decadence of the social body, in the way of Gamboa’s *Santa*. If Azuela is able to inaugurate the twentieth-century Mexican novel, it is because *Los de abajo* meaningfully articulates, for the first time, the fact that the essential dissociation between subject and world does not lie in the ontological rupture of the modern subject with totality, but in the roaring, eventual emergence of a new, previously unthinkable totality. This totality is embodied by an excessive subjectivity that the novel can only partially grasp, but that is ultimately defined not by its reference to the “ages when the starry sky is the map of all possible maps” from the beginning of the *Theory*, but by the horizon of futurity that Lukács only implies when he speaks of the “signs of a world to come, still so weak that it can easily be crushed by the sterile power of the merely existent.”⁴⁰ The grand paradox here is that Cervantes embodies, precisely, that “sterile power.”

There is a dialectical tension between Luis Cervantes, the intellectual whose consciousness of the existent impedes the experience of totality in the sphere of the sensible, and Demetrio Macías, the revolutionary that represents future revolutionary totality, in part due to the impossibility of his “capture” (in the Deleuzian sense) by either the post-revolutionary State apparatus or by the equally territorializing apparatus of national literature. The major intensities in *Los de abajo*, where we can briefly and imperfectly glimpse the horizon of futurity, emerge from fleeting moments of synthesis in which Cervantes becomes ephemerally subjectified by Demetrio’s unnamable cause. In a climatic scene at the center of the novel, Demetrio and his army march to Moyahua, his homeland, to pursue Don Mónico, the cacique whose exploits led him to his uprising. The scene begins with a description of Demetrio’s officers marching against the backdrop of a cordillera that embodies the affect of war:

Gradually the cordilleras emerge like variegated monsters with sharply angled vertebrae: hills like the heads of Aztec idols — with giant faces, grimacing frightfully and grotesquely — which alternately make one smile or leave one with a vague sense of terror, something akin to a mysterious foreboding.

At the head of the troop rides Demetrio Macías with his general staff: Colonel Anastasio Montañés, Lieutenant Colonel Pancraccio, and Majors Luis Cervantes and Towhead Margarito.⁴¹

The squad enters Moyahua, and finds Don Mónico, who begs for his life. Demetrio declines to execute him, but surprisingly, also refuses to allow the townsfolk to sack the cacique’s house, a common symbolic gesture of redistribution in similar situations. When a young man disobeys and moves towards the house, Demetrio shoots him, and

disperses the rest of the crowd. With the gun smoking in his hand, he utters an order:

“Burn the house down,” he orders Luis Cervantes when they reach their quarters.

Luis Cervantes, with rare solicitude and without passing the order on to anyone else, makes sure to carry it out himself.

When a couple of hours later the small town plaza was full of black smoke and enormous flames lapped up from Don Mónico’s house, no one understood the general’s strange behavior.⁴²

This scene illustrates one of those rare moments in which the dissonance between Demetrio and Luis temporarily subsides, and Luis fleetingly manages to meet a duty of the Event unfolding in front of his eyes. This moment recedes quickly in the following section, when he seeks to persuade Demetrio to take some of the spoils, given that leaders like Villa or Carranza will not respond for them when the time comes to face the future. This, of course, is a result of the fact that Azuela writes the scene with the benefit of hindsight, retroactively providing Cervantes a wisdom about the imminent internal conflicts between revolutionary forces. But their dissonance is not about contingent contexts but rather a different historico-philosophical location of their subjectivities: Demetrio inhabits the world of the epic, of the man whose soul and destiny coincide in the revolutionary whirlwind, while Luis experiences modernity in its horizon of failure, from a consciousness that, despite of the glimpses of heroism and futurity, can only stare at the Event as a form of horror. This is why it is crucial that the passage above is framed by a dissonant, estranging description of the *cordillera*: the strength of the destruction of the cacique’s house is framed by the specters of a terrifying time and space (the mountains that look like Aztec idols, the foreboding sense of doom) that ultimately pre-empt any sense of justice. When Don Mónico cowardly begs for his life and when Luis burns the house, we clearly know that there is no such thing as restitution.

The title of the novel, “those from below,” names a social subject that modern political discourse is unable to name, and the English word “underdogs,” which has been used as a title since the first translation, does not capture.⁴³ The sense of David bravely fighting Goliath or of a group fighting an impossible fight does not adequately account for the way in which Azuela conceives Demetrio and his army’s political subjectivity. “Los de abajo” frames the narrative in terms of the explosion of the vivid social stratification that defined Porfirian society, while asserting the telluric, primal nature of the revolutionaries. It is not about the challenge of uprising, but about the ontological condition of oppression and the way this informs the historical Event of the rebellion. Many of the novel’s best readers have underscored the way in which the novel captures an Evental feature of the Revolution: the pre-emption of liberalism as an organizing principle, one that became hegemonic since at least 1857,

when the doctrine of popular sovereignty became embedded in the constitution.⁴⁴ According to Max Parra:

Azuela's greatest distinction, despite his lack of clarity and his moralizing, is to have captured the equalizing force of the masses, armed and on the move, tumultuous, disorderly, and destructive. The text reveals a world of intense passions, naked violence, looting and hatreds, friendship spurred by alcohol, promiscuity, and libertine desires. And this despite the narrator's somewhat incongruent longing for moderation and order in the midst of chaos and war.⁴⁵

Juan Pablo Dabove takes this point even further and, in his brilliant Deleuzian reading, notes that the "absence of class consciousness" signals to the revolution as something that is both exterior and anterior to the State form, an "excess of the state that is always singular (resists categories) and is never possible to render it positive." That is, the novel articulates a particular politics: "The resistance to name the sense of the war (lacking a 'cause' different than war itself) therefore is the specific political dimension of those from below." Dabove concludes arguing that this provides "a nomadic politics: a politics that exceeds the signs of the nation and its forms of sovereignty."⁴⁶ Both Parra and Dabove deploy subalternist theory to make sense of these politics, which manifest themselves in the novel as an excess to Azuela's own attempts at rationalization. In the context of my argument, I would add that, insofar as "los de abajo" names the "nomadic politics" materially embodied in the chaos described by Parra, the ideological limits of Azuela's task as a novelist become evident when he resolves the novel through the tropes of horror and defeat.

Here, Jameson provides a useful insight in his discussion of *Grimmelhausen*. Discussing a utopian moment in which we attest representations of primeval bliss, Jameson concludes: "war, perceived at this existential proximity of the Scene, is virtually non-narrative, and that this raw material seeks to appropriate its missing protagonist from any number of narrative paradigms."⁴⁷ In Azuela's representation of the cordillera, the primeval Scene was present (Aztec idols), but not as a space of bliss but of foreboding horror: a historical foundation that places Mexico in a permanent state of war. The "virtually non-narrative" nature of war spells in Azuela the demand of an ethical demand that is inherently inconsistent with the social subjectivity his novel discloses but fails to grasp. Consequently, the only way in which he can engage with the semantic void of nomadic politics, with the terrifying and chaotic subjectivity of "los de abajo," is through a reterritorialization of the safety of liberalism, the blind faith in reconciling the subjective rift through a symbolic act. In order to do so, and to save Cervantes's soul, the novel opts to demonize war and to assert failure as the founding act of the nation to come. The novel concludes with a scene in which Demetrio dies fixated in his gesture of resistance: "At the foot of a craggy

hollow — enormous and magnificent as the portico of an old cathedral — Demetrio Macías, his eyes fixed forerever, continues to aim with the barrel of his rifle...”⁴⁸ *Los de abajo* ends with an ellipsis, after describing the sierra as a bride and Demetrio as a groom, about to meet his destiny in the portico of a magnificent cathedral. This is a telling utopian moment, placing Macías ephemerally in a foundational position, but ultimately freezing him in time: eyes fixed together, always aiming his gun, the signal of a war that may never end. This prophetic moment, though, is foreshadowed by a stunningly apocalyptic set of developments. The novel’s third and final part is narrated with Cervantes removed from the scene. After Demetrio learns from General Nátera that Villa was to rise against Carranza, we transition into a letter by Cervantes to a fellow revolutionary, dated in El Paso, and suggesting that his life would progress in the United States removed from the revolutionary process that he just left behind.⁴⁹ With the Villista movement facing imminent defeat, Azuela brings Demetrio’s troops to the town of Juchipila, where one of the first outbursts of the Revolution in 1910 took place. Although the town receives the troops with a deceivingly “joyful” tolling of the church bells, the reality in the ground is disastrous:

Juchipila was in ruins, just like the other towns through which they had passed since Tepic, including Jalisco, Aguascalientes and Zacatecas. The black traces of fire could be seen on roofless houses and burnt porticos. The remaining houses were still boarded up. And occasionally a store would still be open, as if sarcastically, to show its empty shelves, which resembled the white skeletons of the horses scattered along every road. The awful mark of hunger could already be seen on the dirt-ridden faces of the people, in the bright flame of eyes that burned with the fiery hatred whenever they beheld a passing soldier.⁵⁰

Even if one recognizes that Azuela grants Demetrio an epic ending worthy of his epic status, Cervantes’s withdrawal and Juchipila’s ruins are the two key ideologems here. Unlike Lukács, who eventually found Marxism to depart away from the bourgeois *malaise* of the soul, Azuela, like his protagonist, could only envision as future a restoration of the bourgeois myth at the top of the ruins of the Event. Azuela glimpses a totality that lies not in the memory of a distant past but in the horizon of futurity underlying Demetrio’s revolution, but he ultimately fails to recognize it. Thus, he would become the founder of a model of nation that opted to restore liberalism (in the 1917 constitution that would verbatim reproduce the popular sovereignty doctrine from 1857) and allow its revolution to persist in the memory of its failure and defeat.⁵¹

Regardless of this problematic resolution, I think that reading *Los de abajo* next to *The Theory of the Novel* posits an important lesson regarding the way in which their peculiar formal and intellectual choices manifest interregna, moments of suspension of the political, and of change between historical paradigms of modernity. Failure,

tellingly, is also a central trope in the *Theory*, particularly in Romantic narratives where “the completely pre-determined nature of this failure is the other objective difficulty of purely epic form-giving.” Lukács speaks here of “the artistic task of [that] consists of revealing the point at which such a character’s being-there and being-thus coincides with the inevitable failure.”⁵² *Los de abajo* unfolds this failure in two: the contemplative character of Luis Cervantes and historical necessity as embodied by Demetrio. If the epic of the Mexican Revolution never crystalizes into literary form, it is due, at least in part, to the unthinkability of Utopia in a nomadic revolution. Yet, the theorization of failure in both texts is a condition of possibility for theorizations and novels to come, given that their undecidability, both formal and intellectual, introduce an aporia in the notion of totality set forward from Romanticism onwards that cannot be ignored. In Lukács’s case, the aesthetic rift would evolve into a theory of consciousness that, in Edward Said’s words, sought to enact “a revolutionary will committed to wordliness and change.”⁵³ Similarly, Azuela’s novel became the condition of possibility of a modern Mexican novel inasmuch as it contributed to the territorializing imagination of national culture. It would not be until the 1940s and 1950s when Demetrio Macías’s dissonance would find worthy successors in José Revueltas’s lumpenproletarian characters and Juan Rulfo’s spectres.⁵⁴ Neither Lukács’s announcement of the “new world” nor Azuela’s transformation of Demetrio into a monument enacted a closure. They were, rather, openings: constant reminders of the inevitable rift on capitalist modernity that inaugurated both the twentieth century and the genealogies of our contemporaneity.

Notes

1. György Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT P, 1971); Mariano Azuela, *Los de abajo*, ed. Jorge Ruffinelli (Madrid: ALLCA XX, 1988); English edition: *The Underdogs: A Novel of the Mexican Revolution*, trans. Sergio Waisman (New York: Penguin, 2008). Although I will only cite the book in English, I provide reference to the Spanish edition so speakers of the original language may refer back to it. However, for reasons discussed below I will keep referring to Azuela's book with the Spanish title, since I feel that the translated title misses a dimension fundamental to my analysis here. Otherwise, all translations of materials from Spanish-language sources are mine. I am very grateful to Anna Kornbluh for inviting me to this dossier.
2. For readers not familiar with the Mexican revolution, Adolfo Gilly's unsurpassed bottom-to-top materialist history *The Mexican Revolution* (New York: The New Press, 2006) remains the best source to understand the world narrated by Azuela. A more concise and recent history may be found in Stuart Easterling, *The Mexican Revolution: A Short History 1910-1920* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012). For a recent authoritative history of the Revolution as a whole, see Gilbert M. Joseph and Jürgen Buchenau, *Mexico's Once and Future Revolution: Social Upheaval and the Challenge of Rule since the Late Nineteenth Century* (Durham: Duke UP, 2013). For a detailed publication history of Azuela's novel, see Stanley L. Robe, *Azuela and the Mexican Underdogs* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1979).
3. Jorge Aguilar Mora, *Una muerte sencilla, justa, eterna. Cultura y guerra en la Revolución Mexicana* (Mexico: Era, 1990) 54. For a detailed account of the 1925 debates on "national literature" see Víctor Díaz Arciniega, *Querrela por una cultura "revolucionaria"* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1925).
4. Arpad Kadarkay, *Georg Lukács: Life, Thought, and Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 1991) 191-92.
5. Franco Moretti, "Lukács's Theory of the Novel: Centenary Reflections," *New Left Review* 91 (January-February 2014) 39.
6. Lukács, *Theory of the Novel* 12.
7. A version of this reading led Lucien Goldmann to a fascinating and underexplored comparison between the young Lukács and the first Heidegger. See Lucien Goldmann, *Lukács and Heidegger: Towards a New Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2009).
8. David Cunningham, "'Very Abstract and Terribly Concrete': Capitalism and *The Theory of the Novel*," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 42.2 (2009) 311-17.
9. *Theory of the Novel* 152.
10. *ibid.*
11. Ángel Rama, "Mariano Azuela: ambición y frustración de las clases medias," *Crítica literaria en América Latina*, comp. Carlos Sánchez Lozano (Medellín: Ediciones de la Universidad Nacional de Antioquia, 2006) 206-58.
12. Max Parra, *Writing Pancho Villa's Revolution: Rebels in the Literary Imagination of Mexico* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2005) 30.
13. Parra, *Writing Pancho Villa's Revolution* 35.
14. *Theory of the Novel* 15.
15. The edition used here, funded by the ALLCA XX Project and established by Jorge Ruffinelli is based in a thorough comparison of sources, which Ruffinelli himself discusses in Azuela, *Los de abajo*, XXXV-XLIII. A new philological edition by Víctor Díaz Arciniega (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2015) was

released in late 2015, but I was not able to consult it prior to the writing of this essay. Sergio Waisman does not specify which version he uses for his translation, but it is very likely the established Fondo de Cultura Económica text established in the 1960s, which is the basis of the mass market editions of the text ever since. I use Ruffinelli's philological essay as the basis of my assertions here.

16. I use "reality effect" in the terms developed by Roland Barthes, for whom realism is the "acceptance of speech acts justified by their referent alone," something that hides the resistance of the "real" to structure. See Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: U of California P, 1986) 141-48.
17. Jorge Aguilar Mora, *El silencio de la Revolución y otros ensayos* (México: Era, 2011) 20-21.
18. *Theory of the Novel* 11.
19. *ibid.*
20. Eva L. Corredor, *György Lukács and the Literary Pretext* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987) 72.
21. Ivan Boldyrev, *Ernst Bloch and his Contemporaries: Locating Utopian Messianism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) 58.
22. György Lukács, *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (Columbia: Columbia UP, 2010) 16-34.
23. *Theory of the Novel* 125.
24. *Theory of the Novel* 128.
25. György Lukács, *Tactics and Ethics 1919-1929*, trans. Michael McColgan (London: Verso, 2014) 15-16.
26. *Theory of the Novel* 144.
27. Timothy Bewes, "How to Escape from Literature? Lukács, Cinema and *The Theory of the Novel*," *Georg Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence*, ed. Timothy Bewes and Timothy Hall (London: Bloomsbury, 2011) 7.
28. György Lukács, *Studies in European Realism* (New York: The Universal Library, 1964) 3.
29. Federico Gamboa, *Santa* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2006). English edition: *Santa: A Novel of Mexico City*, trans. John Charles Chasteen (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2010).
30. Lukács, *Studies in European Realism* 86
31. For a discussion in this regard, see Elzbieta Sklodowska, *Todo ojos todo oídos. Control e insubordinación en la novela hispanoamericana (1895-1935)* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997) 95-128.
32. For the general historical account of this process, see Ángel Rama, *Las máscaras democráticas del modernismo* (Montevideo: Fundación Ángel Rama / Arca, 1985). A more recent account that more precisely connects literature to capital can be found in Ericka Beckman, *Capital Fictions: The Literature of Latin America's Export Age* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2013).
33. For a narrative of this period, see Joseph and Büchenau, *Mexico's Once and Future Revolution* 63-78.
34. Gareth Williams, *The Mexican Exception: Sovereignty, Police and Democracy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 86.
35. Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1991).
36. Aguilar Mora, *Una muerte sencilla, justa, eterna* 52.
37. Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013) 232-33.
38. *Theory of the Novel* 101-105.
39. Azuela, *Los de abajo* 19; *The Underdogs* 20.

40. *Theory of the Novel* 29, 153.
41. *Los de abajo* 88; *The Underdogs* 86-87.
42. *Los de abajo* 93; *The Underdogs* 90.
43. For a discussion on the term, see Waisman, "Introduction," *The Underdogs* xiv.
44. For a discussion on popular sovereignty and liberalism in Mexico, see Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, "Democracy, Rule of Law, a 'Loving Republic,' and the Impossibility of the Political in Mexico," *Política Común*, 7 (2015). <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/p/pc/12322227.0007.004/--democracy-rule-of-law-a-loving-republic?rgn=main;view=fulltext>
45. Parra, *Writing Pancho Villa's Revolution* 46.
46. Juan Pablo Dabove, "La fiesta popular, la banda de bandidos, la 'bola': la Revolución y sus metáforas en *Los de abajo*," *Heterotropías. Narrativas de identidad y alteridad latinoamericanas*, eds. Carlos A. Jáuregui and Juan Pablo Dabove (Pittsburgh: Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana, 2003) 180-81.
47. Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* 251.
48. *Los de abajo* 140; *The Underdogs* 134.
49. *Los de abajo* 123-24; *The Underdogs* 119-20.
50. *Los de abajo* 135; *The Underdogs* 131.
51. For studies of this trope see John Ochoa, *The Uses of Failure in Mexican Literature and Identity* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2004), and Brian L. Price, *Cult of Defeat in Mexico's Historical Fiction: Failure, Trauma, Loss* (New York: Palgrave, 2012).
52. *Theory of the Novel* 116.
53. Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983) 231.
54. José Revueltas, *Human Mourning*, trans. Roberto Crespi (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990), and Juan Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, trans. Margaret Sayens Peden (New York: Grove, 1994).