

# Cult of Defeat in Mexico's Historical Fiction: Failure, Trauma, and Loss

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Cult of Defeat in Mexico's Historical Fiction

CULT OF DEFEAT IN MEXICO'S

HISTORICAL FICTION

FAILURE, TRAUMA, AND LOSS

*BRIAN L. PRICE*

CULT OF DEFEAT IN MEXICO'S HISTORICAL FICTION

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Hay que hacer la historia de las derrotas. [The history of defeat needs to be written.]

—Ricardo Piglia, *Respiración artificial*

Yo sé (todos lo saben) que la derrota tiene una dignidad que la ruidosa victoria no merece . . . [I know (everyone knows) that defeat enjoys a dignity that noisy victory does not deserve . . . ]

—Jorge Luis Borges, "Nota para un cuento fantástico," *La cifra*

Crisis, however, facile the conception, is unescapably a central element in our endeavors toward making sense of our world.

—Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*

I spoke just now of "having suffered together" and, indeed, suffering in common unifies more than joy does. Where national memories are concerned, griefs are of more value than triumphs, for they impose duties, and require a common effort.

—Ernst Renan, "What Is a Nation?"

I'm writing for the survivors, that they may know what it was they survived. I'm writing, if you will, for posterity, that people may understand what went wrong and resist the historical imperative of judging us too harshly.

—Don Delillo, *Great Jones Street*

Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.

—Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho*

## Contents

### [Acknowledgments](#)

### [Introduction: The Stellar Moments of Mexican History and the Rhetoric of Failure](#)

### [1A Mexican Comedy of Errors in Jorge Ibarra's Self-Correcting Independence History](#)

### [2Cross-Dressing the Second Empire in Fernando del Paso's \*Noticias del imperio\*](#)

### [3The Voices of the Master in Enrique Serna's \*El seductor de la patria\*](#)

### [4Paralysis and Redemption in Three Novels about the Mexican-American War](#)

### [Conclusion: Bicentennial Reflections on Failure](#)

### [Works Cited](#)

### [Index](#)

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All translations from the Spanish language are mine with four exceptions: for quotations from Ricardo Piglia's *Respiración artificial*, Fernando del Paso's *Noticias del imperio*, Ignacio Solares's *La invasión*, and Ángel Rama's *La ciudad letrada*, I have followed *Artificial Respiration* (trans. Daniel Balderston, 1994), *News from the Empire* (trans. Alfonso González and Stella T. Clark, 2009), *Yankee Invasion* (trans. Timothy G. Compton, 2009), and *The Lettered City* (trans. John Charles Chasteen, 1996), respectively.

## Introduction: The Stellar Moments of Mexican History and the Rhetoric of Failure

The National History Museum at Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City houses some of the finest murals dedicated to the nation's past, but the most striking is Gabriel Flores' *Los niños héroes* [The Heroic Children] (1967), which covers the expanse of the castle's main cupola. Along the perimeter, phantom horses and riders heralded by tattered stars and stripes trample through the debris of war and smoke from the blazing city walls ascends in the form of an imperial eagle. In the center of the mural, a doe-eyed boy wrapped in the Mexican flag, falls headlong from heaven toward the abyss. Tears stream from his eyes as he witnesses the invading Yankee army wrest sovereignty from his beloved homeland. The story of the *niños héroes* has become an intriguing part of national mythology. On September 13, 1847, American forces under Winfield Scott bombarded and then assaulted Chapultepec Castle, which at the time served as the military college for up-and-coming young officers. Legend has it that the cadets, bereft of arms and training, held off the invading Americans as long as they could and, when hope seemed lost, climbed to the top tower, draped the national standard on their shoulders, and jumped to their deaths rather than be taken prisoners. Monuments commemorating their deed adorn the grounds of Chapultepec today as a testimony of heroism in the face of foreign intervention. The story has become a mainstay of Mexican nationalist mythology despite its questionable historical veracity. While there was a brief battle between US forces and academy cadets, there is no documentation about the exact number of children who jumped, their ages, whether they donned the flag or not, or if the event actually happened. Little mention of the *niños héroes* was made until nearly three decades after battle, and since then the legend has been modified by successive presidential administrations to meet the needs of the present (Parra 277). The story is further complicated by its similarity to Cervantes's

historical tragedy *Numancia* about a small band of Spanish Christians who throw themselves from a tower in order to avoid being brutalized by an army of invading Romans in the second century. But the story continues to hold a permanent place in the Mexican imagination despite questionable historical grounds, which leads me to ask: Why is this story so important? Why has the suicide of military cadets come to symbolize an integral part of Mexican nationalism?

Both the mural and the myth interest me for what they say about the manner in which nationalism is both historically constructed and constructed historically. By this I mean that nationalism is both the subject of a developing historical process that involves the transmission of myriad images through artistic representation, as well as a discourse that is firmly rooted in an actualized concept of the past. Intellectuals, historians, politicians, and artists who witnessed the Mexican-American War worked assiduously to understand what happened and make others understand its lessons. As their work filled the voids of public memory, certain stories, ideas, and concepts became the bedrock foundation for all conceptualization of national character articulated after the war. Thus the immediate impressions of those who survived—the sense of outrage, impotence, and violation—in time became the central narrative line. As these notions of defeat were incorporated into the national narrative and disseminated through public education, contemporary crises came to be viewed through the lens of the past. No one questions whether the Mexican-American War actually took place because the evidence of its reality is readily apparent in the treaty that ended hostilities, the written testimonies of those who experienced it, and the border that amputated a significant section of the country. Yet, from what by all accounts was the most astonishing failure of Mexican history, the nation has been able to create a narrative of heroism and resistance that endows tragedy with a sacralized patriotic sentiment.

The central contention of this book, to paraphrase Marx's dramatic opening to *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), is that the specter of failure haunts Mexico's historical imagination. This is particularly true for representations of the independence movement and the nation-building process of the nineteenth century. One of the most recent, not to mention entertaining, descriptions of the period comes from *México: Lo que todo ciudadano quisiera (no) saber de su patria* (2006), Denise Dresser and Jorge Volpi's cheeky parody of the free civics and history textbooks that the federal government distributes to all Mexican schoolchildren. "Una sola cosa puede decirse del siglo XIX: fue un absoluto desastre. Todo lo malo que podía pasarle a un país, pasó," [Only one thing can be said for the nineteenth century: it was an absolute disaster. Everything bad that could happen to one country, happened,] they warn readers. "En realidad, lo mejor que podría hacer el alumno o la alumna es olvidarse de esta malhadada época y pasar de una vez por todas a la Revolución mexicana, la cual no fue menos catastrófica, pero al menos sí un poco más divertida" [Really, the best thing a student could do is forget this unfortunate period and proceed directly to the Mexican Revolution, which was no less catastrophic but much more entertaining] (66). Carlos Monsiváis put it even more succinctly when he mused that "los momentos estelares de la historia mexicana tienden a ser fracasos" [the stellar moments of Mexican history tend to be failures] (14). At first glance these summations may seem exaggerated and undeservedly infused with cynicism. Nevertheless, a cursory examination of nineteenth century Mexican history reveals that they might not be too far afield. The major events that come to mind are the short-lived insurgency under the direction of Miguel Hidalgo that ended three months later with the destruction of significant infrastructure and the capture and execution of all the major conspirators, the loss of Texas 15 years later to Anglo settlers who refused to submit to the Mexican government and rose up in open rebellion, the wholesale despoiling of half the national territory by an invading Yankee army that overran a beleaguered and poorly armed militia of conscripts, decades of ideological contention that undermined the political and defensive well-being of the nation and bankrupted the coffers, and the invasion by French forces that drove the legitimate president into a lengthy sojourn across the country while a Habsburg monarch established an illusory throne in Chapultepec. And this list, for the sake of scope and brevity, leaves off before the complex twentieth-century revolution, the bloody vying for political power by revolutionary generals, the

establishment of a single dominant political party, the social upheavals that occurred as a result of governmental repression of student protests, and the mismanagement of major financial and natural disasters.

While Dresser and Volpi's sweeping rejection of the nineteenth century and Monsiváis's aphoristic quip might be regarded as unduly pessimistic dismissals of Mexico's history, they are clear examples of what I will refer to as the rhetoric of failure in Mexico's historical imagination. Lois Parkinson Zamora employs the term "historical imagination" as a critical metaphor that embodies the various literary guises used to construct a sense of continuity between the past and the present. Instead of disavowing the errors of the past, Parkinson demonstrates that Latin American writers "search *for* precursors (in the name of continuity) rather than escape *from* them (in the name of the individual); to connect *to* traditions and histories (in the name of a usable past) rather than disassociate *from* them (in the name of originality)" (5). My contention in *Cult of Defeat* is that authors connect with the tragic moments of their history by employing a series of discursive strategies that highlight, reinterpret, and even poeticize perceived cultural, political, and social shortcomings. Writers resort to failure for many reasons: to revise history, to explain failed utopian ideals, to undermine opposing political ideologies, to promote platforms of social change, to consecrate messianic missions with martyrdom, or to express pessimism about the future. Failure narratives often mediate between lofty aspirations and unsatisfied goals. They seek to ameliorate the psychological trauma resulting from loss. At times loss itself becomes a matter of national pride. Additionally, these narratives are fiercely nationalistic and intimately tied up with the nation's guiding fictions. As authors employ the rhetoric of failure, they reinterpret the nation's foundational moments and at times this serves to challenge official stories in an attempt to invite citizens to rethink their nation, their history, and their commitment to progress. We will see, however, that the realization of that goal is not always accomplished.

My approach to failure differs significantly from the one employed by John Ochoa in his book, *The Uses of Failure in Mexican Literature and Identity* (2005). I am interested in examining the ways that intellectuals actively engage with failure in their historical representations, whereas Ochoa opts for a deconstructive approach to foundational Mexican texts that "contain the *precise moment* of failure, and not necessarily its long aftermath or its reconstruction in hindsight" (7). His primary concerns are the epiphanic moments when failure surprises and even overcomes the author. Ochoa's is a daring proposition that works well in his analyses of Bernal Díaz del Castillo's attempts to correct Francisco López de Gómara's inaccurate account of the conquest of Mexico while simultaneously adhering to the work's structure and narrative line, or Humboldt's fascination with human perception and his paradoxical inability to suppress his own subjectivity in order to adequately express the American experience. And, as will become clear in a number of the historical novels examined in this book, Ochoa's approach provides great insight into the ways in which authors are at times unable to fulfill their own lofty aspirations. But, by contrast, what draws my attention in these historical novels are the ways in which authors conscientiously frame their national history as a long succession of defeats, mistakes, and missteps. I study the rhetoric of failure as being neither accident nor epiphany. Remembering Kenneth Burke's basic definition that rhetoric is the use of words by writers to form attitudes or to induce action in others (41), the rhetoric of failure is the product of a deliberate narrative choice. This is to say, then, that I understand the rhetoric of failure not as a "marker of a certain modality of analysis but as indicative of the way in which historical circumstances have created a predicament that has in turn constituted the context for the Spanish American performance of cultural discourse" (Alonso 5). Moreover, a study of failure discourse is only possible when performed within "the complex web of dominant ideas and events in its immediate historical context" (Mercieca 4). I contend that authors engage in a rhetorical appropriation of failure to reconstruct the stellar moments of Mexican history for the express purpose of responding to present crises.

Mexico is not alone in its fascination with defeat. Failure has formed an integral part of Spanish

America's thinking on history, sovereignty, and identity since the fifteenth century and has intimate ties to notions of cultural and political dependency upon foreign powers. When spectacular successes abated during the New World campaigns, conquistadors framed their trials and tribulations as a demonstration of their fidelity and perseverance in their crown's cause (Pastor 116–17). In the nineteenth century, Latin American intellectuals on both sides of the political spectrum framed independence histories as failures in order to justify their redemptive political agendas. Charles A. Hale explains how the crushing defeat of the Mexican army by US forces in 1847 initiated a crisis among intellectuals that provoked "a disposition towards self-examination and a renewed search for remedies to Mexico's ills" (*Mexican Liberalism* 11–12). Nicolas Shumway observes that Argentine intellectuals of the Generation of '37, who witnessed firsthand the failure to unite the nation's disparate provinces and the inability of *porteño* political leaders to provide adequate and inclusive leadership, set out to identify the problems besetting the new nation and, in doing so, went about explaining those failures "with a mercilessness that borders on self-defeating negativism" (112). Nicola Miller notes that Spanish American intellectuals attempting to justify their independence following the imperial experience grounded their sense of nationhood "on the idea that Spanish American experience was best represented as in some fundamental way *lacking*, and that dependency was therefore an inevitability" (177). Forced to forge a national narrative that effectively broke with the Spanish Crown and governmental system in order to justify its claim to sovereignty, Spanish American identity discourse began from a discursive vacuum where the nascent nation was constructed as perennially belated and in need of tutelage and guidance from more mature democracies. For Carlos Alonso, this vacuum allowed Spanish American intellectuals to incompletely and paradoxically inhabit both the modern and the traditional, and eventually led to a weakness in American intellectual thinking. Nevertheless, near the close of the nineteenth century, that weakness no longer constituted a mark of inferiority but afforded Spanish American intellectuals a certain amount of cachet: "If at the banquet of modernity we were always a second-class invitee, history finally rewarded us when sveltness [sic] became the universal fashion. This interruption has the attractiveness of turning into a virtue what was previously a defect" (154–55).

José Martí's banana wine offers an interesting paradigm for thinking about how the prestige of inferiority structures Spanish American identity discourse. In his classic essay, "Nuestra América" (1891), Martí argued for the development of authentically American political systems that responded to the cultural and historical idiosyncrasies of the American experience without necessarily depending upon European models for inspiration. Spanish American political systems, like Spanish American alcohol, should be made from native elements with native processes. Instead of importing European wines, his countrymen ought to make their own wine with whatever they have on hand, including the banana if need be. And if the wine is sour, so be it, exalts Martí, because bitter or not, banana wine is authentically American. What stands out here is the rhetorical twist in Martí's expression that transforms inherent inferiority into an authentic expression of Spanish American identity. Martí already accepts the probability that domestic products are innately inferior to foreign ones and that this inferiority is part and parcel of the American experience. But, through the rhetorical construction of this failure, Martí is able to recover a positive Spanish American solidarity. This a priori expectation of failure has become deeply embedded within the fibers of twentieth-century discussions of national character throughout the continent, as studies on national identity construction in Cuba, Puerto Rico, Argentina, and Mexico have shown.

This emphasis on failure may run counter to the bold, triumphal concept of nation that appears in many texts on nationalism, because one of the challenges confronting an analysis of the rhetoric of failure is the seemingly inherent aversion to recognizing defeat. Greil Marcus writes that

There are events that are real but that dissolve when one tries to attach them to the monuments—wars, elections, public works projects, universities, laws, prisons—out of which we

make our history. There are people who act and speak but whose gestures and words do not translate out of their moments—and this exclusion, the sweep of the broom of this dustbin, is a movement that in a way is far more violent than any toppling of statues. It is an embarrassment, listening to these stories and these cries, these utopian cheers and laments, because the utopian is measured always by its failure, and failure, in our historiography, is shame. (17–18)

The case of national discourse in the United States offers a useful illustration when compared to Mexico. Carlos Fuentes remembers that, as the son of a Mexican diplomat growing up in Washington DC, he was encouraged to read Mexican history in his home. The names, places, and events that he learned constituted “a history of crushing defeats,” which stood in stark contrast to the historical narrative that was taught in his DC public school that “celebrated victories, one victory after another” (*Myself with Others* 4). The disjunction between these two stories became nowhere more evident to him than when he realized that sometimes “the names of United States victories were the same as the names of Mexico’s defeats and humiliations”(5). This is not to say, however, that the United States has not suffered loss and humiliation. Instead, the mythologies that underpin this country’s sense of being tend to exclude, explain, or erase failure in favor of an epic story of victory. This is why, for example, the Second World War continues to hold an alluringly seductive frame for thinking about what it means to be an “American” while the wars in Korea and Vietnam have been largely suppressed. Where the former was considered the apogee of American culture and military strength—we should not forget that those living during that time are frequently referred to as “the greatest generation”—the later conflicts left indelible marks in national conscience because they were, at best, incomplete exercises of flawed foreign policy or, at worst, painful and costly debacles. The film industry instinctively picked up on this distinction as can be illustrated by comparing the heroic tales told in the HBO miniseries *Band of Brothers* or Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan* with the heartbreaking stories of defeat such as Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*, Oliver Stone’s *Platoon*, and Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket*. Linnie Blake comes to similar conclusions in *The Wounds of Nations* (2008) when she argues that the discursive gap for dealing with failure in the United States and Britain is overcome through a film language that metaphorically expresses the trauma of war through depictions of dragons, zombies, and horrific hillbillies. In short, the national myth that exaggerates the United States’ sense of exceptionality has limited its ability to develop the narrative strategies that other countries possess to deal with failure in a straightforward manner.

The United States’ inability to locate a suitable place for failure within the scope of its national narrative does not mean that other countries have failed to do so. In fact, a number of recent studies have shown how tropes of victimization, defeat, and traumatic loss have paradoxically come to form the central core of what Benedict Anderson called the “imagined community”, or the imaginary construct that binds heterogeneous groups into a collective community by establishing bonds of deep, horizontal camaraderie. However, as Claudio Lomnitz points out in *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico* (2001), the appeal to imaginary constructs alone cannot generate the kinds of personal sacrifice in the name of the nation that Anderson considers to be the hallmark of nationalism. Sacrifice demands a more visceral motivation. Dominick LaCapra has identified a tendency in modern culture to covert traumatic experiences into sublime moments of nationalist organization. Horrific events, such as the dropping of atomic bombs or genocide, become occasions for negative sublimity or displaced sacralization and “give rise to what may be termed founding traumas—traumas that paradoxically become the valorized or intensely cathected basis of identity for an individual or a group rather than events that pose the problematic question of identity” (23). In a similar vein, Ian Buruma writes that history, and especially the most painful and gruesome elements of it, enable societies to construct a common identity that differentiates them from other groups. Fraternity is developed through a shared sense of outrage and injury. Defeat and failure become so important for identity construction because it is easier to imagine personal insult and injury than it is to see one’s personal sacrifice contribute to the well-being of the group. What is needed to activate the imagined community is a brush with annihilation. And in this

regard, negative emotions, especially the sense of injury that follows upon the heels of failures to thwart attacks against national sovereignty, exercise a greater hold on individual citizens than do the lofty sentiments of self-determination and freedom. Indeed, as Jing Tsu eloquently argues in her study of Chinese nationalism, a sense of inferiority is a paradoxically central component of nationalism because the redemptive mission of nationalism is preconditioned by crisis: "The fundamental paradox of nationalism is its testimony not to greatness but to the need for greatness. Oddly, its persuasion and legitimacy derive from the lack of precisely these elements on the basis of which its ideology can be reified. The identity of the nation must be perceived as having failed in some way in order for nationalism to come to its rescue" (24). The rhetoric of failure, then, requires the deployment of powerful, negative images for the purposes of inspiring inciting reflective and communal action.

Because the redemptive mission of nationalism is predicated upon the threat of political and social dissolution, the rhetoric of failure emerges more forcefully in moments of crisis. If we could plot the high and low points of a nation's history on a graph, it would look like a rolling wave, with troughs and peaks occurring at fairly regular intervals. Troughs would be characterized by economic problems, social disarray, civil war, foreign invasions, authoritarian control, and reductions of democratic rights, while peaks would represent moments of growth, prosperity, success, democracy, confidence in government, and general well-being. The rhetoric of failure surfaces in the troughs and look backward, past the peaks, to other troughs in search of answers for present dilemmas. The rationale is that something must have occurred in the past that led the nation to its current state of malaise. Since the peak is a time of prosperity, when everything is going well, the problem must logically lie before, in prior troughs. Because these highs and lows are cyclical, so are narratives of failure. When nations experience highs, narratives of failure tend to disappear. As they descend into troughs, intellectuals begin to ask questions and to look for answers. An example from nineteenth-century Mexican historiography might help to exemplify this ebb and flow. Lucas Alamán, the leading conservative through the first half of the nineteenth century, published his multivolume *Historia de Méjico* in 1852, one year prior to his death. The year is significant because the country had been mired in political turmoil for more than three decades. The situation had reached its lowest point and the government struggled with its inability to maintain social order. Backed by recalcitrant *santanistas*, Alamán determined that the strong hand of a dictator was needed to restore order. He offered the post to Antonio López de Santa Anna, gave him unlimited powers, and bestowed upon him the title of "His Most Serene Highness." In *Historia de Méjico*, Alamán argued that the turmoil besetting Mexico in the 1850s was the direct result of the 1810 independence movement led by Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla. He railed against Hidalgo for establishing a precedent of political violence, mixed with a healthy dose of racial hatred and covered in a blasphemous veil of false religiosity. Because Hidalgo offered such a bad precedent, he continued, regional caudillos followed suit and military pronouncements such as the one made by Hidalgo became the standard operating procedure for political transition. Alamán also decried Hidalgo's anti-Hispanic attitudes as xenophobic, narrow-minded, and destructive. Unfortunately, he failed to recognize—or chose to ignore—that the general he supported as the nation's dictator in 1853 had rebelled against more governments than nearly any other in Mexican history. Still, Alamán's argument exemplifies a common trend in the rhetoric of failure. At a low point in history, he delved into the past to find a scapegoat for the present's maladies.

The emotional appeal of failure in the construction of national identity finds its most important expression in the ability to invest the present with the transcendental value of martyrdom. That was precisely the concern for José Vasconcelos, the early-twentieth-century Mexican intellectual who headed up the postrevolutionary push for public education, ran for president in 1928, and ultimately withdrew from public life to write Mexico's history after losing in what he considered to be fraudulent elections. The most important of Vasconcelos's histories for our purposes was *Breve historia de México* (1956), which took inspiration from Alamán's *Historia de Méjico*. They coincide, for

example, in their mutual admiration for Hernán Cortés and disapproval of Miguel Hidalgo. The most striking contribution that *Breve historia de México* makes to this discussion of failure and the historical imagination comes midway through the chapter on the independence war, where he notes that José María Morelos, who had taken charge of the insurgent army following the execution of Hidalgo, was a substandard military leader whose only contribution to the legacy of the nation was being a substandard martyr. Concerned that his nation had become enamored with fallen heroes, he chided Mexico for having populated its national pantheon with martyrs, “como si la milicia tuviera por objeto preparar a sus hijos para que sean víctimas, lo que es oficio de santidad, no de milicia” [as if the military’s main objective were to prepare its children to be victims, which is the job of religion and not the military] (279). Vasconcelos termed this fascination with failure “un culto a la derrota” [a cult of defeat] and wondered how much “la circunstancia de que nos hemos dedicado a adorar fracasados influye en el temperamento nacional pesimista y en la insistencia con que hablamos de ‘morir por la patria’, cuando lo que necesitan las patrias es que nadie muera, sino que todos vivan en plenitud y libertad” [our tendency to worship failures influences our pessimistic national temperament and our insistence of speaking of “dying for the nation,” when what nations really need is not for people to die but rather to live in prosperity and liberty] (279). For Vasconcelos, what lays at the heart of the Morelos’s legacy and other stories of defeated Mexican heroes is not simply a story about self-sacrifice. It is instead a process whereby failure is assigned a transcendental value, becomes a central component of the national narrative, and leads to a flawed model of citizenry.

Vasconcelos was not alone in his preoccupation over the potential dangers of the rhetoric of failure. They also appear in the philosophical quest for a definition of national character that was the primary work of the Hiperión group, which included important twentieth-century thinkers like Antonio Caso, Emilio Uranga, Samuel Ramos, Jorge Portilla, Leopoldo Zea, and Luis Villoro. As Anne Dormeus points out, these “writers regarded philosophy as central to the understanding of the Mexican. By offering self-awareness, they believed it could lead Mexicans to abandon their imitation of imported doctrines and overcome their self-denigration—a by-product of cultural dependency” (158). In *Naciones intelectuales* (2009), Ignacio Sánchez Prado demonstrates that despite the Hiperión group’s best efforts to establish an existential and historicist model of philosophical argumentation that distanced discussions of national identity from mythological essentialisms, methodological weaknesses in the work of Uranga and Portilla opened the door to them by codifying certain archetypal figures like *el pelado* or behaviors like *el relajo* (198–206). It was not until the later works of Zea and Villoro that the essentialist bend in Mexican identity discourse was overturned in favor of analyses that focused on endemic social problems derived from economic and epistemological relationships of power. The philosophical and methodological advances made by Zea and Villoro were almost immediately overturned, however, by the mythologizing function of Octavio Paz’s iconic essay, *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950). Sánchez Prado has effectively argued that the literariness of the book granted Paz greater access to the public sphere than did the rigidly philosophical writing of his predecessors. Sánchez Prado observes that, around 1950, “el pensamiento verdaderamente crítico se encuentra confinado en las instituciones académicas, mientras que en la esfera pública se consagran los mitos que los mexicanos comienzan a creer como propios” [truly critical thought is confined to academic institutions while in the public sphere intellectuals consecrate myths that Mexicans come to adopt as their own] (237). Though the mythical social misfit known as the *pachuco* had disappeared decades earlier, the national myths that were propagated by Paz’s writing essentialized the notion that “‘el mexicano’ es un hipócrita que se esconde tras la máscara y el disimulo, un estoico al que la muerte le es indiferente, mientras que la mujer es ‘enigmática’” [“the Mexican” is a hypocrite that hides behind masks and deception, a stoic who is indifferent to death while women are “enigmatic”] (239). This pointed summary of the main points of *El laberinto* is purposefully reductive because the central tenets of the essay are familiar for many readers and, for that reason, I will not offer a lengthy exegesis. Rather, I pause briefly to reemphasize that it was not the strength of the book’s ideas but rather the literary merits of Paz’s writing that captivated the public’s attention. The high

literary quality of phrases like “El mexicano venera al Cristo sangrante y humillado, golpeado por los soldados, condenado por los jueces, porque ve en él la imagen transfigurada de su propio destino” [Mexicans venerate the bloody Christ, humiliated and beaten by the soldiers, condemned by the judges, because they see in him the transfigured image of their own destiny] (*El laberinto* 107) make Paz’s overly essentialist reading of Mexican character more palatable despite its negative implications for a discussion of national character.

This reading of *El laberinto de la soledad* goes against the grain of critics who hope to find in Paz the exaltation of the poetic national spirit. Ochoa, for example, takes a much more generous look at his work, arguing that a careful reading of the essay reveals that Paz “never states, either explicitly or implicitly, that Mexicans *are* failures or even that they regard themselves as failures” (10). Instead, Paz’s analysis of Mexican character “teeters between paralyzing pessimism and euphoric action” and this “shocking realization can then spark a refashioning of identity” both at the individual and the national level (10–11). This fits Ochoa’s general interest in the epiphanic revelation that failure as a heuristic device can offer. That is to say that, by the sudden realization of weakness or shortcoming, authors and readers are propelled into a new form of knowledge that produces positive effects for identity construction. The drawback to Ochoa’s reading of *El laberinto de la soledad*, however, is that in his push to find a redemptive use for failure, he overlooks the potential damage that Paz’s style of essentialist mythologizing can do. While I agree that Paz is not overtly attempting to prescribe the adoption of criminal or irresponsible behaviors, by essentializing them, his essay falls headlong into poeticized solitude and inactivity. In this regard Sánchez Prado is entirely correct in his assessment of the overarching ideological function of the text: it returns to the essentialist discourse that the Hiperión group had attempted to overturn. And, because of the accessibility of its language and its widespread dissemination, it consecrated a number of myths related to failure in such a manner that Mexicans began to accept them as inherent elements of national being. \*

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