

In Quest of a Myth: Latin American Literature and Theology

Vitor Westhelle

Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

and

Hanna Betina Götz

Ohio State University

1. *Inscription and Dissimulation*

Contemporary Latin American theology and literature are a hybrid endeavor that results from two practices: the inscriptional practice of a European kind and the constant evasion of inscription as such. Latin American literature and theology are both subversive attempts at undoing a legacy within the confines of its own domain. Using the metaphor of a Brazilian literary movement, they are acts of anthropophagy by which the spirit of the devoured corpse inhabits the nourished body that has conquered it, but the conquered soul is also often the prison of the nourished body.

The first practice refers to the way in which Latin Americans, "before having a historical reality of our own . . . began being a European idea," in the apt definition of Octavio Paz.¹ In Europe were conceived the very names used to describe the continent: "Indies," "New World," "Ibero-America," and "Latin America." And from Columbus, through Vespucci, Cortés, Humboldt, Saint-Hilaire, to more recent Latin Americanists,² all have attempted to provide the paradigms for the accounts of the "discovery." The two main languages spoken in the continent, Spanish and Portuguese, and their surprising homogeneity in the vast extensions of the territory (if compared to the variety of dialects and languages in the small Iberian countries from where they originated³) is but a symptom of the very

¹Octavio Paz, *Signos em Rotacão* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1990) 127.

²See Richard Morse, *New World Soundings* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989), especially chapter 5, "On Grooming Latin Americanists," 169-200.

³See Darcy Ribeiro, "The Latin American People," in 1492-1992: *The Voice of the Victim*, ed. Leonardo Boff and Virgílio Elizondo (London and Philadelphia: SCM/Trinity, 1990) 27.

inscriptional practice that remains as our legacy. Language is for Latin Americans the language of the father, the legislator, the one who sets the conditions of possibility for conversation. In 1492, the year of the start of the European conquest, Antonio Nebrija produced the first grammar published in any modern language—the *Gramática castellana*. In the presentation of the work to Queen Isabel of Castile he says what needs no commentary:

Language has always accompanied domination and follows it to such a measure that both began together, together they have grown and, finally, their fall is joint. When in Salamanca I presented this work to Your Majesty, you asked me what would it be good for. The Right Reverend Bishop of Avila anticipated my own response, and speaking on my behalf said that, once Your Majesty has imposed your yoke to numerous barbarian peoples and nations of different languages, as a consequence of their defeat they would be obliged to receive the laws that the victor applies to those who have been defeated. Then they would be able to acquire this knowledge through my grammar.⁴

Latin America is an emblematic case of the new sort of practice that characterizes European modernity. The emergence of modern science and the conquest of the new continent are united—the children of the same project of inscription that moved sixteenth-century Europe onto center stage. As Elizabeth Eisenstein indicates, the events are not new. New is the way they are inscribed:

Much as Viking landfalls preceded Columbus, careful star-gazers had been at work before Tycho. What was unprecedented (with new stars and new worlds alike) was the way observed phenomena could be recorded and confirmed.⁵

The inscription and systematization of nature, and the conquest of the new world, are like Janus' faces in the European modern project. And we will see the two of them even coinciding, as Mary Louise Pratt argues in her book *Imperial Eyes*.⁶ This inscriptional practice has

⁴In Ruggiero Romano, *Mecanismos da Conquista Colonial* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1973) 79.

⁵Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communication and Cultural Transformation in Early-Modern Europe*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) 2:601–602. Note also that the very word "discovery" in the English language appears in the early sixteenth century to describe both the finding of new lands and of new natural phenomena. S.v. "Discovery" in *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

⁶Mary L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992). That the European eye has also transferred itself to Euro-Americans doing Latin American studies is profusely documented in Morse, *New World Soundings*, 169–200.

been the heritage within which Latin Americans would also operate. In the words of Pablo Neruda, reflecting the emerging consciousness of the Latin American modernist movement, "nos llenámos la cabeza con lo último de los trasatlánticos."⁷

In a passage from Gabriel García Márquez's *The General in His Labyrinth*, a novel on Simón Bolívar, the general encounters a Frenchman and, over a meal, they begin arguing about the political evolution of Europe. The Frenchman wanted to use the European case as a framework to understand political processes in Latin America and offered a lesson on the moral evolution of politics. Annoyed, Bolívar points out to the well-intentioned Frenchman that "if there is a history washed by blood, by indignities, by injustices, it is the history of Europe."⁸ The conversation concludes with this paradox: Bolívar wanted to bring about a rupture with Europe using for this purpose the European interpretive models for historical development. According to García Márquez's fictional account, this is how Bolívar ends the conversation:

"So stop doing us the favor of telling us what we should do," he concluded. "Don't attempt to teach us how we should be, don't attempt to make us just like you, don't try to have us do well in twenty years what you have done so badly in two thousand." He crossed his cutlery on his plate, and for the first time he fixed his flaming eyes on the Frenchman: "Damn it, please, let us have our Middle Ages in peace!"⁸

Although he reacts against any lesson from European history, it is the European periodization ("let us have our Middle Ages") that he adopts to frame his very rebuttal.

Another example of the impasse can be shown in the novel by Ernesto Sábato, *Sobre héroes y tumbas*, where we find a discussion about the uniqueness of the continent, using the example of Argentina. After having criticized the Europeanism of Jorge Luis Borges, Father Rinaldo—one of the novel's characters—turns his criticism against those who pretend to have an authentic, *criolla* literature, like the writer Méndez. And so the conversation goes:

*Y lo que más me causa gracia es que Méndez repudie la influencia europea en nuestros escritores ¿buscándose en qué? Esto es lo más divertido: en una doctrina filosófica elaborada por el judío Marx, el alemán Engels y el griego Heráclito. Si fuésemos consecuentes con esos críticos, habría que escribir en querandi sobre la caza del acastruz. Todo lo demás sería advenimiento y antimarcional.*⁹

⁷Cf. Ruggiero Romano, *Mecanismos*, 121.

⁸Gabriel García Márquez, *The General in His Labyrinth*, trans. Edith Grossman (New York: Penguin, 1991) 124.

⁹Ernesto Sábato, *Sobre héroes y tumbas* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1965) 180–181.

This paradox is what makes it so difficult to harmonize the experience of the continent with its inscription. It is not a modern Western society, but this cannot even be said without using Western modern paradigms! This is another way of saying that Latin America has not yet found its own language. Its sole means of expression at this point are borrowed languages that, if they reveal glimpses of the Latin American face, they also miss most of it.

The second, the practice of evading the European inscription, is equally remarkable and was already indicated by the examples above. A culture of silence and dissimulation halts the gaze at the veil of what is perceived as chaotic.

Werner Herzog, the German film director, while attempting to describe the European perception of our continent in his tale about obsession—the motion picture *Fitzcarraldo*—introduced us to an Irishman who attempts to bring order to the Amazon region by building an opera house in the heart of the jungle—a creation epic out of an original chaos! During the shooting of the film a documentary was also made. Its greatest merit is raising doubts as to who is more obsessed: Fitzcarraldo, the protagonist, or Herzog himself. There is a significant moment in which Herzog uses the Amazonian rain forest as a metaphor for Latin America:

There is some kind of harmony. It is the harmony of overwhelming and collective murder. And we, in comparison to the articulate vileness and baseness and obscurity of all this jungle. . . . We, in comparison to that enormous articulation, we only sound and look like badly pronounced and half-finished sentences out of a stupid suburban novel, a cheap novel. . . . And we have to become humble in front of this overwhelming misery and overwhelming fornication, overwhelming growth, and overwhelming lack of order. Even the . . . stars up here in the sky look like a mess. There is no harmony in the universe. We have to get accustomed to this idea that there is no real harmony as we have conceived it. But when I say this, I say this full of admiration for the jungle. It is not that I hate it. I love it! I love it very much. But I love it against my better judgment.¹⁰

The notion of a chaotic reality, in a narrative that is in itself grammatically chaotic, is a confession made in face of the impossibility of conceptually reducing the reality to be inscribed. Within the spectrum between civilization and barbarism, reason and nature, Alexander von Humboldt, a century and a half earlier, also gave a similar account:

¹⁰Werner Herzog, "The Screenplay," in *Burden of Dreams*, ed. Les Blank and James Bogan (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1984) 57.

In the Old World, nations and the distinctions of their civilization form the principal points in the picture. In the New World, man and his productions almost disappear amidst the stupendous display of wild and gigantic nature.¹¹

The peculiar difficulty in reducing Latin American reality to the European inscriptional practice has been observed by Richard Morse, noting that while

Toqueville, Weber, or Huizinga were able to capture the Anglo-American situation, . . . minds that could hardly be said to be of a lesser caliber—a Humboldt or a Saint-Hilaire—were able only to offer fortuitous glimpses of the Ibero-American condition, even having stayed longer.¹²

The simultaneous drive toward conceptualization and the virtual impossibility of getting the object under control reveal the basic feature of what Pratt called the "imperial eye": it sees the object (nature), but is unable to recognize the subject. And this attitude, in the words of Tzvetan Todorov, was a trademark of the European attempts to inscribe Latin America since Columbus, who "discovered America, but not the Americans," because for him the human beings were only part of the natural scenery.¹³

The result of all this was the practice of evasion that Latin Americans learned by hiding themselves behind the "official" screen that described Latin America. In the words of the Brazilian sociologist José de Souza Martins, we have a culture of dissimulation in which the conquered

were forced to speak the language of the conqueror and to hide in it the language of the conquered, a language demarcated by a code of prohibitions and allowances, a code of subjection, a language of jest. . . . Metaphor, occultation, dissimulation, silence remain as the language that documents the persistence of the same violence that gave birth to it.¹⁴

Octavio Paz, speaking on the Mexican situation, concurs:

The speech of our people reflects the extent to which we protect ourselves from the outside world. . . . The disssembler never surrenders

¹¹Cf. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 111.

¹²Richard Morse, *O Espelho de Próspero: Cultura e Idéias nas Américas* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1988) 157.

¹³Tzvetan Todorov, *La Conquista de América. El problema del otro* (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1987) 57.

¹⁴José de Souza Martins, *Caminhada no Chão da Noite* (São Paulo: Húteco, 1989) 116.

or forgets himself . . . the person who dissimulates is not counterfeiting but attempting to become invisible, to pass unnoticed without renouncing his individuality.¹⁵

Latin American literature and theology, both of which gained unprecedented international recognition in the third quarter of this century, are attempts to articulate this uncanny sense of invisibility and give voice to the dissembler, a voice still ruled by the grammar of the conqueror, but revolting against it, poetically breaking and transgressing it in search of a myth, of the story that tells where we come from, what we are, and what went wrong. This story is the myth upon which Latin American civilization is to be built. The naming of it, its conscious articulation, is what allows the construal of a narrative of redemption and emancipation. And this is the project that unites Latin American literature and theology.

2. *The Marvelous and the Invisible*

Ever since independence in the nineteenth century, many intellectuals in Latin America have attempted to envision what it means to "have our Middle Ages in peace!" In other words, to take history into their own hands and write their own narratives. As the people who previously belonged to the "*ciudad letrada*" (the clergy, the writers, the essayists, and other literary figures) began engaging in the various nation-building projects,¹⁶ they were faced with two difficult and interrelated problems. First, they had to try to break free from the "Bolivar paradox" of asserting their identity by means of an imported language and imported literary models. Second, they had to create a foundational myth, i.e., a kind of national or continental discourse that accentuated the homogenous, shared traits of the various Latin American peoples rather than the elements that could divide or separate them.

In the literary realm, writers considered it counterproductive—since the beginning of the nineteenth century—to draw on their peoples' mythological repository and native traditions. It was the age of Enlightenment. So, they inscribed their narrative in the ideals of the neoclassic tradition, dominant in the French Enlightenment, while also

¹⁵Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, trans. Lysander Kemp, Yara Villos, and Rachel P. Belash (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1985) 29, 42.

¹⁶See Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), or Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), for an in-depth view of the nation-narration projects and the participation of literati in such projects.

putting to good use the national and continental values proposed by figures such as Andrés Bello and Simón Bolívar, and later by José Martí, among many. The result was the creation of a libertarian tradition in the French Jacobine spirit, which still marginalized and cast into invisibility all the customs and beliefs that did not fit the paradigms of those foundational discourses. The Latin American literary corpus rambled strongly in pursuit of freedom, but like a body lacking the very soul that inhabited the autochthonous Latin American narrative! In retrospect, as Edwin Williamson contends, this is precisely where the Latin American writer committed the greatest mistake: he "had failed to perform the functions of a mythologist," like Alejo Carpentier's character Mackandal in *El reino de este mundo*, "whose stories bonded his people into a community by sinking into the past, by creating a stock of images that served to spell out a collective identity."¹⁷ It was not until the late 1950s and early 1960s that writers realized, contrary to what had been previously thought, that Latin America needed to be reinvented in much the same way, and with much of the same tools, as Europeans had once invented it. They had to re-present themselves as once they have been presented; but now over the debris of imposed representations that had made them absent, invisible.

To clarify this point we need to review how America had been "invented" the first time around. As was stated above, Latin America had been defined and inscribed, since the earliest accounts, to suit the European framework of references as well as to justify their needs and expectations. When Christopher Columbus was commanded to provide factual information on the profitability of the discovery enterprise, he also provided the Spanish Crown with his *interpretation* of the new findings. As O'Gorman points out, instead of describing his data for their face value, he construed his narrative against the complex backdrop of medieval expectations, by making comparisons and by using superlatives, hyperboles, and adjectives such as "fabulous," "admirable," "astonishing," and "marvelous," that fed the eager minds of his contemporary readers. These were accustomed to the chivalric literature, to epic novels, and to legendary myths of unknown places and people, which were equated in their minds with the idea of paradise, of Eden before sin, of the land of the possible and of the impossible; i.e., with Utopia.¹⁸ It was *another* world in the very sense of the

¹⁷Edwin Williamson, "Coming to Terms with Modernity: Magical Realism and the Historical Process in the Novels of Alejo Carpentier," in *Modern Latin American Fiction: A Survey*, ed. John King (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1987) 85.

¹⁸Edmundo O'Gorman, *Invention of America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961). The very term "utopia"—brought into current use by Thomas More's

term, the place below the equator where there could not even be sin: *ultra equinoxialem non peccavit*, in the famous sixteenth-century motto by Barbaeus.

Columbus, and many others who followed him, wrote to a European audience, weaving their narrative of the New World with myths and references their readers could share and understand.¹⁹ If this narrative worked then, why should it not work now? Why couldn't Latin Americans also adopt Columbus' narrative techniques and write their own story weaving in their own mythological worlds or, in the absence of a monolithic past, refer to the various myths, cultures, traditions, and beliefs that make up the heterogeneous fabric of Latin American societies?

These tactics of drawing on their systems of reference, their mythological worlds, which metaphorically speaking "spiced up" the imagination of Columbus' extra-official readership, is precisely what Latin American narrative had been missing since independence. In his prologue to *El reino de este mundo*, Carpenter, who coined the term *real maravilloso*, explains that in order to reinvent themselves, it would be necessary for Latin Americans to redeem their native repository and their frames of reference, to make their story, their language, and their world realities with which they could indeed identify. Their narrative practices would have to reconcile European and Latin American autochthonous heritages in order not to be reductive, exclusive, or monolithic. This is in fact what Latin Americans have been able to accomplish in the theological realm through religious syncretism. In this field, they have to a great extent been able to polish and perfect their subversive practices of dissimulation and evasion, that is, their ability to give in without total submission to the beliefs and value system of the master, thus avoiding a monological perception of reality.

In literature, however, their myths and customs barely survived, having been maintained almost exclusively through subcultural practices of orality and through scarce written indigenous narratives, only recently made available in Spanish translation from the original lan-

— famous work by the same title—was inspired by the latter's readings of Montaigne's *Essais* about the discovery of the New World.

¹⁹Note the importance the Iberian chivalric literature—so well ironized by Cervantes in *Don Quijote*—plays in the way the Iberian conquerors interpreted their role in the New World. This literature was for the conquistadors an "extraordinary introduction to the wonders of the New World." (Romano, *Mecanismos*, 28) It served them "para tener fe en lo imposible." (Irving Leonard, *Los libros del conquistador* [Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1979] 43). See also Alberto Flores Galindo, *Buscando un inca. Identidad y utopía en los Andes* (Havana: Casa de las Américas, 1986) 28–30.

guages.²⁰ In fact, the recent weaving of Latin American mythological ancestry and storytelling practices into the "realist" novel—in precisely the same way Columbus had done in his accounts—boosted the search and the revival of a past that had seemingly been lost. But it had not. It was *invisible* present, real, admirable, and marvelous just as Columbus once perceived/inscribed it out of his own myths!

The "marvelous real novel," since its inception, can be characterized by the attempt at experimenting with "other technical solutions in order to construe a multifaceted image of the real,"²¹ so as to redeem the silenced voices of an otherwise heteroglossic cultural space. As Carpenter defines it, the "marvelous real" is

*una revelación privilegiada de la realidad, . . . una iluminación inhabitual . . . de las inadvertidas riquezas de la realidad, . . . una ampliación de las escalas y categorías de la realidad percibidas con particular intensidad en virtud de una exiliación del espíritu que lo conduce a un modo de "estado límite."*²²

In Manuel Scorza's novel *Garabombo el invisible*, this past, this mythological world that survived in the subcultural practices of dissimulation and evasion, is protagonized by Garabombo, a peasant who suffered from the inexplicable "disease" of becoming "transparent," "invisible" at times. Curiously, he would be invisible only to those who did not acknowledge his existence, for whom he was a non-person. The people of his community, who knew him and counted on his leadership in organizing their struggle against the landlords who had taken the Amerindian ancestral lands, had no doubts over his existence because he was one of them. The authorities, however, who dismissed every one of the communities' efforts to reclaim their land, would not, and could not, "see" him. This mysterious disease, for which the people had no explanation, was finally unraveled when Garabombo went to the district office to file a complaint. Explaining to one of his fellows what had happened there, the truth about his invisibility finally dawned on him: "*Es que usted es de nuestra sangre, pero los blancos no me ven. Siete días pasé sentado en la puerta del despacho, las autoridades iban y venían, pero no me miraban.*"²³

²⁰There are only a few written native texts that have survived. Among them are the Mayan *Popol Vuh*, the Chilean *Araucana*, the Peruvian *Comentarios Reales* by Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, and Guamán Poma de Ayala's *Nueva crónica y buen gobierno*.

²¹Hernar Chiampí, *El realismo maravilloso* (Caracas: Monte Ávila Editores, 1983)

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²²Alejo Carpenter, *Tientos y diferencias* (Buenos Aires: Calicanto, 1976) 96.

²³Manuel Scorza, *Garabombo el invisible* (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1991) 29.

This fictional story, with an invisible character as the protagonist, well allegorizes the Latin American plight. Their autochthonous cultural dimension is present and should no longer be relegated to backstage through continuous hegemonic practices, such as those enacted by the authorities in Scorza's novel. To bring the "marvelous real" to the forefront—into our canonical literary practices—is to finally learn to represent the continent, its multiple nations, by and for its people. To acknowledge "the presence of thriving ethnic cultures, the mixture of mentalities, together with the extraordinarily diverse and imposing natural phenomena made it possible to experience the marvelous quite spontaneously in everyday life."²⁴

While most of Scorza's novels, here exemplified by *Garomboto*, deal with the marvelous as it invisibly inhabits daily reality, by exerting either a positive or a negative effect on the masses,²⁵ Alejo Carpentier's various novels usually dramatize the inexorable search for a variety of lost or hidden myths that may aid in the creation of new ones. By redeeming their past and its possible myths of origin, they might be better able to come to grips with their present reality and project a more promising future. In *Los pasos perdidos*, for instance, Carpentier presents the reader with a narrator-protagonist suffering from an empty existence as a Latin American composer and intellectual, who reevaluates his life, his beliefs, and ultimately his identity, while on an expedition to collect primitive musical instruments throughout Latin America. It is on the outbound journey into the jungle that he gets back in touch with his ancestral past and with himself. He seems to have finally found that land of the possible, the paradise, as it was envisioned over five hundred years ago by Columbus' readers. If the protagonist had stated that back in the city "aquí en esta multitud que me rodea y corre, a la vez desdoforada y sometida, veo muchas caras y poco destino,"²⁶ now, in the present, he suddenly feels "una fuerza que me penetra lentamente por los oídos, por los poros: el idioma."²⁷

The language to which he refers does not stand only for the Spanish of his childhood but also for an *Ursprache*, the original and ahistorical language of an ancestral identity dating back to the pre-Columbian era, before (European) history interferred in Latin America's historical process: "It symbolizes the possibility of beginning again, of return-

ing to the womb, in order to start all over again."²⁸ This retrieval of the past and this expectation of a new beginning is, however, radically rooted in the present, a present that reclaims the past in the image of a future. According to Gabriel García Márquez, Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes

vindicates a right to the imagination that knows how to distinguish between the mystifications of a dead past that wants to pass for a living present and the mythification by which a living present restores also the life of the past.²⁹

Between "mystification" and "mythification" lies the dirty ditch that Latin American theology and literature have to cross in their attempts to be at the same time faithful to a non-recyclable past and committed to a non-disposable future. Not an easy task! But in spite of criticisms,³⁰ the crossing of this ditch has been an attempted and lasting contribution of Latin American literature and theology.

3. *Fragmentation and Reintegration*

Invisibility, we have argued, cuts both ways. It is an act of dissimulation that protects the subject, and it is also the result of violence that turned the subject invisible. This realization stands at the very origins of Latin American theology. It was forcefully expressed through Paulo Freire's concept of "conscientização,"³¹ and was thematized in Rubem Alves' early work. In speaking of the oppressed Alves says:

Their language was not an expression of a historical self-consciousness. . . . They spoke a language that did not belong to themselves: they repeated, like an echo, the slogans of those who dominated them. Determined by . . . mutism, the oppressed consciousness was reduced to paralysis.³²

²⁴Hanna Betina Côtz, "The Dialogical Principle and the Search for the Self in *Los pasos perdidos*," in *Torre de Papel* 3:1 (1993) 64.

²⁵Alejandro Serrano Caldera, ed., *Filosofía e Crise: Pela Filosofia Latino-Americana* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1985) 19.

²⁶In reference to Carpentier's works, Michael Taussig criticizes the "painfully romanticized" way in which the Cuban writer renders his mythical retrieval. See Taussig's *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987) 165–170. The basic error of this otherwise insightful criticism of Carpentier's tendency to mystification is Taussig's assumption that the novel *Los pasos perdidos* deals with the encounter of a European with an Amerindian, when the protagonist of the novel is a Latin American in search of his mythological origins.

³¹See his *Educação como Prática da Libertação* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1967).

³²Rubem Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope* (New York: Corpus Books, 1969) 10.

²⁴Williamson, *Modern Latin American Fiction*, 84.

²⁵Anna-Marie Aldaz, *The Past of the Future: The Novelistic Cycle of Manuel Scorza* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990). In this study the author suggests that Manuel Scorza raises the awareness of both the positive and negative effects certain beliefs, traditions, and superstitions may have on Latin Americans' perception of reality.

²⁶Alejo Carpentier, *Los pasos perdidos* (Barcelona: Bruguera, 1980) 257.

²⁷Ibid., 44.

Carpentier's retrieval of the original myth reveals this search for the *Ursprache*, which is simultaneously the origin of the myth, of the foundational narrative that will give voice to those who have been deprived of it.

Retrieval and liberation, myth and utopia are the fundamental categories around which Latin American theology has attempted to articulate its discourse.³³ It was in an effort to retrieve a foundational myth that not only literature but also theology made their impact on the continent's cultural scene. And this is what should concern us here. Even if there have been very few direct contacts between theology and literature, our argument is that both share the same commitment toward a "re-mythologizing" of reality (to use Paul Tillich's expression).

Among the few direct, notable cases of literature's influence on theology, the most significant one can be found in the writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez. His personal friendship with fellow Peruvian writer José María Arguedas, to whom he dedicated his influential *A Theology of Liberation*, is meaningful enough for Arguedas to appear in many of the former's works, including a long epigraph from one of Arguedas' novels in Gutiérrez's aforementioned book. Gutiérrez also devotes an article to the work of his late friend.³⁴ What is it that he finds of theological importance in Arguedas' literary work? Agreeing with a statement by Pedro Trigo, Gutiérrez finds in Arguedas an understanding of liberation that is "linked to the mythical human being as its historical subject."³⁵ The conscious articulation of this mythical anthropology implies the "construction of a subject." Following insightfully the very dialectics of invisibility and dissimulation, this subject is the one to be found in what Gutiérrez has called the "non-person." He clarifies the term, pointing precisely to what has been referred to as the double aspect of invisibility. To call them "non-persons"

does not mean that they truly are "non-persons," but only that they are treated as such by those with power in society and consequently are more and more prone to so regard themselves.³⁶

³³However, these also frequently became disjointed projects. At times the retrieval project was shortcut by a surrogate myth, articulated by the Latin American theory of dependency. See Vitor Westhelle, "Dependency Theory: Some Implications for Liberation Theology," in *Dialog* 20 (1981): 293-299. See also, "Notes on a Crisis: The Current Dilemma of Latin American Theology," *Dialog* 34 (1995): 39-43.

³⁴"Entre las calandrias. Algunas reflexiones sobre la obra de J. M. Arguedas," in *Raíces de la teología latinoamericana*, ed. Pablo Richard (San José: DEI/CEHILA 1985): 345-363.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 348.

³⁶Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History: Selected Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983), from the preface by Robert McAfee Brown, vii. In Gutiérrez's

From the side of those who have been rendered invisible, from the "underside of history," as Gutiérrez calls it, theology will present another God, another faith, another God-talk, not inscribed by the European-inspired project, which for him is concerned with the non-believer and *not* with the non-person.³⁷ And here is where Gutiérrez finds Arguedas so reassuring and insightful for his own theological project: the God of those on the "underside" might very well be another God, different from the one created and sustained by the official story. The former is a God committed to the lives and cultures of the marginalized. Insofar as persons become invisible by the mechanisms of oppression and domination, this God also becomes absent, thereby sharing the invisibility of the non-persons. Here is how Gutiérrez uses Arguedas to make this point:

When justice does not exist, God is not known; he is absent. "God is everywhere," says the priest to the sacristan in José María Arguedas' novel *Todas las sangres*. And the sacristan, who knows no metaphysics, but is well acquainted with injustice and oppression, replies with accurate biblical intuition: "Was God in the heart of those who broke the body of the innocent teacher Bellindor? Is God in the bodies of the engineers who are killing *La Esmeralda*? In the official who took the corn fields away from their owners. . . ." ³⁸

The sacristan, as the embodiment of the non-person, raises an ironic voice in the prevalent metaphysical rhetoric of the ecclesial establishment (although in Arguedas' text the dissimulation is still at work in that the sacristan raises his critical and ironic remarks only to himself). The appeal to irony emerges as a condition for a theology that starts with the deconstruction of North-Atlantic God-talk,³⁹ embodied as it is in the political function of hegemonic Catholicism in

own words: "To be sure, when we say 'nonperson' or 'nonhuman being,' we are not using these terms in an ontological sense. We do not mean that the interlocutor of liberation theology is actually a nonentity. We are using this term to denote those human beings who are considered less human by society, because that society is based on privileges arrogated by a minority." *Ibid.*, 92.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 171-185.
³⁸Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973) 195. Note that the first English edition of the book omits the long epigraph where this passage appears.

³⁹For examples in Latin American theology of this deconstruction of the European practice of inscription in theology see Hugo Assmann, *Teología desde la praxis de la liberación* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1973), especially 76-102; for a similar critique directed at philosophy, see Enrique Dussel, *Método para una filosofía de la liberación* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1974); for a critique of modern science, see Franz Hinkelammert, *Crítica de la razón utópica* (San José: DEI, 1984).

the continent. While literature in Latin America had its rite of passage granted it by the European avant-garde (although it later turned against it), in theology, within a context largely untouched even by the Retormation, the ironic voice is much more audible. While in literature the irony makes the counterpoint to the narrative, in theology it becomes a dialectical pole in the spectrum of re-mythologizing and deconstruction. Like in Latin American literature, having inherited the European paradigms for inscription, theology needs to assert itself by raising another question, the question of who is the "other" in theological construction. By locating this "other" in the poor who have been rendered invisible, and by constructing the subjectivity of the non-person, theology aims at imploding its own inherited models. And this is the ironic task of theology within the rhetoric of official Christianity. This was also the precise point laid out in Scorza's *Garabombo*.

How irony is connected to "mythification" corresponds to the question of how Latin American theology can relate its deconstructive project with a constructive God-talk. Octavio Paz's distinction between analogy and irony, as twin apparitions of the modern narrative, suggests that the common ground on which the two operate is the myth. But while analogy sets the rules of correspondence and opposition between myth and the modern "tiempo sucesivo de la historia y . . . la beatificación del futuro utópico . . . ; la ironía desgarrará el tiempo mítico al afirmar la caída en la contingencia, la pluralidad de dioses y de mitos."⁴⁰ How this problem is solved remains the fundamental task of Latin American theology. Is irony only a propaedeutic tool for the project of mythical retrieval, like a ladder that can be dismissed once a new level has been achieved? Or is it a constant heuristic principle for ever increasing dissonance in theological construction? These questions are rephrased by the theologian Pedro Trigo when discussing the theological significance of Arguedas' literary work:

El proceso de liberación estaría ligado al hombre mítico como su sujeto histórico. Ahora bien, este hombre mítico ¿estaría confinado a la sociedad tradicional de modo que el proceso de modernización provoque automáticamente su extinción? ¿o será capaz de meterse en este proceso asimilando las cualidades de su contrato para vencerlo?⁴¹

By answering the second question affirmatively, and the first one negatively, Trigo suggests that irony is neither a propaedeutic tool nor an external disturbance factor corroding with nihilist force the hegemonic power of a dominant myth. It is rather the inner work of

⁴⁰Octavio Paz, *La otra voz. Poesía y fin de siglo* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1990) 36.

⁴¹Pedro Trigo, *Arguedas. Mito, historia y religión* (Lima: CEP, 1982) 32.

what Octavio Paz calls "the other voice," calling from behind the veil of the official inscription of the continent. In a poetic text on "El Dios del rico y el Dios del pobre," theologian Hugo Assmann gives programmatic expression to this task:

*Que no se lo diga después
que no hay minerales
porque sólo aparecen en ganga impura;
que la realidad está siempre ahí,
disponible y transparente
y que es inútil develar cosas ocultas;
que hacer ciencia es clasificar
lo que está a la vista de todos
y que es pérdida de tiempo
perforar opacidades;
que nada tiene de verdad
lo que no puede ser generalizado.
Porque la praxis exige su consistencia
en la cuna de lo particular
y multiplicando diferencias
va rompiendo la identidad
del estado de cosas de siempre.⁴²*

Here is the theologian raising the other, the ironic voice, in much the same way as searching for the invisible, beyond the opaque veil of conventional inscription. Irony is what calls theology into the present. It is a retrieval, but its function is to unveil the fragmented and fantastic reality of the present. What first comes out of invisibility and into sight is a disjointed mosaic that, theologically and religiously, will be experienced as a reality in which a multiplicity of gods are in strife. The courage to face what in Latin America has been called "la lucha de los dioses"⁴³ is colorfully expressed in the words of Arguedas' sacristan.⁴⁴ The awareness of what could be called a mythical fragmentation is both what reveals the impossibility of retrieving any wholeness as well as the condition of the possibility for a theological reconstruction. This is well expressed in Arguedas' words:

Quizá conmigo empieza a cerrarse un ciclo y a abrirse otro en el Perú y lo que él representa: se cierra el de la calandria consoladora, del azote, del arriero,

⁴²Hugo Assmann, "La fe de los pobres en la lucha contra los ídolos," in *La lucha de los dioses. Los ídolos de la opresión y la búsqueda del Dios liberador*, ed. Pablo Richard, et al. (San José and Managua: DEI/CAV, 1980) 239.

⁴³See Pablo Richard, et al., *La lucha de los dioses*.

⁴⁴Hugo Assmann defined this courage as "el coraje con armas primitivas," which he distinguishes from the European political theologies, which for him are "prólogos en busca de coraje" (*Teología desde la praxis*, 77).

*del odio impotente, de los funebres 'alciantos', del temor a Dios y del predominio de ese Dios y sus protegidos, sus fabricantes, se abre el de la luz y la fuerza liberadora inextinguible del hombre de Vietnam, el de la calandria de fuego, el del dios liberador. Aquél que se reintegra.*⁴⁵

The liberating God, as "aquél que se reintegra," is the one who emerges out of this fragmented reality just made visible, and rejoins the mythical pieces. Not in a voyage to a prelapsarian origin, but in a present reintegration in which the wrathful realization of the mythical fragmentation gives shape to a utopian profile of the new human being, the Promethean "hombre de Vietnam." At the end of Alejo Carpentier's *El reino de este mundo* this mythico-utopian anthropological nucleus is described thus:

*La grandeza del hombre está precisamente en querer mejorar lo que es. Es imponerse a través. En el reino de los cielos no hay grandeza que conquistar, puesto que allí todo es jerarquía establecida, incógnita despejada, existir sin término, imposibilidad de sacrificio, reposo y deleite. Por ello, agobiado de penas y de lamentos, hermoso dentro de su miseria, capaz de amar en medio a las plagas, el hombre sólo puede hallar su grandeza, su máxima medida en el reino de este mundo.*⁴⁶

The "integrationism" that rejects any thought wrought on two different planes, that affirms the simultaneity of myth and utopia, of creation and redemption, of history and salvation is the birthright of Latin American theology.⁴⁷ More than a simple rejection of an immanent-transcendent dichotomy, this "integrationism" aims at reacing the Augustinian and Neoplatonic epistemological duality between the visible and the invisible. God is not the invisible reality that faith clings to, but, as a *deus absconditus*, God shares the condition of those rendered invisible by the official inscription. It is out of this invisibility that God becomes the one who brings to sight what was exiled from the field of vision. What is thus made visible is, however, a fragmented reality. Wholeness is won by a faith that sees in the dispersed fragments of the world the reintegrative and marvelous force of divine grace.

Such reintegrative effort will find its most controversial expression in Latin American theology's positive appreciation of syncretism. It is through a syncretic practice that theology sees Christianity performing today the distinctive praxis that distinguished it as an effective op-

⁴⁵José María Arguedas, *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1975) 269. See also Gutiérrez, "Entre las calandrias," 345-348.

⁴⁶Alejo Carpentier, *El reino de este mundo* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1980) 144.

⁴⁷See the seminal work of Gustavo Gutiérrez, Juan Luis Segundo, et al., *Salvación y construcción del mundo* (Barcelona: Nova Terra, 1968).

tion among the world's religions in the first centuries C.E.⁴⁸ Even when rejecting its false forms, such as accommodation or adaptation, syncretism is the necessary consequence of a theology that seeks to be responsible toward concrete religious formations and toward the mythical worlds that underscore these. While syncretism has been understood as a practice of dissimulation in the religious formations of Latin America (whence it received its pejorative meaning), it is now being proposed as a practice of intentionally reintegrating a fragmented world and bringing it explicitly to sight.

It is in this explicit syncretic dialectic of fragmentation and reintegration—and not in the opposition between immanence and transcendence—that the traditional relationship between grace and nature will be cast. Rejecting the question about the other world, theology (as much as literature in Latin America) is concerned with bringing to sight the other-worldliness of this world and its inner fantastic, marvelous, and terrifying aspects, realized when "otherness" is found in the depths of this world. Hence, the "other" world, sociologically invisible according to the patterns of the official inscriptions, is ontologically very much present in what lies hidden from sight. The effort of bringing into visibility the fragmented mythical pieces also implies, therefore, the syncretic effort of weaving them together. With sharpness and accuracy such program is defined by Octavio Paz:

*No me preocupan la otra vida allí sino aquí. La experiencia de la otredad es, aquí mismo, la otra vida. . . . Recuperar la vida concreta significa reunir la propia vida-muerte, reconquistar el uno en lo otro, el tú en el yo, y así descubrir la figura del mundo en la dispersión de sus fragmentos.*⁴⁹

To "discover the profile of the world in the dispersion of its fragments" is the constructive task with which theology finds itself engaged. Engaged precisely because its own narrative is made possible by, and is about, the one who gathers the fragments of its own Being: God as "aquél que se reintegra."

4. Concluding Note and Challenge

In Latin America, literature and theology share a common project that was explicitly formulated in the third quarter of this century. Even

⁴⁸The most controversial argument in defense of syncretism is offered by Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church* (New York: Crossroads, 1992) 89-107. For an insightful commentary on the importance of syncretism in Latin America's theological self-understanding see Hermann Brandt, *Gottes Gegenwart in Lateinamerika: Inkarnation als Leitmotiv der Befreiungstheologie* (Hamburg: Steinmann & Steinmann, 1992) 138-155.

⁴⁹Octavio Paz, *El arco y la lira* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1986) 270.

if very few elements of direct cross-fertilization can be detected, both have shared a fundamental commitment to an anthropological project of rendering visible the subjects of the underside of history. Both also agree that this project can be carried out only by the retrieval of the mythical repository that remains alive under numerous layers of inscriptions that have defined Latin America since Columbus. The belief that below these layers lies the true soul of the continent is what unites the reclamation of the foundational myths with the utopian hope for a redeeming future, although there is no romantic dream of a single foundation that could be simply restored. What theology and literature find in the subsoil of the continent is a fantastic, marvelous, and yet tragic reality, fragmented and dispersed, but alive and capable of defying any attempt at systematization.

Obviously, what most clearly distinguishes Latin American theology from literature are the specific theological claims in reference to the conceptualization of God as the one who ultimately reintegrates the fragmented pieces, even when this definition seems to have been coined originally by Peruvian novelist José María Arguedas. For most of Latin America's recent literature, however, the relation between the human predicament and the possibility of redemption remains open and inconclusive, even to the point of suggesting that Latin America's Good Friday does not entail an Easter.⁵⁰ However, it is literature in Latin America that has been better able to articulate this predicament. It is in this sense that a closer encounter between the two would offer theology a more articulate language, a narrative to formulate and give an account of its own hope. Conversely, a Latin American literature capable of successfully tapping into the rich repository of mythological elements could learn from theology's practice of re-mythologizing, in a context where the symbolic power of Ibero-American Catholicism, with its historical syncretic practices, is far from having exhausted its formative power in the culture.

⁵⁰This seems to be the main argument of Augusto Roa Bastos in *Hijo de hombre* (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1969).