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‘Civilization and barbarism’

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The year 1845 was a key one in the development of Latin American thought. It was the year of publication of a seminal work by Argentina’s Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, a book which came to be popularly known as *Facundo* and which bore the subtitle commonly quoted as *Civilización y barbarie*. In this phrase was crystallized one of the principal concerns affecting Latin American identities and nationhoods after independence; in it also was born a polemic that would rage throughout the rest of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and would indeed cast its shadow over much of the subcontinent’s thinking and writing up to the present day. The term ‘civilization and barbarism’ essentially encapsulates an anxiety about the state and direction of the relatively newly independent Latin American nations as they sought to consolidate a precarious sense of order, progress and modernity (usually associated with the emerging urban metropolises) in the face of a perceived threat of instability from the supposedly wild, untamed, chaotic, native masses (associated largely with the undeveloped interior).

Of course, with hindsight the opposition implied in the idea of civilization-versus-barbarism can be seen as a highly problematic one, an opposition which is not necessarily

'natural' but rather a reflection of the particular interests of certain elite social groups. To be sure, the seemingly neutral concept of 'independence' already betrays, in the Latin American context, this ambivalence or inexactitude. It is not the purpose of this chapter to trace the historical background to the independence movements and battles nor to give an account of the nation-building projects and struggles that followed independence (for a brief account, see Chapter 2). What is plain, though, is that 'independence' is a selective term. Yes, independence meant the ejection of the Catholic European monarchy and the establishment of republican self-rule (except at first in Brazil, where there was a transition to a constitutional monarchy, which nonetheless, despite certain tensions, smoothed the way to relatively representative government too). But did this really mean independence for ordinary people? While it would be wrong to deny the political idealism behind the push for independence, it is nevertheless clearly the case that a key driving force behind it, and more especially behind its consolidation, was the desire for privilege on the part of the *criollo* or European-descended creole elite. In a sense, independence was about securing the authority of the creole (as opposed to European) elites in their own land, to put control of wealth and trade in the hands of an American-born ruling class. And so, societal structures did not necessarily change with independence – the break with the Spanish crown did not mean a complete break with tradition. The discourse of freedom held only limited significance in a region still characterized by extreme social hierarchy, near-feudal agrarian systems, racial division and even, in some parts, slavery. Not surprisingly, instability and conflict quickly became the offshoot of independence, and it is from this

antagonistic situation that the apparent dichotomy of civilization-versus-barbarism is engendered.

The picture is a complex one, and often varied. For instance, Brazil, as has been suggested, went down a different path, and Chile, for example, managed to create a harmonious state early on. Edwin Williamson (1992) offers an excellent and accessible account of the 'quest for order' that characterized post-independence Latin America, and the reader is referred there for more detail. The main area of initial contention to be considered here is Argentina, for this would become the conceptual fulcrum for the many theories and debates that would proliferate around the notions of nation and identity in the subcontinent. Widespread arguments between liberals and conservatives in the area now known as Argentina soon coalesced into a fundamental conflict between centralism and regionalism or federalism. Basically, there was a series of wars between the 1820s and the 1870s between so-called *unitarios* or Unitarians (often liberal intellectuals who favoured a centralized state run from the great port of Buenos Aires) and Federalists (often landowners or ranchers who preferred a decentralized system of semi-autonomous provinces that would underpin their own local power). The former were pro-European and favoured progress through modernization on the model of Great Britain or France, while the latter were Catholic, traditionalist and jealous of the urban elite and their foreign allies. Unsurprisingly, in time, the former would come to be broadly associated with the forces of 'civilization' and the latter with the forces of 'barbarism'.

A major figure who rose to power in this conflict was Juan Manuel de Rosas, a big boss or *caudillo* from the provinces who eventually assumed full dictatorial powers (1829–33,

1833–52). Rosas relied at first on *gaucho* fighters from the interior, but soon developed a mass movement of support. With the aid of the organization La Mazorca, run by his wife, a huge and hysterical personality cult was developed behind Rosas, and his power was cemented via fanaticism, terror and the expulsion of opponents. Rosas did eventually fall from power (he actually fled to England and died near Southampton in 1877). Not long afterwards, the liberals managed – with some
hiccups – to realize their unitarian dream with Buenos Aires becoming the capital of a united republic under President Bartolomé Mitre (who ruled from 1862 to 1868). He was succeeded by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento himself. However, many would argue that the dangerous populist personality cult of the dictator inaugurated by Rosas left its mark on much subsequent Argentine history, finding echoes in, for example, Peronism, the fascination with Evita, the nationalist fervour encouraged by the military dictatorship during Argentina's home soccer World Cup victory in 1978, and the misplaced patriotic fanaticism of the invasion of the Malvinas or Falkland Islands sponsored by General Galtieri in 1982.

Sarmiento's essay *Facundo* was basically a bitter and blistering attack on Rosas's regime, told via the story of another corrupt and violent federalist *caudillo*, Facundo Quiroga. It came to be seen as espousing the values of 'civilization' connected to the sophisticated urban centre that Buenos Aires was thought to be, a city that was a port, open to the ocean route linking Argentina with Europe and its enlightened values; and it came to be seen as attacking the ignorance and 'barbarism' of the provinces, of the vast *pampas* and its *gaucho* inhabitants. The idea grew that only

by defeating barbarism and installing the values of civilization could Argentina (and Latin America as a whole) genuinely move forward and become real nations like the USA.

Even more crude was the version of Rosas's era conveyed by Sarmiento's friend Esteban Echeverría in his short piece of satirical prose *El matadero* (1838). This piece is recommended to students, as it is rather more readable than *Facundo* and, despite its extremism, gives a sense of liberal, unitarian feeling. It presents the Rosas regime via the none-too-subtle allegorical setting of a slaughterhouse (the meaning of the title), complete with gruesome butchers in traditional provincial dress (echoes of *caudillos*), a sort-of-grotesque master butcher who exercises absolute power in the '*pequeña república*' (mini-republic) of the abattoir (a clear stand-in for Rosas), and assorted vile, stinking, sweaty labourers wallowing in blood and filth and scrapping over animals' innards (Rosas's followers, even the *gauchos?*): 'simulacro en pequeño era éste del modo bárbaro con que se ventilan en nuestro país las cuestiones y los derechos individuales y sociales' (this was a microcosm of the barbaric manner in which matters concerning individual and social issues and rights are aired in our country) (Echeverría 1977: 144, 148). The masses are meanwhile clearly associated with the passivity of the cattle who plod docilely to slaughter. However, one brave bull, said to be as stubborn and aloof as a unitarian, stands out and resists – its eventual capture and castration equalling the cruel emasculation of decent liberal values. Lest the message has been missed, Echeverría has a real-life Unitarian turn up. Civilized and elegantly turned out, his language and appearance contrast with the ritualistic sloganizing and

conformist sporting of pro-Rosas symbols that characterize the others. In an obvious parallel with the fate of the fiercely independent and masculine bull, this man 'with balls', who thinks
for himself, dies in a fit of apopletic rage when his torturers strip him and thus metaphorically castrate his dignity and humanity. Indeed, as the mob prepare him for torture, he is 'atado en cruz' (159), like Jesus on the Cross, a moral superior and potential saviour betrayed by a savage and hypocritical society.

Echeverría's own values are summed up in his *Dogma socialista* of 1837, though his concept of *socialismo* is really closer to the idea of 'sociability', that is the idea of a fair and functioning mutually respectful and socially cohesive society. In fact, this is the sort of doctrine behind Sarmiento's thinking. *Facundo* has been unfairly caricatured as an elitist rant, when really it is simply arguing that any system of government not based on fairness and consensus is akin to barbarism. In fact, despite his seeming slating of the *gauchos*, Sarmiento's prose cannot hide an admiration for their proudly held traditions. There is, then, an element of doubt or uncertainty behind Sarmiento's grand gestures, a feature that would characterize much of the debate in literature on civilization and barbarism in the future. And the ambivalence remains. Buenos Aires today celebrates *gaucho* and working-class tango culture, yet Sarmiento's mausoleum is the only one signposted in Buenos Aires's prestigious Recoleta cemetery – but with one final irony: Facundo Quiroga is buried just across the way.

One immediate legacy of Sarmiento was, though, the unfortunate association of the *gaucho* with barbarism. This

position soon came under revision. Indeed gauchesque writing, especially poetry, had been popular for some time. It was not, in fact, *gaucho* literature as such but very much poetry and other literary forms written by educated city-dwellers generally who sought to capture the customs or, in a more romantic vein, the mood of the *gaucho's* life. Even Sarmiento was influenced by European Romanticism and Echeverría is considered the father of Romanticism in Latin America. Moreover, the *gaucho* was effectively beginning to disappear as a type: many had been wiped out in the frontier wars against the 'Indians' or indigenous peoples against whom they had been conscripted to fight; and, in any case, their traditional way of life was being erased by the modernization of the *pampa* in the name of progress. The gauchesque increasingly became seen as a means of preserving dying *gaucho* tradition. The climax to this trend was undoubtedly the publication in the later nineteenth century of the dramatic book-length adventure in poetic form, *El gaucho Martín Fierro* (1872 and 1879) by José Hernández. The classic of Argentine literature, *Martín Fierro* rescues the *gaucho* from the image of lawless barbarian and depicts him sympathetically, exposing above all his abuse at the hands of society. This seems to represent an inversion of the civilization-versus-barbarism ethic: now the peaceful rural-dweller and his own civilization have been destroyed by the capricious and chaotic policies of central government. The central contention of the poem seems to be that if the *gaucho* is seen as a lawless element, it is precisely because society has forced a good people beyond the pale:

> Y atiendan la relación
>
> que hace un gaucho perseguido,

> que padre y madre ha sido
>
> empeñoso y diligente,
>
> y sin embargo la gente
>
> lo tiene por un bandido.

(You should understand why the *gauchos* become persecuted, for even though they have been hard-working and diligent parents, people cast them as outlaws.) (lines 109–14)

This is the story of Martín, a decent man, who through no fault of his own gets into trouble with a species of small-town politician and is banished to the frontier to fight in the war against the Indians. It is precisely because he is law-abiding and trusts authority that he is undone:

> Juyeron los más matreros
>
> Y lograron escapar.
>
> Yo no quise disparar,
>
> Soy manso y no había por qué,
>
> Muy tranquilo me quedé
>
> Y así me dejé agarrar.

(Some fugitives got away and managed to escape. I didn't want to run off, I'm meek and had no reason to run, so I stayed there quite calmly – and that's how I got caught.) (lines 313–18)

Martín loses his wife and family and his home is in ruins. Eventually, he breaks his guitar – the symbol of the essence of his being as a *gaucho*, the source of his instinctive and

traditional form of *gaucho* self-expression through song. Yet, if this seems a radical reversal of Sarmiento's perceived position, it is also a deeply conservative reaction against the liberal project of progress. Much of the poem is really an act of preservation of a disappearing way of life. Hernández's aim, he explained in a letter, was to 'retratar, en fin, lo más fielmente que me fuera posible, con todas sus especialidades propias, ese tipo original de nuestras pampas, … tan erróneamente juzgado muchas veces y que, al paso que avanzan las conquistas de la civilización, va perdiéndose casi por completo' (portray, in short, as faithfully as possible, and with all his special characteristics, this originary man of our pampa lands, … who has often been so wrongly judged and who, as the ravages of civilization advance, is almost completely disappearing).[1] Part II of the poem was published seven years after the first and underscores the lack of real radicalism. The tone is more didactic now and Martín's apparent return to civilization is held up as an example to other *gauchos* who should learn to integrate with the new society. Even though the mistreatment of the *gauchos* continues to be asserted in Part II, implicit in it is the assumption that the *gaucho*'s ills are at least in part due to his own anti-social tendencies. The era of the *gaucho* is over and adaptation
is the only way forward. This is really a similar awkward ambivalence to that visible in Sarmiento, an ambivalence that was to repeat itself later in the twentieth century when the *gaucho* genre was revisited and the topic of civilization and barbarism spread more widely in Spanish American literature.

In Brazil meanwhile there was a parallel Romantic fascination with figure of the Indian. Given the differential path of independence here, the need for a national literature to reflect

national identity emerged more slowly. But when it did, it came in the guise of Romanticism. Hence the Indians became emblematic of national identity because they were authentically Brazilian yet still distant and exotic, unlike the uncomfortably close non-native Africans who had been imported as slaves. Effectively *indianismo* was escapist literature with not much real social content and often no *real* social referent: the images of Indianist literature owe as much to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Fenimore Cooper and François René Chateaubriand as they do to Brazilian social reality. However, the nation's greatest romantic poet, Antônio Gonçalves Dias (1823–64), probably had some contact with the indigenous people and even compiled a Tupi dictionary. When the adjective 'bárbaro' is used in his poetry, it seems to suggest innocent primitivism rather than barbarism as such. For example, a poem like 'I-Juca-Pirama', on the surface at least, is written, with its Tupi title, from an Indian perspective. It deals with cannibalistic sacrifice in a rather matter-of-fact way: there is little sense of wonderment or repulsion here. At the same time the colourful *costumbrismo* of the 'festival Timbira' does imply an outsider's gaze. But when the Indian chieftan surprisingly sets free his captive, it is not done out of a more 'advanced' society's notion of pity, but because the prisoner's pleading for his life means that the chief does not want to eat a coward, for cowards die without the recompense of the gods. Of course, the released Indian prisoner is cursed by his shamed father and goes on to live in exile and silence. Indeed exile and nostalgia (echoing the traditional Portuguese theme of '*saudades*'), both personal and in the form of longing for the homeland, are important features of Gonçalves Dias's poetry, as in his most famous poem 'Canção do exílio'. But pride in the potential of the nation is also strong, as in 'O gigante de pedra', where Brazil

is portrayed as a sleeping giant which will one day awake and surprise the world. The national spirit evoked in Gonçalves Dias, then, reveals some inconsistencies not so different from those of the gauchesque, but more laced with fantasy and poetic lyricism.

The major Romantic novelist of Brazil was José de Alencar. Like Gonçalves Dias before him, he too failed to finish an Indianist epic in verse, but wrote a variety of novels often regarded as the basis for Brazilian national literature. In this sense, there is another link with Spanish America, for a number of Brazilian romantic novels were sentimental fictions similar to a series of novels in Spanish which have more recently come to be regarded as foundational in their own way. Doris Sommer's basic contention in her *Foundational Fictions* is that the mid-century vogue for novels about young lovers seeking each other
across class, regional or racial divides was a projection of a desire for nation-building and national conciliation. Her concern is:

> to locate an erotics of politics, to show how a variety of novel national ideals are all ostensibly grounded in 'natural' heterosexual love and in the marriages that provided a figure for apparently nonviolent consolidation during internecine conflicts at midcentury. Romantic passion, on my reading, gave a rhetoric for the hegemonic projects in Gramsci's sense of conquering the antagonist through mutual interest, or 'love', rather than through coercion. And the amorous overtones of 'conquest' are quite appropriate, because it was civil society that had to be wooed and domesticated after the creoles had won their independence. (1991: 6)[2]

This implies a more benign interpretation of the civilization-versus-barbarism debate. However, if Alencar's *O Guaraní* (1857) projects a sort of ideal world of harmony between Indians and Portuguese, his *Iracema* (1865) offers a less promising vision. In the latter work, the Indian Princess Iracema is forced to abandon her community to pursue her love with the white man Martim. Though some commentators detect an optimistic note in the birth of their son Moacir, who may represent the future of an authentic (mixed-race) Brazil, the relationship with Martim becomes problematic and Iracema dies as a result of the birth. Is this meaningful transculturation or a process of assimiliation or loss?[3] The Argentine José Mármol's *Amalia* (1851), meanwhile, is a pretty clear standard civilization-versus-barbarism novel aimed against a despotic Rosas, while Bartolomé Mitre's *Soledad* (Solitude, 1847) reveals an ambiguous idealizing of the barbarian as in other works of the period. Disappointment is at the core of the Cuban novel *Cecilia Valdés* (1882) by Cirilo Villaverde: in this anti-slavery work, the lovers are unable to overcome the racial barrier that separates them. However, Colombian Jorge Isaacs's *María* (1867), by far the most popular of the mid-century sentimental romances, is often seen as giving a kind of utopian picture of Latin American life as manifested in the consensual community of the *hacienda* or plantation. This is the story of an orphaned girl brought up on her uncle's estate who falls in love with her more upscale cousin Efraín. But, though their marriage is sanctioned, María succumbs to disease and dies before it can take place. Thus the fantasy of national conciliation is allowed, while the reality of social division holds sway in practice.

These narratives, then, are as uncertain as the liberal political ideology behind them, struggling as it did between privilege and representation, social order and freedom, outward-looking modernization and inward-looking national identification. One important point to be made, though, is the link between literature and history. One of Sommer's starting points is Benedict Anderson's famous establishment of 'continuities between nation-building and print communities formed around newspapers and novels'.[4] And, following Pedro Henríquez Ureña, she notes the long list of Hispano-American writers
who became presidents of their country[5] (those mentioned here include Mitre, Sarmiento and below Gallegos, while others like Hernández and Mármol held political office; most recently the acclaimed below-mentioned author Mario Vargas Llosa ran for the Peruvian presidency in 1990). Literature is not, then, separate from history but an important part of the project of forging history. Literature is part of the nation-building enterprise, and writers, for Sommer, were driven 'by the need to fill in a history that would help establish the legitimacy of the emerging nation and by the opportunity to direct that history toward a future ideal' (1991: 7).

This somewhat confused legitimizing aim mixed with national ideals was not easy to achieve, and, unsurprisingly, the civilization-versus-barbarism polemic strongly reasserted itself in the literature of the early twentieth century, in particular in the so-called Regionalist novel (see Chapter 5). From the later nineteenth century onwards, the modernizing project took hold in much of Latin America and its ideological justification was further reinforced by the rise of Positivism. The philosophy of the Frenchman Auguste

Comte, Positivism was a kind of religion of science (sometimes called the Religion of Humanity: that is, rather than that of a deity) and its application in some parts of Latin America encouraged the view that only a small educated elite could build the path to progress. This contributed to the reinforcement of the idea of the masses (particularly the natives) as backward. And this led in turn to a trend for writers or intellectuals to regard the countryside from an experimental perspective as the laboratory of national reform. Once again, though, ambiguities would seep in: many writers and intellectuals of the early twentieth century were seduced by the raw energy and seeming national or continental authenticity of the interior. Even more than before, the relationship between city and countryside made for a heady mix of anxiety and attraction.

Oddly enough an important work which probably helped encourage movement away from positivistic thinking was also rather close in some ways to traditional forms of elitist thinking. The Uruguayan José Enrique Rodó's influential essay *Ariel* (1900) takes the form of a valedictory speech by a teacher nicknamed Prospero after the character from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The speaker is addressing his young pupils, who obviously represent the future of Latin America. The lesson is built around the images of two other figures from Shakespeare's play, the spirit Ariel and the monstrous Caliban. Ariel is the ideal of wisdom, beauty, spirituality, the values of civilization to be transmitted by the new generation of the elite. Caliban is the gruff materialism and utilitarianism of vulgar North American capitalism that is threatening the values of true civilization. While Rodó pays tactful lip-service to modernization and progress, he also appeals for a future civilization based on the timeless values

of ancient classical European civilization. As can be imagined, the influence of *Ariel* went in all sorts of directions, both conservative and progressive. But its context of production is important – just two years earlier the Spanish had been defeated in Cuba by the USA and this
was seen as the beginning of a possible new era of North American intervention and even imperialism. Williamson makes the point that one key effect of the *Ariel* phenomenon was that it 'stimulated resentment against US cultural influence' and provoked 'a new preoccupation with *americanismo*' (1992: 305). Indeed, theorist Roberto Fernández Retamar would later reverse the Caliban image into a more contestatory direction (1976: 64, 94, 233). So, as the Regionalist novel developed, it became bound up with questions of identity and essence, and the very nature of the terms 'civilization' and 'barbarism'. These novels in many ways begin the conscious or unconscious struggle to define or gravitate towards some kind of notion of what it means to be Latin American, the question of identity – the most repeated and most vexatious topic of Latin American culture and criticism in the twentieth century and beyond.

It is not the intention of this chapter to discuss Regionalist fiction as such in any detail, but to trace an important theme as it resurfaces in some representative texts. Two key works will be considered here: *Doña Bárbara* (1929) by the Venezuelan Rómulo Gallegos and *Don Segundo Sombra* (1926) by Argentina's Ricardo Güiraldes. At first sight, Gallegos's views seem close to those of Positivism or extreme readings of Sarmiento. He believes in the idea of an *alma de la raza*, a national mentality predisposed towards barbarism, particularly prominent in his country's huge plains or *llanos* which must be tamed or civilized by the importation

of city values. In this novel the city-educated Santos Luzardo returns to his rural family estate called Altamira where he confronts and ultimately defeats barbarism in the shape of the evil and rural landowner Doña Bárbara whose estate is called El Miedo. Progressive values rooted in the European Enlightenment are thus rather unsubtly pitted against darkly retrograde native tradition. However, much of the novel actually centres on Santos's practical attempts to manage and modernize the environment in an effective socio-economic way. This emphasis would seem to dilute the significance of the *alma de la raza*, suggesting that social and economic reform is the real key to change. Indeed the attitude to the interior and its human personification is, once again, quite ambivalent: 'la llanura es bella y terrible a la vez' (the plains are beautiful and terrible at the same time) (Gallegos 1982: 66); Bárbara has 'algo de salvaje, bello y terrible a la vez' (something of the savage, beautiful and terrible at the same time) (36). And Santos is only ultimately able to defeat his barbaric enemies by substantively adopting their methods. Whether there is more subtlety here than initially thought or mere confusion is open to question. But a generous reading would make something of Santos's relationship with young Marisela, a girl who has been abandoned to nature and in a sense represents the *alma de la raza* in a pure uncontaminated state, untouched by either 'civilization' or 'barbarism'. Santos may at first seem like a Hispanic Henry Higgins sprucing up his tropical Eliza Doolittle, but what he really learns is not to impose an artifical notion of civilization on her but to bring out the positive qualities
latent within her and the rural culture from which she hails. Marisela effectively teaches the civilizer 'su verdadera obra, porque la suya no podía ser exterminar el mal a sangre y fuego, sino descubrir, aquí y allá, las fuentes ocultas de la

bondad de su tierra y de su gente' (his real task, for his could not be to wipe out evil with blood and fire, but instead to uncover the hidden sources of goodness in his people and his land) (264).

Equally (maybe more) ambivalent is the other great classic novel of civilization-versus-barbarism, *Don Segundo Sombra*. This book marks the climax of the process of rehabilitation of the *gaucho* started by Hernández and posits the figure of the *gaucho* as the essence of true Argentine national identity, an apparently complete abrogation of popular versions of Sarmiento. The eponymous hero Don Segundo is the incarnation of the noble and free spirit of the nomadic cowboy *gauchos* and the embodiment of all that is best in the *gaucho* tradition, to the extent that he is 'una sombra, algo que pasa y es más una idea que un ser' (a shadow, something which passes by and is more of an idea than a human being as such) (1939: 17): in other words, a symbol of those essential *gaucho* virtues that should form a mythical basis for Argentine identity. At the same time, Don Segundo is seen largely through the eyes of his young protégé and the story's narrator Fabio.[6] In this sense, he is the projection of the ideals or fantasies of the younger generation that Fabio represents. Most of the novel is in fact about the trials and tribulations of young Fabio as he learns the skills and values of the *gaucho* from his older mentor. But at the end of the novel, the hitherto anonymous young narrator is identified as the son of a landowner and is returned to the family estate to claim his inheritance. The idea seems to be that the new generation of leaders must base their beliefs and practices on traditional *gaucho* lore and custom, on the authentically national, rather than on some alien foreign notion of modernity. However, not only is this a rather vague model for national identity, it is

only part of the story. In an extraordinary and hastily despatched episode,[7] the otherwise idealized Don Segundo intervenes in a quarrel so as to prompt a peaceful young man into a knife-fight that results in the gory death of the opponent and the ruination of the young man's life. Fabio tries to brush off his horror, but in some ways it is inevitable that Don Segundo has to be seen to ride off into the sunset at the end while the youth is left behind to carry the torch for the new generation. Behind the idealization of the *gaucho* lies a tradition that does seem here to be based on a dangerous propensity towards lawlessness and violence. And therefore the glorification of the *gaucho* as a national symbol may seem to be setting a rather dangerous precedent for the future. Indeed *Don Segundo Sombra* itself may be seen as conservative as much as it is revisionist. Güiraldes was a literary-orientated French-educated landowning aristocrat with a thing for *gauchos* and the gauchesque. But by the time the novel was written the *gauchos* had basically disappeared as a distinct social group and the *pampa* had been transformed by agricultural modernization, transport systems and European immigration. The novel may be taken then as a nostalgic elegy for a
lost age at a time of change, an expression of the anxiety of a traditional ruling class on the brink of a new era of modernization and urbanization.[8]

The problem is that this anxiety of identity is, in varying forms, an unresolved dilemma for much Latin American thought and culture up to this day, since the same tension between Latin Americanism and outside influence remains. This tension is a defining feature of the various culture wars or debates that rage in the academy over Latin American cultural studies, with regard to diverse but related areas such

as transculturation, modernity, globalization, high modernism, popular culture, the mass media, postmodernism, post-colonialism, race, gender, sexuality and subalternity. The intention here is not to engage with the discourse of cultural studies, but to look at some 'modern' authors whose works seem to show the continuing relevance of the civilization-versus-barbarism dualism even well into the later twentieth century. Chapter 5 on Latin American literature will survey the literary history in more detail, but the so-called 'new narrative' from the 1940s onwards, culminating in the 'Boom' of the 1960s and a subsequent phase often now referred to as the 'Post-Boom', was generally regarded as marking a radical break with and strong reaction against Regionalism. The Regionalist novel is also usually seen as the central manifestation of the 'civilization and barbarism' ethic in the subcontinent's literature. The simple contention here is that, despite this periodization, the question of civilization and barbarism remains a central element today in much conspicuously modern (or even postmodern) fiction, as it was the central element nearly a hundred years ago. Moreover, the same ambivalence is visible, as is the same dual thrust of assertion and revisionism.

The revisionist thrust gained precedence as the new, more self-confident 'modern' writing gained ground during the twentieth century. The idea of 'lo real maravilloso' in Alejo Carpentier or the mixture of subjectivity and indigenous belief in Miguel Angel Asturias (later evolving into the broad trend referred to as Magical Realism) implicitly continued the complex and shifting discourse between Latin Americanism, sometimes even nativism, and European modernity (and Modernism). The climax to this trend and the climax to the 'Boom' was Gabriel García Márquez's masterpiece *Cien años*

de soledad (One Hundred Years of Solitude, 1967). Magical Realism in this novel is, in part at least, a question of giving voice in a First World (European or North American) form (the novel) to the 'Third' (or 'Developing') World perspective of a rural and largely oral Latin American culture. Hence, famously, the accoutrements of civilization (such as trains, phonographs, ice, false teeth) are seen as bizarre, while events that would elsewhere be considered fantastic (like a girl ascending into heaven, a trail of blood making its way through the streets to find the victim's mother, a child being born with a pig's tail) are described with deadpan realism. 'Civilization' emerges as a hoax or myth here and that idea is carried into the text s recreation of the experience of Latin American history.[9] The establishment of the town of Macondo on the site where the founder had a dream of a great city of shining lights is an echo of the European dream of the New World, but the inheritance of European civilization is shown to be a myth as isolation and vulnerability prevail, and the Spanish heritage is mocked via the image of a Spanish galleon uselessly stranded inland and the ridiculous and contextually irrelevant Spanish aristocratic pretensions of the lacklustre Fernanda del Carpio. But even the modern brand of nineteenth-century 'civilization' is shown to be false. 'Independence' leads to the cementing of the privileges of the ruling classes by pacts between landlords and local politicians (such as José Arcadio and Arcadio – the repetition of the family names hinting at an incestuous alliance), and 'progress' leads to civil war, exploitation, foreign interference and boom-and-bust economics. Moreover, there is a fairly direct repudiation of the crude version of Sarmiento's argument in the story of the intervention of central government into the affairs of the rural community in the form of Apolinar Moscote. A 'corregidor', Moscote is not

needed because according to the town's founder 'aquí no hay nada que corregir' (there is nothing here that needs correcting) (1978: 56). The effect of his first decree, forcing the people to paint their houses in the colours of the Conservative Party, is actually to 'implantar el desorden' (implant disorder) (57). He further introduces 'progress' in the form of democracy and elections (another myth in this context), yet provokes a civil war with the Liberals by rigging the vote. Mutual destruction now follows in a place whose inhabitants were, before the arrival of central government, 'tan pacíficos que ni siquiera nos hemos muerto de muerte natural' (so peaceful that none of us have even died of natural causes) (57). So, it is the forces of the centre, the supposed bearers of civilized values, who actually bring chaos and discord to the regions. 'Civilization and barbarism' is one of the great falsehoods foisted on Latin America, which has always been forced, ever since 1492 and no less so with supposed independence, to perceive its own identity and history through the lens of other dominant cultures' version of it. And this internalized dependency would continue into the acquiescence to US economic imperialism (dramatized in the novel by the story of the all-powerful North American banana company) and lead to a generalized state of neo-colonial submission. Thus a variation on the reading of Magical Realism is that its function is also to encourage Latin Americans to see through obfuscatory versions of their own history and identity (another kind of myth or magic) and see the reality, to assert an authentically Latin American consciousness not based on slavish adherence to foreign models.

The most famous novel of the Post-Boom and a direct descendant (ironic or otherwise) of *Cien años de soledad*,

Isabel Allende's *La casa de los espíritus* (The House of the Spirits, 1982) takes a similarly revisionist approach, though using a brand of feminism to nuance further García Márquez's master discourse. Another family saga corresponding to Latin American (particularly here Chilean) history, the story of the patriarchal landowner Esteban Trueba is also presented through his eyes as the enlightened introduction of civilization to a barbaric countryside, a 'región inhumana', in his sister's words, 'donde no funcionaban las leyes de Dios ni el progreso de la ciencia' (an inhuman region
where neither the laws of God nor of scientific progress work) (1985: 104). However, Trueba's version of civilization is mocked. He heaps admiration upon Jean de Satigny, whose rationalism he compares to native barbarism (191), but the European turns out – as presented in the novel – to be a ludicrous homosexual dandy and a confidence trickster ripping off the country's natural resources. And on another occasion, Trueba – who prefers North American medicine because local doctors are no better than witch doctors (216) – has his broken bones fixed by an old peasant retainer in a way that baffles conventional science (145). Another manifestation of the fascination with European 'civilization' is the patriarch's desire to overcome nature by replacing wild local vegetation with orderly French gardens. But Trueba's eccentric yet beloved wife Clara is herself like 'una planta salvaje' (a wild plant) whose 'madness', as it is thought to be, cannot be cured by modern European medical treatments (75). Clara's 'madness' is akin to 'barbarism', thought to be threatening but nothing more than the pure natural exuberance and energy of Latin Americanness. Indeed it is a woman who brings Trueba closer to a more meaningful sense of civilization. 'Woman', like the peasantry, is that which is

perceived as mysterious, 'other' and threatening to patriarchal notions of stability, yet, like barbarism, is merely an imagined threat. The peasant woman whom Trueba rapes and takes in tames him and helps him usher in 'un poco de civilización' (59), and he is further mellowed by his wife and ultimately his grand-daughter Alba. The latter's experience of torture and rape at the hands of those responsible for a military coup designed to restore order (an obvious reference to Pinochet) leads him to re-evaluate radically what might be termed the conventional categories of civilization and barbarism.

This impulse against nineteenth-century liberalism is often portrayed as the real momentum behind Latin American intellectual (and often popular) culture since the early twentieth century. That feeling has been reinforced among students of the area thanks to the essentially leftist nature of cultural criticism in the field, increasingly so in recent decades. However, that is not the complete picture. Even early liberal novels like Mariano Azuela's dealing with the Mexican Revolution, *Los de abajo* (The Underdogs, 1916) – despite sympathy with the *campesino* and disgruntlement with bourgeois opportunism and a cynical political class – presents popular revolution as a barbaric cataclysm that destroys a painfully erected civilization. One of Latin America's most successful writers and cultural commentators today, the Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa, is often painted by his critics as embodying a reactionary neo-liberalism that is suspicious of the masses – though, from another point of view, he represents a remarkably radical stance in the generally dominant context of nationalist leftism in politicized Latin American culture, at least as largely presented via the filter of academic Latin American studies.

Fingers began to be pointed at Vargas Llosa in the 1970s after his break with the left and when his fiction began to dwell on the dangers of extremism
and utopianism.[10] His (surprising for such a serious writer) comedy *Pantaleón y las visitadoras* (Captain Pantoja and the Special Service, 1973), basically a Post-Boom novel, marks the shift. Sex-starved horny soldiers in the Amazon region have been jumping the local women. To offset scandal, the central military authorities dispatch from the capital the hapless Captain Pantaleón Pantoja to set up a mobile prostitution service to minister to the men's unruly urges. The story seems at first to be a satirical take on Sarmiento's presumed notion of civilization and barbarism as in some of the texts mentioned above. The town of Iquitos and its surrounding jungle area are presented as provincial, even primitive and backward. The disorderly conduct of the soldiers is even attributed to local primitivism. The lack of priests and women is blamed, suggesting underdevelopment and a milieu beyond the reach of civilization. Moreover, the real culprit is the heat, which drives men wild: the hot steamy jungle is a metaphor for the savage barbarism of the interior. Of course, this seems to be all a joke. And an even bigger joke is the absurd scheme of the army and central authorities, which shows a complete ignorance of local conditions: not only are the military (a supposedly civilizing influence in the region) the very source of the problem, their bizarre plan actually provokes more social disorder as it inevitably leads to scandal. The hilarious parody of Pantilandia, as the troupe is known, has the same effect as the lampooning of García Márquez's Apolinar Moscote. But it is not that simple, for the novel also deals with the fanatical religious sect known as the Brotherhood of the Ark whose influence extends from the jungle even as far as the capital. Their practices of violence

and ritual sacrifice are distinctly *not* funny, unlike the antics of the amiable Pantoja. Barbarism is a real and dangerous force after all, and the unthinking glorification of the interior and primitivism a perilous by-product of earlier revisionism.

The idea is taken further in Vargas Llosa's *La guerra del fin del mundo* (The War of the End of the World, 1981). This is a historical novel about the incredibly bloody suppression of a revolt of messianic royalist peasants against the Republic at Canudos in remote north-east Brazil in 1896–97. This revolt was actually the subject of one of the landmark novels of Brazilian literature, *Os sertões* (Rebellion in the Backlands, 1902) by Euclides da Cunha, another ambivalent liberal piece that defends modernization but sympathizes with the ordinary people. Vargas Llosa's version retains the sympathy but comes down much more firmly on the side of progress. Two of the principal characters are the charismatic Antonio Conselheiro, who forecasts the apocalypse and leads the poverty-stricken peasants into rebellion against the 'Anti-Christ' of the Republic, and Galileo Gall, an anarchist phrenologist who jumps on the bandwagon of the uprising to promote anarchist insurrection through the channelling of religious fanaticism. The results of their actions are devastating (though the novel does not shirk the brutality of the republican forces – their leader, General Moreira César, is just as much of a fanatic). Idealism all too easily leads to fanaticism, unleashing a terrifying barbarism that must be countered by a civilizing programme of modernization. This was to become a key theme in Vargas Llosa's work and in his political development, with an obvious relevance to Peru given the rise of the Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) guerrilla movement in the 1980s.

In some ways, then, Vargas Llosa is not all that dissimilar to Sarmiento, and this full-circle journey not only underscores the centrality of the civilization-verus-barbarism conflict in Latin American thought but also begs the question of how effective modernity and progress have been in the subcontinent. The circle, though, is not quite complete. Competing voices do share the public space. Hence, when Vargas Llosa – following predecessors like Mitre, Sarmiento and Gallegos – ran for the Peruvian presidency in 1990 on what many saw as a Thatcherite ticket, he lost. Unfortunately, the winning candidate, Alberto Fujimori, said to have more appeal to the 'popular' masses, later sought to dissolve the constitution and eventually fled the country under a cloud of corruption. The debate about 'civilization' and 'barbarism', despite the crudity of the terms to today's ears, remains, in essence, open.

NOTES

1 Quoted in Hernández (1976: 20–1).

2 The reference is to the Italian Marxist cultural theorist Antonio Gramsci and his *Notes on Italian History*.

3 Transculturation is a favoured term in cultural studies discourses as it implies the fluid and complex process of interaction or negotiation between contact cultures in which each side of the supposed divide is influenced or affected by the other. Acculturation would, on the other hand, imply the subsuming of a culture into an opposing dominant culture.

4 Sommer (1991: 6). She refers to Anderson (1983: 30).

5

Sommer (1991: 4). She refers to Henríquez Ureña (1945: 243).

6 The narrator is actually the adult Fabio recalling his youth. The tensions within the novel are further reinforced by the educated and often poetic style of the adult as he attempts to recall and even recreate the rough-and-tumble world and language of the *gauchos*.

7 See Beardsell (1981), who offers a perceptive reading of this episode.

8 The stories (and poetry) of Argentina's and Latin America's greatest writer Jorge Luis Borges a couple of decades later often display similar tensions and anxieties. Conspicuously universal and pro-European, they are often also very Argentine. They display a somewhat snobbish disdain for the vulgar populism Borges saw as embodied in Juan and Eva Perón, yet come close to glorifying a mixture of heroic creole past, *gaucho* culture, the knife-fight and the tango. Behind the 'civilized' knowledge of the lessons of history lies an ambiguous yearning for the spirit of noble adventure embedded in the 'barbaric' myth of the *gaucho*. See my 'The Southern Cone' in Davies (2002).

9 James Higgins gives an excellent and accessible account of the text's recreation of history in Swanson (1990: 141–60). See also Swanson (1991). Worthwhile too in this regard are the sophisticated essays by Gerald Martin and Edwin Williamson in McGuirk and Cardwell (1987).

10 Vargas Llosa's break with the left is often dated as 1971, when the poet Heberto Padilla was imprisoned in Castro's Cuba and subsequently forced to sign a denunciation of 'counter-revolutionary' activities. The Padilla affair is

sometimes seen as marking the end of the Boom, which was said to be given unity and identity by the exciting example of the Cuban Revolution. Kristal (1998) gives a good account of the case of Vargas Llosa.

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