

## Chapter 5

# THE PERILS OF PROGRESS

By the 1880s, Latin American writers had a new job to do. Somehow, they had to come to terms with the idea of Progress. Progress meant change—the abandonment of traditional ways and the embrace of material, social, and ideological transformation. The changes that defined Progress were embodied, above all, in European examples. To be like England or France or the United States, in whatever way, meant Progress. Most Latin American readers and writers found the idea of Progress desirable and inevitable, but also, a bit unsettling. These transformations were not automatic, after all, they required resources, and they produced both winners and losers. While Latin American governments (almost all in the hands of liberal Europhiles) promoted Progress, some conservative traditionalists (especially humble people of the countryside) resisted it. But theirs was a losing battle.

Ready or not, the material transformations that went by the name of Progress had begun to arrive from Europe at a prodigious rate. Telegraphic cables spanned the oceans and provided almost instant communications across them. Manufactured goods from European (and, to a lesser extent, US) industries were imported by the ton in the capacious holds of steamships that were vastly quicker and more reliable than sailing vessels. The countryside of Latin America underwent dramatic changes as landowners, stimulated by the arrival of the railroad, ramped up production of agricultural export products to fill ships' holds for the return trip. The region's major cities—its capital cities, above all—took on a new look, as colonial-style Spanish architecture gave way to the ornate facades inspired

by Italian examples, and wide avenues were opened following the example of Paris. New European immigrants—many of them, too, Italian—were attracted to work on the land but usually ended up in major cities such as Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Rio de Janeiro, or São Paulo. Upper-class Latin Americans traveled frequently to Europe and often cited European thinkers as intellectual reference points. The lure and influence of Europe is everywhere in Latin American writings of the late nineteenth century.

So what were the perils of Progress? Furnishings and artworks imported from Europe defined luxury and good taste, as emphatically exemplified in the novel *The Stock Market* (1891). And yet the new ideas and new commercial abundance seemed to invite crass materialism and class conflict. Furthermore, the commercial abundance was very unevenly distributed. In the cities, the mansions of those who profited much from booming trans-Atlantic trade inspired the envy and sometimes the hatred of those left behind economically. In the countryside, Progress benefited large landowners, but it often impoverished rural workers by depriving them of traditional forms of subsistence. The mythic gaucho no longer roved freely over a boundless landscape, butchering semi-wild cattle whenever he chose. Instead, he became a rural proletarian who sheared sheep for countless hours under the watchful eye of an overseer to provide wool for the international market, as in the novel *No Direction* (1885). Social tensions increased in many parts of rural Latin America. Slaves who had gained their freedom and moved to the poor neighborhoods of burgeoning cities sometimes rubbed elbows with newly arrived European immigrants, as in the novel *The Beehive* (1890), but their situation was not promising, and the immigrants themselves sometimes seemed threatening to middle-class people.

The greatest symbol of Progress was also its primary “vehicle” (pun intended, of course): the railroad. Railroads connected sleepy backwater regions to capital cities and oceanic ports and, via steamship, to European (and, to a lesser extent, US) ports on the other side of the ocean. Railroads not only facilitated contact with the European and US centers of Progress, they were almost always constructed, owned, and operated by foreigners. Writers consistently celebrated the railroad, as in the 1880s newspaper chronicle, *The*

*Inauguration of the Railway from Mexico City to Texcoco*, but the “iron horse” could evoke some ambivalent responses as well. Could technological innovation be, in some ways, a faddish obsession, an empty and thoughtless sort of imitation? The short story “Evolution” (1884) subtly invited its readers to ask themselves that question. And what about the perils of those terrifying fifteen-mile-an-hour velocities that led to a train wreck in *Birds without a Nest* (1889)? Of course, this is perhaps the least destructive train wreck ever described, and perhaps that is the answer. The perils of Progress seemed, for the time being, far outweighed by the advantages.

## THE INAUGURATION OF THE RAILWAY FROM MEXICO CITY TO TEXCOCO

### Ignacio Manuel Altamirano

*In the 1880s, Ignacio Manuel Altamirano (born 1834) was the grand old man of Mexican letters, the man whom younger writers called “maestro.” Altamirano had been a fighting Liberal like Benito Juárez, part of the great midcentury movement called La Reforma. Like Juárez, Altamirano was a man of the strongly indigenous south who looked somewhat out of place when he mingled with the light-skinned elite of Mexico City. In the early 1880s, Altamirano wrote a number of chronicles for Mexico City newspapers, including the following celebration of the railroad connecting Mexico City with nearby Texcoco.*

The railway from Mexico City to Texcoco was inaugurated on the fifteenth of last August, practically in silence.

In silence, I say, because advance notice was slight, only modest announcements in a few newspapers. There were not a great number

SOURCE: adapted from Ignacio Manuel Altamirano, *Paisajes y leyendas: Tradiciones y costumbres de México* (Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1974), pp. 219–23.

of invited guests, nor did the reporters who covered the event endlessly announce the identities and descriptions of those in attendance, more or less the same list who have been attending all such events for years. The number of cakes and bottles consumed during the inaugural journey remains undisclosed. Nor have the newspapers divulged the more-or-less witty remarks made, and by whom, in order to pass the time during the trip—the only interesting thing that the reporters generally write in their little notebooks, because it is valuable for the public to know what such people are saying on such occasions.

On the other hand, if the bustling and sweet-smelling metropolis of Mexico City did not celebrate the train’s departure with the music of bells and trumpet flourishes, the train’s arrival in poor, obscure Texcoco was indeed motive for a celebration in the streets around the newly erected railroad station, a great celebration that attracted enormous crowds of people from Texcoco and numerous hamlets in its environs.

The celebration showed a hint, a faint hint, of Texcoco’s vitality in bygone times. Today poor and languishing, Texcoco was once a great city, a rival of Tenochtitlan that occasionally defeated the Aztec capital on the battlefield.\* When Texcoco finally succumbed to Aztec overlordship, it did not become a tributary, but rather, a respected ally, governed by its own laws. Despite its proximity, just across the lake from Tenochtitlán, indigenous Texcoco always retained its competitive spirit and separatist tendencies vis-à-vis Tenochtitlan.

Of course, the Texcoco of today is not truly a direct descendant of the indigenous Texcoco of old. Today’s Texcoco is a hybrid in all ways—in its construction and appearance, in the customs of its people, in the people themselves, mostly mestizos or descendants of Spaniards. Like Mexico City, Texcoco’s inhabitants have changed so much over the centuries that one could say the current inhabitants have nothing in common with the people who dwelled there before

\*Both Sahagún and Díaz del Castillo told how the Lord of Texcoco accompanied Moctezuma when he greeted Cortés.

the conquest. All that has remained is the name and location beside the lake, things that the Spanish could not destroy, whether as rigorous conquerors or zealous missionaries, things that the natives who fled enslavement and destitution could not carry with them.

In justice, however, we must confess that the downtrodden state of towns and cities like Texcoco that were known, in ancient times, for their prosperity and opulence cannot be explained totally by the sword of Spanish conquest nor by the additional neglect of Spanish colonial rule. No, the incessant cannon of our post-independence civil wars played a part, as well, by making material progress impossible for decades.

And yet, on the fifteenth of August, the impoverished descendent of the once-proud lady of the lake put on party clothing, adorned herself with festive garlands of flowers, and set the bells of her half-ruined churches madly ringing. Texcoco seemed to stir from her three centuries of torpor and sit up in spite of her anemia. Her pale, sad countenance broke into a smile when she heard the voice of the locomotive, the voice of hope, coming at last to this silent region to instill spirit and vigor. The movement of the locomotive will shake things awake and restore the vitality of the native people of this place, scattered and crushed by three centuries of conquest, despotism, and civil war.

It was as if Texcoco received an infusion of youth with the approach of the locomotive. Her circulation seemed to improve, and the blood flowed into her pale and sunken cheeks, giving them a healthier color. A flash of joy and hope shone in her sunken and fever-swollen eyes. She adorned her jet-black hair with blossoms and sat by the shore of her poetic lake to await the chugging messenger of her bliss. It had been so, so long since she had tasted such happiness, cherished such hope, felt herself buoyed by such a consoling vision.

The waters of the lake have always linked Texcoco to Mexico City, it is true, but those sullen and swampy waters, rather than a fraternal bond, became a confining chain after the Spanish conquest. No longer a sister city, Texcoco became the mere servant of Mexico City (the arrogant mistress of the Spanish king and then, after independence, disdainful chief housekeeper of the Republic).

Texcoco continued to send Mexico City boatloads of fruit, flowers, and other articles of value, but in return she received only waste, fever, and death. The lake, so vast and calm, became little more than a cesspool for the effluents of unhealthy and licentious Mexico City. Now, for the first time in centuries, Texcoco was to be linked to the capital of the Republic by a mode of transport that was not a humiliating open sewer.

The railroad tracks had arrived!

Moreover, the two ribbons of steel that began at the eastern edge of Mexico City and extended eastward to Texcoco were destined to continue east, to Puebla, and beyond, until reaching the waves of the Gulf of Mexico. The ribbons of steel were like a gold ring symbolizing a marriage, a marriage uniting the high valley of Mexico with European civilization on the other side of those waves and with the prosperous future that Mexico deserves.

The arrival of the railroad was Texcoco's first intimation of what the future holds in store. This is what moved the city's people to rejoice upon hearing the whistle of the locomotive that brought the first train from Mexico City. Interestingly, the entrepreneurs who are carrying out the construction of the rail line are Spanish. If the first arrival of the Spanish in Texcoco brought missionaries of Christianity, this second Spanish mission brings a gospel of Science and nineteenth-century Civilization.

The people of today's Texcoco hurried to the town's new railway station to give their enthusiastic greeting to the new envoys of Civilization. They spread flowers on the tracks in front of the locomotive and offered it their appreciative applause. They delivered several heartfelt speeches in expression of their gratitude to a representative of the Spanish company. Someone even read a poem that he had composed to commemorate the inauguration of railroad. It was nothing like the sublime songs of Nezahualcoyotl from the old glory days of Anáhuac, but it showed that the ancient poetic inclination of these lands is alive and well.

*Analyzing the Sources: Does Altamirano seem to have any mixed emotions about the coming of Progress to Texcoco? If so, where may they be found?*

## EVOLUTION

## Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis

*Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis is generally considered the greatest Brazilian author ever. A descendant of slaves, he was born free (1839) into a Brazil whose plantations were still powered by slave labor. While naturally critical of slavery, Machado de Assis wrote mostly elegant fictions for the entertainment of the white Brazilian upper class, whose lives and manners he depicted in a manner well exemplified by the following 1884 short story. Machado's themes tended to be more psychological than social, but both interests can be detected in "Evolution."*

Benedito was forty-five years old when I met him. I will not say when that was, because everything in this story is going to be oddly incomplete.

At the time, Benedito had relatively little gray hair, and he submitted what he had to a chemical process so efficacious that the gray hairs could not be distinguished from the rest—except when he got out of bed in the morning, but no one saw him when he got out of bed. Everything else was natural—legs, arms, head, eyes, clothing, shoes, watch chain, and walking cane. Even the diamond stick pin that he wore on his tie was authentic and natural. It had cost him a considerable amount of money, and I myself saw him purchase it in the shop that belongs to . . . I was about to let slip the jeweler's name. Let's just say that the shop was on fashionable Ouvidor Street.

In moral terms, Benedito was himself, the same then as now. One's character does not change, and Benedito's was generally good, or at least, mild. In intellectual terms, he was scarcely original. We can compare him to a busy inn where ideas of all sorts encounter one another and sit down to eat with the innkeeper and his family.

SOURCE: Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis, "Evolução," in *Relíquias de casa velha* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1977), pp. 114–120, slightly abridged.

Occasionally, there might be someone obnoxious, or even two declared enemies, present at the table, and yet no one quarrels because the innkeeper imposes mutual respect among his guests. This is how Benedito managed to reconcile his vague atheism with his founding of a couple of religious brotherhoods somewhere in Rio, possibly Gávea, Tijuca, or Engenho Velho. He put on and took off his atheism and devotion like a pair of silk socks. I never saw his socks, by the way, but he told his friends everything.

We met during a journey from Rio to Vassouras. We had gotten off the train and boarded a coach to take us into town from the railroad station outside it. We exchanged a few words and were soon chatting freely, with the quick familiarity inspired by travel, even before becoming formally acquainted.

Naturally, our first topic was the progress that the railroad was bringing to Brazil. Benedito reminisced about the time when travelers had to sit astride a donkey all day. Each of us then told stories, mentioned names, and ended up agreeing that railroads were vital to the progress of our country. Those who have never made a long journey simply cannot appreciate how such solid, serious banalities alleviate the tedium of the road. One's spirit is refreshed, one's muscles, relaxed, one's circulation, improved by a serviceable banality. It leaves one at peace with God and Man.

"Our children will not live to see a railway network span the entire country," he said.

"I'm afraid not. Do you have any children?"

"None."

"Neither do I. No, we'll not have such a network, not even in fifty years. And yet, it is our greatest necessity. I like to compare Brazil to a baby that is crawling on the floor. It will only begin to walk upright when it has many, many railroads."

"A nice image!" exclaimed Benedito, his eyes sparkling.

"I don't care much if it's nice, as long as it's accurate."

"Nice *and* accurate," he replied amiably. "Yes, sir, you are right. Brazil is still crawling on the floor. It will only begin to walk upright when it has many, many railroads."

We arrived in Vassouras. I went to the house of the local judge, an old friend of mine, while Benedito spent only one night before

continuing to his destination in the countryside nearby. A week later I made the return trip to Rio, by myself, and a week after that, he too was back in Rio.

We met at the theater and talked for a long time, exchanging news, and Benedito ended up inviting me to lunch the next day. I went, and he gave me a meal fit for a king, followed by good cigars and an animated dialogue. I noticed that Benedito's conversation had been more interesting during our journey together, when it refreshed the spirit and left us at peace with God and Man. But perhaps the interest of his conversation was merely overshadowed by the meal, which was really magnificent and left little space for philosophizing. Between the coffee and the cognac, he said to me, leaning on an elbow and gazing at the lit end of his cigar:

"On my return from Vassouras, I saw how right you are with your idea about how Brazil is still merely crawling."

"Hmmm?"

"Yes, sir, it's just as you said in the coach we shared. We will only begin to walk upright when we have many railroads. You can't imagine how true that it is."

And he made a number of observations about the difficulties of life in the countryside, its isolation and backwardness, while conceding people's good intentions and their desire for progress. Unfortunately, the current government had not responded to the needs of Brazil and seemed intentionally to keep it behind the other countries of South America. But we must realize that principles are everything and men are nothing. A people is not made for its government, but rather, a government for its people, and *abyssus abyssum invocate*, which means in Latin that one disaster leads to another. Then he got up to show me other rooms in his house, all furnished and decorated in good taste. He showed me his collections of coins, stamps, old books, paintings, and weapons. He had both swords and foils but confessed that he was no fencer. Among the paintings I saw a beautiful portrait of a woman and asked who she was. Benedito smiled.

"I won't ask any further," I said, smiling as well.

"No, no use in denying it," he offered hurriedly. "It is a young woman whom I liked very much. Pretty, no? You can't imagine how pretty. Her lips were ruby red, and she had roses in her cheeks. Her

eyes were black as night. And her teeth! Her teeth were like pearls . . . exactly like them."

Next we entered his study. It was ample, elegant, slightly inconsequential, perhaps, but lacked nothing. It had two shelves of books in fine bindings, a globe, and two maps of Brazil. The desk was of ebony, a beautiful piece of work. The Laemmert statistical almanac of Brazil lay casually open atop it, beside a glass inkstand—"rock crystal," he said, explaining the inkstand as he explained everything else. In the next room there was an organ. He played the organ and liked music very much. He spoke of it enthusiastically, mentioning particular operas, outstanding passages, and informed me that, as a child he had begun to learn to play the flute. He gave it up before long—which was a pity, he concluded, because it is such a lovely instrument. He showed me a few more rooms. We went into the garden, which was splendid, so ably did Nature aid Art and Art crown Nature. He had roses of all sorts and from all over, for example. "There is no denying that it's the queen of flowers," he said.

I left his house dazzled. We met afterward a few times on the street, at the theater, at the house of mutual friends, and I had the opportunity to get to like him. Four months later, I traveled to Europe on a business matter that kept me away for a year. He was busy trying to get elected to the Chamber of Deputies. I was the one who had suggested that idea, without any real political intention, but merely as a pleasantry, roughly as if I were complimenting him on the cut of his vest. He took the idea seriously and became a candidate. One day I was crossing a street in Paris and bumped into Benedito.

"What are you doing here?" I exclaimed.

"I lost the election," he said, "so I've come to travel in Europe." He stayed with me, and we travelled together from then on. He confessed that losing the election had not discouraged his parliamentary ambitions. To the contrary, it had encouraged those ambitions, and he spoke to me of a master plan.

"I'd like to see you become a government minister," I told him.

Mention of a ministry took him by surprise, and he beamed but then quickly dissembled.

"Not likely," he said, "but when I become a minister, you may be sure that my chief care will be industry. We've had enough parties

and politics. We need to develop the vital forces and enormous resources of our country. Do you remember what *the two of us said* in the coach to Vassouras? Brazil is still crawling, it will only walk upright when it has railroads.”

“You are right,” I agreed, a little startled. “Why else did I come to Europe? Because of a railroad. I’ve made all the necessary arrangements in London.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely.”

I showed him the paperwork, which he examined in amazement. Because I had collected notes, statistics, leaflets, reports, copies of contracts, all sorts of information on industrial matters, and showed it all to him, Benedito announced that he, too, was going to start such a collection. And I did see him visiting banks, commercial associations, and government ministries, collecting a lot of paper that he piled into briefcases. But the ardor with which he did so, while intense, did not last long. It was borrowed, one could say. Benedito collected something else much more enthusiastically: political slogans, parliamentary phraseology. His head was full of these, a vast arsenal. He delighted in their apparently inestimable value, and he repeated them frequently in his conversations with me, for practice. Many were of English origin, and these were his favorites, bringing with them the prestige of the House of Commons. He savored them so much that I do not know if he would accept liberty itself without the slogans that went along with it. I rather doubt it. I rather think that, if he had to choose, he would opt for those pithy, easy slogans, none requiring reflection, some of them beautiful, some high-flown, all of them axiomatically true, conveniently filling up the spaces between other words, leaving listeners at peace with God and Man.

We returned to Brazil together, but I got off the ship in Pernambuco while he continued to Rio. I later returned to London and did not get back to Rio for another year. By that time, Benedito had been elected to the Chamber of Deputies. I paid him a visit and found him preparing his maiden speech. He showed me notes, passages taken from official reports, books on political economy, some with pages marked by strips of paper labeled Exchange Rate, Property Tax, Grain Issue in England, John Stuart Mill’s Opinion, Adolph Theirs’

Error Regarding Railroads, and so on. He was earnest, detailed, and emphatic. He spoke to me about these things as if he had just discovered them, explaining everything from the beginning. He was determined to show the knowledgeable men of the Chamber that he, too, was knowledgeable. He asked about my own project, and I told him where it stood.

“I hope to inaugurate the first section of track within two years.”

“And what about the English investors?”

“What do you mean?”

“Are they satisfied?”

“Very much so. You can’t imagine.”

I related a few technical particulars. He listened distractedly—whether because my narrative was extremely complicated or for some other reason. When I finished, he said that he was pleased to see me promoting industry because that is what this country really needed, and by way of illustration, he did me the favor of reading me the opening passage of the speech which he was to deliver within a few days.

“It’s still a rough draft,” he said, “but the main ideas are in place.”

And he began to read:

“Amid the growing agitation of the public spirit, amid the partisan clamor that drowns out the voice of legitimate public interest, allow me to make heard the following plea that comes to us, gentlemen, from the Nation itself. It is time for us to devote our attention exclusively—and take note of that word, *exclusively*—to the material improvement of our country. I know what the reply may be. You will say that a nation has not only a stomach for digesting, but also a head for thinking and a heart for feeling. I respond that all this is worth little or nothing if the nation does not also have legs for walking. And here let me repeat what *I said* to a friend of mine, a few years ago, during a journey through the interior of Brazil. Brazil is like a baby crawling on the floor. It will only walk upright when it has many railroads. . . .”

*Analyzing the Sources:* What is the “evolution” in this story? What comment does the story make about the nineteenth-century’s devotion to Progress?

## NO DIRECTION

### Eugenio Cambaceres

*Argentine author Eugenio Cambaceres (born 1843) wrote in the "Naturalist" style associated with the French novelist Émile Zola. As a literary style Naturalism contrasted with the Romanticism of novels like María. While Romantic novels often idealized the social relations of the countryside, Naturalist novels tended to view them (and most other things) starkly. For example, the following scene of rural workers—the opening of Cambaceres's best-known novel, No Direction (1885)—differs enormously in tone from the view of "happy slaves" in the previous chapter's excerpt of María and from the earlier, also Romantic, view of rural Argentina presented by Sarmiento.*

The sheep stood in parallel lines leading to a table piled with wool that several men were busy binding into bundles.

The men placed the bundles in the wide pan of the scale that hung by a rawhide cord from the rafters of the building and then tossed the weighed fleece to one side, where others heaped it onto what looked like a mountainside of melting snow.

The sheep, their feet brutally hobbled, leaned against one another and turned their heads toward the open door, their eyes half-closed with fear and exhaustion, panting breathlessly.

Around the walls of the room, men and women worked bent over, in clusters.

Theirs was a motley array of clothing typical of the countryside, all of it filthy: the *alpargata* footwear with soles of coiled fiber, the primitive rawhide *bota de potro*; the French-style beret and baggy *bombacha* trousers of the modern gaucho, the *vincha* headband and *chiripá* loincloth of the more impoverished or old-fashioned kind; the women's uniformly ragged gingham dresses.\*

SOURCE: Eugenio Cambaceres, *Sin rumbo* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Minerva, 1924), pp. 11–13.

\*Articles of gaucho garb are difficult to describe and impossible to translate. The point of the passage is the mixture of old and new.

Amid the reigning silence, interrupted now and again by bleats of pain from the sheep and coarse jokes from the sheep shearers, the shears made a high-pitched plink like the plucked strings of a violin. The shears dove quickly through the thick fleece, snipping, surfacing here, disappearing there, like panicky creatures in search of a hiding place, occasionally catching the flesh of the sheep between their blades in haste, so that long strips of skin came off with the wool, leaving wide, bloody wounds on the animals' flanks.

The hot north wind huffed and puffed at the structure's three wide entrances.

"Medication!" shouted a voice.

It belonged to a stocky, muscular, bronze-skinned young man with high cheekbones and small, fierce, deep-set eyes.

One of those human types whom one encounters on the plains, stubborn as a mule, sly as a fox, savage as a tiger.

The old cigarette-smoking Basque who served as provisional veterinarian had approached with his can of tar (the "medication") and was about to apply it with a small brush to the freshly opened wound when another man, standing beside him, spoke in a rude and angry tone:

"Where did you learn to shear sheep, kid?" he asked the stocky young man.

"Oh, get off my back, would you, old man?"

"You're just aching to get your tail whipped, kid."

"Not even if you were my father," replied the boy, and, whistling a rustic ditty through his teeth, he pulled a hand-rolled cigarette from behind his ear, lit it as calmly as could be, and crossed his legs casually over the recumbent animal whom he had just wounded, all the while watching his challenger out of the corner of his eye.

The scorn and repressed laughter with which the others celebrated the boy's cutting remark brought a flush of blood to his challenger's face.

"You insolent—" he bellowed, beside himself with rage, and the sound of a blow accompanied the sound of his voice.

The young gaucho's reaction was automatic. His hand dropped to his belt and he lunged erect brandishing his knife.

The barrel of a revolver stopped him cold.

With the impotent fury of a wild animal that bites at a rod thrust through the bars of his cage, the boy suddenly ceased his aggressive attitude, lowered his gaze, sheathed his knife, and let his arms drop to his sides.

"What do you hit me for, boss?" he asked softly with false humility, but his trembling, bloodless lips betrayed his bitterness and frustration.

"So you'll learn to behave yourself and act like a man. . . ."

And, addressing the man who kept track of each shearer's work, he said: "Villalba, pay this fellow for what he's done today, and I don't ever want to lay eyes on him again."

He added, for the benefit of the other workers:

"If anybody else has a commentary, you can go ahead and make right now. The door is big enough for everybody."

The wind entered with a whirl, hanging a thick curtain of dust in the air. There was no sound but that of the shears diving through animals' thick fleece and snipping with a high-pitched plink like the plucked strings of a violin.

*Analyzing the Sources: Who, in this passage, descends from the free-roving gauchos of an earlier period described by Sarmiento?*

## BIRDS WITHOUT A NEST

### Clorinda Matto de Turner

*Clorinda Matto de Turner's Birds without a Nest (1889) was among the first Latin American novels to focus on the plight of the indigenous people. Born in 1852, Matto de Turner exemplified liberal anticlericalism by making a corrupt Catholic priest the novel's villain. Her protagonists are progressive-minded whites from Lima who have come to the indigenous high Andes with a foreign-owned mining enterprise. Only a passive role remains for the novel's indigenous characters in need of rescuing. In this scene, the enlightened capitalist don Fernando Martín boards a train with*

*his wife, his daughter, and a poor godchild whom they are taking to Lima to enjoy the benefits of Civilization.*

An elegant railroad car drawn by a locomotive christened (with a bottle of champagne and everything) Mineshaft was ready to pull out at the sound of the train whistle.

Meanwhile, the first-class passengers examined the merchandise for sale along both sides of the tracks, where Indian women offered gloves of vicuña wool, peach preserves, butter, cheese, and fried pork skins, products of the excellent livestock of the mountainous interior, or *sierra*, of Peru.

Don Fernando helped his wife Lucía and the two girls into their red-plush upholstered seats, then settled luxuriously into his own. He pulled out his tobacco, rolled a smoke in silence, and, after lighting it, put away the box of matches, took a few puffs, and left the cigarette between his lips as he untied the packet of books that they had brought to read on the journey. After a few more puffs he said to his wife:

"Which of these would you like to read, Lucía my dear?"

"Give me Salaverry's *Poetry*," she responded with a smile of satisfaction.

"Fine. In that case, I will enjoy Palma's *Traditions* with their delightful Peruvian flavor," said don Fernando as he handed the requested volume to his wife.

Then he crossed his legs and leaned back just as the train began to roll, soon reaching the dizzying speed of fifteen miles an hour, swallowing distances, leaving flocks, pastures, and Indian huts all behind. Lucía curiously looked over the passengers in the other seats, who were beginning to seek ways to amuse themselves. A thin, dark, bearded army officer, seated next to a couple of country fellows who traded in cochineal and sugar, proposed a diversion:

SOURCE: Clorinda Matto de Turner, *Aves sin nido* (Cuzco, Universidad Nacional del Cuzco, 1948), pp. 239–43, 249–51.



"Shall we kill some time with a hand of cards?"

"Not a bad idea, captain, but where on earth will we get playing cards?" replied one of the country fellows who was all bundled up in vicuña wool.

Whereupon the captain produced a deck of cards from his pocket, saying: "A soldier who doesn't drink, woo the ladies, or play cards . . . should be a friar."

A friar who was seated nearby took the comment personally and glared at them. The cardplayers ignored him and improvised a table for their game. The friar opened a book, and three women seated near don Fernando's daughters, Margarita and Rosalía, began to talk to them and offer them peeled slices of apple. Half an hour later, women and girls were curled up asleep and the friar, too, was snoring, so deep in the sleep of the just that the excited shouts of the cardplayers made not the slightest impression on him.

The door at the end of the car opened and in came a corpulent fellow about thirty years old, his complexion ruddy from contact with the frigid Andean air, his moustache neatly trimmed, a large mole on his right ear. He wore a grey uniform including a cap with a black visor, and he carried a ticket puncher in his hand.

"Your ticket, reverend?" he said, stepping close and raising his voice enough to wake the friar, who opened his eyes and sleepily drew his yellow ticket from his book and handed it to the conductor without opening his mouth.

The conductor punched the ticket and returned it, turning next to the cardplayers. The two country fellows held out their tickets, and the officer produced a document that the conductor returned (with a murmur of displeasure: "these guys and their *papers*") after examining the signatures at the bottom.

Then he turned to don Fernando, and while he was punching their tickets Lucía inquired:

"Could you please tell me how far we have travelled to this point?"

"Four hours, señora . . . which is to say sixteen leagues, and we must go another sixteen to reach our destination," responded the conductor and continued down the aisle.

"What a prodigious journey, no? And without a single care or bother we'll shortly be in Lima," said don Fernando to his wife, shutting his book.

"Prodigious indeed, my dear. Look, Fernando, how precious these two look asleep . . . as peaceful as little angels!"

"Yes, they're angels, Peruvian angels, we could say, with all that native color in their cheeks."

Margarita raised her arching eyelashes and looked fixedly up at her godmother as an iron-and-wood railroad bridge came into view ahead, spanning a shallow river in a picturesque manner. And in the middle of the bridge was a small herd of cattle that the engineer had only just noticed.

The locomotive's whistle shrilled repeatedly, and the cattle fled in terror, but not as fast as the oncoming train. The passengers feared their certain death and cried out in terror, but there was nothing they could do. With the shattering velocity of a lightning bolt, the train ran over the fleeing animals, crushing their bones under its wheels, which went off the rails. Mister Smith, the valiant engineer, was prepared to sacrifice his own life to save those of the passengers who had entrusted him with their safety, and he attempted to puncture the boilers with a revolver shot in order to slow the progress of the train, unsuccessfully. Meanwhile a brakeman had decoupled the first-class car, and now it also, left the rails, and left the bridge, too, the only car to do so. It came to rest intact in the moist sand of the river bank.

The first person to leap to the ground was Mister Smith, shouting loudly in broken Spanish: "Everyone stay putting!" The windows of the train, all of which had lost their glass in the accident, sprouted the heads of curious passengers. Fortunately, there had been only a few minor injuries.

"Mister Smith, that was nearly the end of us!" said don Fernando to the engineer, who was an acquaintance of his. "Now when will we ever get to Lima?"

"Oh, señor Marín, what twisting of fate! But don't worry, the train will be tomorrow in Lima," replied the engineer as he supervised the necessary repairs. And with the energy that distinguishes

his race, he set up a system of pulleys which, at the end of two hours' steady work, had extracted the derailed car from the sand of the riverbank and returned it to the rails, ready to continue the journey.

*Analyzing the Sources:* According to the impression left by this selection, who is responsible for the advance of Progress in Peru, and who are the beneficiaries?

## THE STOCK MARKET

### Julián Martel

*Julián Martel was a Buenos Aires journalist, born in 1867 to an impoverished branch of one of the city's traditional elite families. His novel The Stock Market (1891) is set on the eve of the 1890 financial crisis that shook Argentina, ending a period of rampant real-estate speculation. The novel won immediate acclaim, but Martel did not have time, in his short life, to write another. The following excerpt describes the luxurious life of a lawyer, Doctor Glow, who is deeply involved in the speculative bubble that is about to burst. Non-Spanish surnames like Glow's were (and are) frequent in Buenos Aires, especially among the upper classes.*

"Is my wife home yet?"

"No, sir. She has not returned."

"She went out with the children?"

"Yes, sir."

Standing at attention as he spoke, the doorman bowed respectfully in honor of the arrival of the master of the house, who began slowly to ascend the broad marble stairway of the high atrium illuminated by three large bronze and crystal gas fixtures. The numerous gas jets within each fixture emitted torrents of light that bounced off the walls and the domed ceiling painted in oil with a thousand ara-

SOURCE: adapted from Julián Martel, *La bolsa* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Estrada, 1946), pp. 71–6, 151–52, 156–57.

besques so intricate and beautiful that any of the unknown artisans who created that dreamlike palace called the Alhambra would gladly have signed his name there.

As Doctor Glow\* put his foot on the last gleaming step, he paused, his hand resting on a handsome alabaster jar, enormous and heavy, decorated with one of those Japanese plants of wide, dark, capriciously shaped leaves, so well suited to the refined taste of our encyclopedic century. Well satisfied, he looked around him, and his lips curled again in the same contented smile that they had worn earlier in the day when he entered the stock market. He reflected that this mansion, a veritable palace, situated on Avenida Alvear in the heart of the most aristocratic neighborhood of Buenos Aires, belonged to him and to him alone. He had lived there no more than two weeks, and the impression that the mansion made upon him was still fresh. It was the sensation experienced by a man accustomed to a life of modest comfort who suddenly found himself raised to unexpected heights of luxury and opulence.

He gazed at the splendid vestibule with its costly adornments, its seats with French leatherwork, its elegant, mirrored coatrack, its table crafted of a variety of exotic woods upon which reposed two thick volumes of the works of Shakespeare (the Hetzel edition), and, of course, the floor—a mosaic of a thousand colors, like a carpet spread out to be trodden upon by the white slipper of a sultan's lady.

Doctor Glow's voice echoed in the spacious vestibule.

"It is imperative that the two candelabras be placed by the foot of the stairs tomorrow without fail."

"Of course, sir."

The doorman, with his wide sideburns, his black jacket and red tie, stood as if frozen stiff at the foot of the stairs.

The doctor turned, pushed aside the Moorish tapestry that covered a doorway and entered a darkened room. Reflected light from the vestibule glinted faintly off mirrors and adornments on its walls.

"Juan!"

"Sir?"

"Come up."

\*As "doctors of law," lawyers frequently use that title in Spanish.

The doorman's boots sounded on the stairs.  
"Have the gaslights lit throughout the house."

After giving that order, Glow sat heavily in the first arm chair that his hand located in the darkness. He soon sensed the arrival of shadowy forms, heard the clatter of a stepladder and the sound of a match being struck, and suddenly . . .

A world of bright marvels bloomed out of the darkness! The servant at the top of the ladder was lighting the gas jets of the large central chandelier, one by one. From below, he resembled a tailcoated god able to call forth a glittering universe.

With a priceless expression, Doctor Glow looked around him at the one-piece Obusson carpet, at the footstools covered with hand-painted satin, at the walls smoothly encased in pale pink silk, at the thick draperies that hung majestically from high on those walls, at the ceiling decorated with the most elegantly-painted Cupids imaginable, at the sumptuous furnishings upholstered with fabrics representing warlike scenes of antiquity, at the bronze statues on their richly adorned pedestals, at the bric-a-brac scattered across the tabletops, including objets d'art in capriciously shaped glass cases, at the sculpted stands that supported open books or paintings, and at the large mirrors in their gold-filigreed frames, each with its potted flowers, a floral offering to whatever beautiful woman might chance to contemplate her own image in the beveled glass. Beyond all this, he observed another salon still shrouded in shadows that gave it a vaporous and fantastical air.

"Now turn on the lights in the next room."

The servant, carrying the stepladder that he opened to ascend to each gas fixture, went from one room to another, lighting them all, the various sitting rooms, the dining room, the library, even the bedrooms, while, following behind him, Doctor Glow never tired of admiring the accumulated splendors of his truly regal residence, as dazzling as a scene from the *Arabian Nights*.

When the palatial mansion stood bathed in the sparkling light that cascaded from each chandelier, when all its floors were illuminated and artificial day had been imposed on patios and gardens, then Doctor Glow wandered through it all, intoxicated by pleasure and vanity, pausing in front of each piece of furniture, gazing ecstat-

ically at each painting, finding his image in each mirror. Meanwhile, through the half-open doors one could constantly glimpse his hovering employees—now it was the curious blonde countenance of the chambermaid, now the clean-shaven physiognomy of the English coachman, now the white cap of a kitchen scullion, now the sideburns and inverted v-shaped eyebrows of the doorman.

Through the window glass Glow looked down on winding garden paths and the gigantic sculpted grotto with its splashing fountains that a gardener had just put into motion. He delighted in the bower whose wooden latticework would soon be covered with the honeysuckle vines that had already begun to grow up around it protectively, brandishing their shield-shaped leaves against the attack of some formidable imaginary enemy. A series of iron posts, evenly spaced, held aloft globes of frosted glass. Sentinels erected to impede the advance of darkness, they bathed the flowerbeds in a soft resplendence. Beyond were a few palms swaying in the evening breeze, patches of pitch black, glints of pale green and electric blue, and finally, the street on the other side of the gold-plated iron fence. Glow could see the figures of pedestrians who stopped in astonishment at the sight of the silent mansion bedecked and illuminated as if for a party. One of the figures had eyes that glowed like a cat's, observed the doctor, perhaps one of those ravenous beings who lurk around the palaces of the rich after dark, a knife in their belts, a protest in their hearts, instigated by hunger, advised by envy. Doctor Glow turned away from the window in disgust.

Beneath a radiant and cheerful sun and an immaculate blue sky, the high society of Buenos Aires is out for a ride, a triumphal march toward the park at Palermo. What a spectacle they constitute as they ride along the high ground overlooking the river at La Recoleta in a dazzling procession of horses and coaches. The ordinary city folk who are out to breathe a little fresh air, to enjoy the shade of the trees, to gaze at the swans and ducks of various colors on the various small lakes, to admire the artificial grotto with silver threads of water streaming down its cement flanks, and perhaps to try the excitement of the roller coaster—the ordinary folk stop, amazed, to contemplate the avalanche of fancy carriages on the

Avenida Alvear. They like to hear the rumble of wheels and the clatter of horses' hooves on the pavement and to see the rays of the sun glint on the gleaming carriage bodies and the bright uniforms of the coachmen who sit as calmly and stiffly as English lords out for a drive in Hyde Park, the sun sparkling on their top hats and silver buttons.

Poor ordinary city folk! Poor clerks and modest employees of every variety! Do not feast your eyes on the lovely ladies who pass before you like an enchanting vision. They are not for you. You would have to have a carriage, an expensive tailor (whether or not you could afford him), and appear frequently at the theater and in fashionable salons before any of these women would deign to smile or look at you. You would have to be seen at the stock market, at the club, be involved in investments, play *lansquenet* and *baccarat*. Look how lovely they are, and how they go past without even seeing you! In open carriages they pass, some lying capriciously amid a delicate swirl of lace and velvet, in the shelter of their parasols, some lolling on satin cushions, lost in amorous thoughts.

There goes Doctor Glow—whose tricks have just won him another million on the stock market—seated beside his wife and children, who put their precious little heads out the window of the family's fancy new coach, which Glow is taking out for the first time today in celebration of his recent financial triumph.

There they all go, in a whirlwind of traffic: majestic coaches belonging to distinguished families like Glow's; poor rental conveyances occupied by public women and their clients; small vehicles inhabited by ambitious law clerks whose reckless dealings may land them in jail; and spirited horses ridden by the gallant young men who pursue the lovely ladies, gallant young men who enjoy a family fortune the origin of which they do not even understand, believing that manna falls from heaven equally and effortlessly for all.

There goes, in sum, an entire society, to the sound of cracking whips, the whiny music of an organ grinder playing some popular dance tune somewhere out of sight, and in the background, the dull roar of the rollercoaster like an approaching storm. There goes an entire society, raised up by greed and speculation, celebrating the most scandalous orgy of luxury and ostentation that Buenos Aires has ever seen or will ever see gain, a vision of the apocalypse!

*Analyzing the Sources:* What is Martel saying about the function of the wealth generated by rural workers such as those portrayed in Cambaceres's selection? What seems to be the probable outcome of the situation that he describes?

## THE BEEHIVE

### Aluísio Azevedo

*Literary Naturalists wrote most often about cities rather than the countryside, and they focused most especially on the lower classes, often going out, notebook in hand, to observe the urban poor in their "natural habitat." Brazilian author Aluísio Azevedo (born in 1857) created a national sensation with his 1890 Naturalist novel O Cortiço. Cortiços (literally "beehives") were compounds where hundreds of poor workers inhabited lines of contiguous small houses built around a courtyard. Often, laundresses did their washing and hung the clothes to dry in the courtyard, as in the case of Azevedo's fictional cortiço São Romão, located in Rio de Janeiro.*

It was five o'clock in the morning, and the "beehive" called São Romão was waking up, opening not its eyes, but rather, its myriad doors and windows. The profusion of damp clothing, left hanging by the laundresses from the day before, lent its dampness to the air, and with it, the acrid odor of cheap laundry soap. Between the lines of dwellings stretched the stone pavement, generally cloudy and grey with its coating of dried soap suds, especially bleached and bluish around the washtubs.

Sleepy heads poked out of doorways. One heard enormous yawns, a clearing of throats, a clinking of coffee cups in saucers. The smell of hot coffee smothered all competing smells. "Good mornings" crossed between open windows, and conversations interrupted

SOURCE: adapted from Aluísio Azevedo, *O cortiço* (Rio de Janeiro: Livraria Garnier, 1925), pp. 49–54.

the night before took up where they had left off. Kids romped outside already, and from within the dwellings came the muffled cries of babes in arms. The rising hubbub contained laughter, the sound of crowing roosters, clucking hens, quacking ducks, and somewhere, angry voices arguing. A few women brought parrot cages out and hung them on the exterior wall. Like their owners, the parrots greeted each other raucously, shaking their feathers in the morning light.

Soon a buzzing agglomeration of men and women had gathered around the outside water faucets. One after another, they bent down and washed their faces in the threads of water that flowed from the low faucets. A puddle gradually formed under each faucet, so that the women had to tuck their skirts up between their thighs to keep them dry. They exposed their tanned upper arms and necks as they held their hair atop their heads so as not to wet it. The men did not worry about that. To the contrary, they stuck their heads right under the faucets, rubbing their faces and blowing their noses in their hands. The doors of the latrines opened and closed incessantly. No one stayed inside long, and people emerged still buttoning trousers and skirts. The children did not wait for the latrine and did their business in the high grass behind the houses.

Gradually the buzz grew louder and thicker, individual voices could no longer be distinguished, and people conversed in shouts. The store had opened and women began to buy things there, coming and going like a line of ants. The bread seller arrived carrying a large basket on his head and a small folding table under his arm. He set up the table in the middle of the patio and awaited customers, who soon swarmed around him, children above all. The customers who had been served ran back to their houses clutching a warm loaf. A milk cow walked from door to door, her cowbell clinking sadly, followed by a muzzled calf and by the milkman carrying cans for the milk that she produced on the spot.

The buzz in São Romão was peaking as the pasta factory began to operate down the block, adding the monotonous puffing of its steam engine to the cacophony. Around the faucets, an enormous bunch of cans—especially large kerosene cans—had collected, and the splashing sound became a steady gurgle as people filled them

with water. The laundresses were beginning their work, filling washtubs, hanging up clothes that had been left to soak overnight. Some began to sing. A garbageman entered the gate with his cart, furiously cursing the donkey that pulled it. Vendors of various sorts continued to come and go for a long time. Many sold meat, but none vegetables, because the “beehive” had many garden plots. Peddlers offered glassware and kitchenware and baubles of all descriptions, and each had his own distinctive way of announcing what he had for sale.

The first woman to start washing was Leandra, a Portuguese immigrant with a loud voice, powerful arms, and haunches like a draft animal. No one knew if Leandra was a widow or separated from her husband. Her entire family, including a twenty-five-year-old daughter with children of her own, lived in São Romão. Leandra’s younger daughter, who was seventeen years old, was fiercely proud of her virginity and had so far managed to slip like an eel through the fingers of the men who pursued her with no intention of marrying. She was good at starching and ironing and especially skilled at fashioning men’s undergarments.

The washtub next to Leandra’s was used by Augusta, who was Brazilian, white, and married to Alexandre, a forty-year-old mulatto policeman with a big mustache, quite full of himself when he went to work in spotless white trousers and boots. They had several small children, one of whom lived with a godmother elsewhere in the city, a high-priced French prostitute who had her own house. Next came Leocadia, a short Portuguese woman, not so young, but in good shape, whom the other women scorned as promiscuous. Her husband was a blacksmith. After her, came Paula, an old woman partly of indigenous descent, whom her neighbors regarded as half-mad but whom they also respected for her power to cure a fever or a rash using spells and incantations. Otherwise, they found her ugly, melancholic, and ill-tempered, with pointed teeth like a dog’s. Her long, straight hair remained jet-black despite her age. They called her “the Witch.” Next on the line of washtubs were old Marciana and her daughter Florinda. Marciana, a mulatta, was a solemn woman of exaggerated cleanliness, who scrubbed her floors so often that they seemed perpetually wet. As soon as a bad mood struck her, she

began to dust and sweep, and intense anger made her run for a bucket of water to dump furiously on the living-room floor. Her daughter was fifteen years old with a warm brown complexion, sensual lips, lovely teeth, and a monkey's lustful eyes. Florinda's body cried out for a man, but she had managed to maintain her virginity at all cost so far, despite the repeated efforts of the landlord to seduce her by adding a bit extra to her daily purchases at his store. Then there was old Isabel—or *dona* Isabel as the other women called her deferentially—a person of formerly more elevated social status, now as poor as the rest and eaten up with bitterness. She had been married to a store owner who had gone bankrupt and committed suicide, leaving her with a frail and sickly daughter whom Isabel had sacrificed everything to educate, even paying for French lessons. Old Isabel had the gaunt face of a devout old Portuguese, and her once-plump cheeks now hung limply from the corners of her mouth like empty sacks. Her eyes were always puffy as if she had been crying. When she dressed to go out, it was always in the same old black silk dress and red shawl, and all that remained of her former grandeur was a tiny gold snuff box, from which the old lady took an occasional pinch with an inconsolable sigh.

Pombinha, Isabel's daughter, was pretty, pale and blonde, but fragile and a bit high-strung, with the manners of a well-bred girl of good family. Her mother did not permit her to wash or iron, and indeed, the doctor had expressly prohibited it. She had a fiancé employed by a merchant house, well liked by his boss and by the other employees, a young man with a bright future who had adored Pombinha since she was little, but Isabel did not want them to marry yet, because, even though Pombinha was nearly eighteen, she had never menstruated. So everyone waited anxiously for the marriage, which promised to restore the family's lost social position. Meanwhile, Pombinha was the pride and joy of São Romão. When its inhabitants needed a letter written, it was she who wrote it. She was the one who normally made up the laundry lists and kept the accounts for the laundresses. It was she who read the newspaper aloud for the residents of the "beehive," who treated her with great respect and gave her presents, allowing her to live a little better than most. She always wore nice shoes, colored stockings, a well-ironed

dress, and, when she went out of São Romão, a bit of jewelry. People who saw her at church on Sundays would never think that she lived in such a place.

The last washtub in the line was manned by Albino, a scrawny and effeminate fellow the color of cooked asparagus. He spent all his time among women, and they treated him more or less like one of them, saying things in his presence that they would never say in front of another man, even telling him about their love lives and infidelities. Albino was a peacemaker, arbitrating disputes among the laundresses and married couples. He even used to go collect payment for his colleagues, simply as a favor, until one day when a group of students for some reason paid him with a beating. After that, he hardly ever left São Romão, except during carnival, when he went out dressed as ballerina. He passionately loved to do that and saved money all year to buy a new costume. Other than at carnival, nobody ever saw Albino, whether on Sunday or during the week, whether working or resting, without an apron over his neatly pressed white trousers, a clean shirt, and a scarf around his neck. He did not smoke or drink, and his hands were always cool and moist.

One by one, all of the washtubs were occupied and all the men of São Romão went out to their daily labors. Among the last was a group of street peddlers, leaving to make their daily rounds, carrying boxes of cheap merchandise, and quarreling and cursing at one another in Italian.

*Analyzing the Sources: What can be learned about Latin America's late nineteenth-century immigrants from this carefully reconstructed slice of life? Matters of sexuality are frankly discussed. What does this add to the other selections in this chapter?*