Histories of Power:

The Biographical Novels of Francisco Herrera Luque



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Short Abstract

This thesis offers the first full-length English-language study of the works of the Venezuelan writer Francisco Herrera Luque (1927-1991). Although they have received only modest critical attention, Herrera Luque's historical novels were immense commercial successes. They remain cultural touchstones to this day and heavily influenced popular perceptions of Venezuelan history at a crucial period in the nation's development. They are likewise suffused with the writer's own complex and idiosyncratic views on Venezuelan society, politics, and history. In novelising this history, he sought to diagnose his country's greatest ills. I propose that Herrera Luque achieves this fundamentally through his literary exploration of the wielding and transmission of power.

This study examines Herrera Luque's three biographical novels: *Boves, el urogallo* (1972), *En la casa del pez que escupe el agua* (1975), and *Los cuatro reyes de la baraja* (1991). These works, each of which is adjacent to the wider phenomenon of the *novela del dictador*, depict the lives of enigmatic *caudillo* and dictator figures from Venezuelan history (José Tomás Boves, Juan Vicente Gómez, and Antonio Guzmán Blanco) in conjunction with the political forces and social divides that dominated their respective eras. Combining a literary-historical approach with close reading, I undertake a case study of each novel in turn. I analyse how they are informed by the circumstances of their composition, the interplay of their aesthetic qualities (chiefly, their structure, style, and genre) with their thematic concerns, and Herrera Luque's presentation of and attitude towards his biographical subjects. In so doing, this thesis characterises Herrera Luque's three works as nuanced, prescient and essentially pessimistic musings on how the peculiar problems inherent to the Venezuelan state, alongside greater historical processes and human nature, can most clearly be understood through their relationship with social and political power.

Long Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to provide a literary-historical and literary-critical evaluation of three popular and problematic biographical novels by the Venezuelan writer Francisco Herrera Luque (1927-1991). The most commercially successful Venezuelan writer of his time, Herrera Luque achieved extensive readership, and his nine historical novels – four of which were published posthumously – established him as a cultural authority on Venezuelan history, society and nationhood. Despite his popular renown, Herrera Luque's works have, for a range of reasons, received little meaningful critical attention. To date, almost no academic studies have been produced on *Boves, el urogallo* (1972), *En la casa del pez que escupe el agua* (1975), or *Los cuatro reyes de la baraja* (1991), and those that do exist are superficial, disregarding the literary techniques employed by the writer. This thesis seeks to address this critical lacuna by appraising these novels as works of substantial significance in the literary history of Venezuela, and as texts of formal, thematic and technical interest for the wider study of Latin American literature.

Herrera Luque was the writer most closely associated with the Venezuelan historical novel, a genre that experienced remarkable popularity in the late twentieth century. Its success can be attributed, in part, to the fact that Venezuela's history has been poorly documented, frequently misunderstood, and routinely distorted to serve political ends. The writer's central contention was that Venezuela's was an *historia detenida*. He argued that Venezuela's cultural and socioeconomic development had been impeded by a pathological collective fixation on a fictitious national past, while truer accounts of the country's history – those preserved in anecdote, folklore, and oral tradition – had been silenced. A psychiatrist by training and informed by philosophical Positivism, Herrera Luque theorised that this cultural affliction stemmed from a hereditary legacy of psychopathic disorders left on the Venezuelan people by the Spanish conquistadors. This thesis proposes that in novelising, and thereby revivifying, the nation's history, he sought to induce a therapeutic, liberating act of recognition among his readers – both of overarching, repetitive historical patterns, and of the national psyche. This recognition could be achieved only through literary representation of the sources, forms, and evolution of sociopolitical power.

Power was a recurrent thematic concern in twentieth-century Latin American literature, most notably exemplified by the phenomenon of the *novela del dictador*. *Boves, el urogallo*, *En la casa del pez que escupe el agua*, and *Los cuatro reyes de la baraja* – which novelise the lives of José Tomás Boves (1782-1814), Juan Vicente Gómez (1857-1935), and Antonio Guzmán Blanco (1829-1899), respectively – exhibit many of that genre's defining hallmarks. Unlike other writers, however, Herrera Luque did not aim to condemn tyranny or to interrogate dictatorship's relationship with language. He sought instead to understand its historical roots. The premise of this thesis is that Herrera Luque conceived of these three *caudillo* figures as epiphenomena – avatars of Venezuela, and expressions of its collective soul at different stages of its historical progression towards an undefined *síntesis*. Their legitimacy and authority are seen to derive from this incarnational function. In representing the psyches and the historical impact of each of these leaders, the writer sought ultimately to understand the Venezuelan people and to diagnose the problems inherent to the national character. Regardless of how persuasively this aim was realised, Herrera Luque experienced significant success in re-shaping his readers' conceptions of Venezuelan history and nationhood.

This thesis is composed of a series of three case studies. Herrera Luque's exploration of the origins, nature, and evolution of sociopolitical power is the unifying concern, together with his representation of historical patterns and psyches. However, each chapter offers a literary-critical and literary-historical approach to a single novel, examined and evaluated on its own terms, with close reading being the primary methodology. Central to each study are the circumstances of a particular work's composition, an analysis of its structural and stylistic features, the view it presents of Venezuelan society, and the defining qualities of Herrera Luque's portrayal of his protagonists. Accordingly, I consider the aesthetic features and merits of each novel and assess how these interact with the writer's central thematic concerns.

The Introduction situates Herrera Luque within both his Venezuelan literary and political context, and within the broader development of historical fiction in Latin America, considering the

prevailing political and aesthetic factors that shaped each context. There follows an analysis of Herrera Luque's cultural impact and an examination of the reasons for his comparative obscurity within the critical consciousness. A primary aim of the Introduction is to provide an overview of Herrera Luque's controversial psychiatric research and the idiosyncratic, positivistic hypotheses presented in his two 'scientific' texts, *Los viajeros de Indias* (1961) and *La huella perenne* (1969). These underpin many of the thematic and technical strategies in his novels. The Introduction concludes with an account of his transition from the medical sciences to literary production, while also considering the literary influences that informed his style and artistic outlook.

The first chapter, on *Boves, el urogallo*, opens with an evaluation of the complex and often uncomfortable role of the titular royalist *caudillo* in orthodox Venezuelan historiography, and his enduring presence in folk tradition. I analyse how and why Herrera Luque sought to reappraise Boves's historical significance, particularly in relation to his characterisation as the 'first *caudillo* of Venezuelan democracy'. The chapter then examines Boves's central biographical arc, with particular attention paid to the techniques Herrera Luque employs to interpret his psychological makeup, motives, and actions. Part II comprises a study of the novel's style and structure: its style is integral to understanding its aesthetic merits and shortcomings, while its structure defines Boves's relation to the sociopolitical context that engendered his 1813 military campaign. This context forms the thematic basis for the second half of the chapter, in which I explore Herrera Luque's presentation of the *mantuanos* – the pro-independence aristocracy held responsible for many of Venezuela's foundational problems – and his treatment of questions of race. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the role of author surrogates in conveying Herrera Luque's own evaluations of Boves's significance in the context of what might be termed Venezuela's 'original sins'.

En la casa del pez que escupe el agua is Herrera Luque's most formally complex and generically indeterminate work. A novelised biography of Juan Vicente Gómez, the archetypal Latin American tyrant, it examines the manifestations and evolution of sociopolitical power throughout his long regime. Part One of Chapter Two demonstrates that the novel's formal features derive from its

origin as a long-form sociological essay on the causes and consequences of Venezuela's *historia detenida*. In Part Two, I analyse the work's formal intricacies, again foregrounding questions of structure, style, and genre, and consider how successfully Herrera Luque subverts and reconfigures historical narratives. As with *Boves, el urogallo*, I evaluate the characterisation and development of the protagonist – informed by Herrera Luque's ambivalent attitude towards the historical Gómez – before examining the presentation of the Caracas oligarchy and its complex relationship with the dictator. The chapter's central question concerns the locus of power, and how Herrera Luque depicts the historical evolution of both power and the Venezuelan psyche through the contradictory relationship between two ostensibly opposed sources of authority.

Chapter Three evaluates Herrera Luque's final novel, *Los cuatro reyes de la baraja*, completed immediately before his death in 1991. Written in the wake of the 1989 Caracazo and amid the disintegration of Venezuela's post-1958 democratic system, the near-total absence of critical discussion of this novel belies its literary-historical significance. I characterise it as a didactic, pessimistic, and even prescient work, which can be read as both a codification of history and a manual for governance. Part I provides a comprehensive account of the events that informed its composition and of Herrera Luque's evolving views on history throughout the late 1970s and 1980s. Part II examines the novel's comparatively complex framing and the ambiguities of its narration. Part III, meanwhile, studies Herrera Luque's biography of Antonio Guzmán Blanco, evaluating its main characteristics and its shortcomings, and considers the ways in which it illuminates universal themes relating to power. In Part IV, I outline Herrera Luque's rigid, quasi-dynastic 'reyes de la baraja' conception of Venezuelan history, tracing the patterns and cycles that he identifies, and interrogating his belief that Venezuela's national 'soul' can best be read through its most influential leaders. The chapter concludes by positioning the novel as a prescient warning of the breakdown of modern Venezuela's political system.

This thesis demonstrates that Herrera Luque's biographical novels constitute a distinctive and highly ambitious literary project, informed by an idiosyncratic outlook that seeks to engage readers with collective psychology and draw attention to patterns in Venezuelan history. At the core of

each work is the writer's desire to reconceptualise Venezuela's leaders as manifestations of its collective soul and thereby to identify the nation's principal ills; this diagnosis is itself framed as a form of cultural treatment. By directing sustained attention to Herrera Luque's rarely discussed literary techniques – particularly his novels' style and occasional generic ambiguity – this thesis demonstrates that his works' aesthetic as well as thematic qualities mark Herrera Luque as an innovative figure in Latin American literature whose novels merit serious scholarly analysis.

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List of Abbreviations

I use the following abbreviations for in-text references to Herrera Luque's works. Details of specific editions are to be found in the Bibliography.

1998	*1998*
BCH	*Bolívar de carne y hueso*
BV	*Bolívar en vivo*
BU	*Boves, el urogallo*
VA	*El vuelo del alcatraz*
CP	*En la casa del pez que escupe el agua*
HF	*La historia fabulada*
HP	*La huella perenne*
LF	*La luna de Fausto*
PP	*Las personalidades psicopáticas*
AV	*Los amos del Valle*
4RB	*Los cuatro reyes de la baraja*
VI	*Los viajeros de Indias*
MP	*Manuel Piar, caudillo de dos colores*

Introduction

El escritor es el vengador de la sociedad.

—Francisco Herrera Luque[1]

The problem of historical movement is
directly connected with the 'power' exercised by
some men over others: but what is 'power'?

—Isaiah Berlin[2]

El conductor, el líder, el caudillo
no es más que el comadrón que vigila
el parte de un pueblo en el camino.

—Francisco Herrera Luque[3]

La novela histórica es la novela por excelencia puesto que
el saber histórico es el modo más pleno y total del saber,
porque es reconstitución, añadidura, completamiento.

—Noé Jitrik[4]

[1] Francisco Herrera Luque, *La historia fabulada*, vol. 2 (Barcelona: Pomaire, 1982), 191.
[2] Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967), 23.
[3] Francisco Herrera Luque, *Bolívar de carne y hueso y otros ensayos*, 4th edn. (Caracas: Pomaire, 1991 [1983]), 47.
[4] Noé Jitrik, *Historia e imaginación literaria: Las posibilidades de un género* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 1995), 16.

I. History and Literature in Venezuela

The study of history, perhaps more so than any other academic discipline, is surrounded by a minefield of truisms and commonplaces that colour popular understandings of the course of history itself. According to well-worn aphorisms, often of contested origin, history repeats itself; it does not repeat itself but rather rhymes; we learn nothing from it; those who fail to learn from it are condemned to repeat it; and it is written by the victors. All of these are, to one degree or another, imbued with a grain of truth. What is certain is that each time history is written, it is necessarily re-written. The relationship between literature and history is thorny, and the boundary between them permeable. Questions of what constitutes History and what constitutes Literature, and which parts of history should be reimagined in literary terms – as well as why and how – have preoccupied critics since the days of Aristotle, and became especially relevant with the advent of the historical novel in the nineteenth century. The capacity of the historical novel to shape popular understandings of both past and present (particularly in relation to a nation's self-conception), and by extension imagined futures, have established it as a culturally influential and politically charged literary form.

Latin America, a region whose history – or, perhaps more properly, histories – have often been contested, informed by competing epistemologies, or reimagined for expressly political purposes, 'has produced a vast array of fiction that could be described as "historical"'[5] across a range of forms and genres. A list of all historically inflected Latin American works would be almost impossibly long, but might include the early chronicles of Conquest – whose 'exaggerations and fantasies often reveal more about the reality of the era than its truths'[6] – and texts such as Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's *Facundo* (1845), Manuel de Jesús Galván's *Enriquillo* (1882) and Euclides da Cunha's *Os sertões* (1902), which played important roles in the construction of national identity and

[5] Catriona McAllister, *Literary Reimaginings of Argentina's Independence: History, Fiction, Politics* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022), 1.
[6] Mario Vargas Llosa, 'Fiction and Reality', in John King, ed., *Modern Latin American Fiction: A Survey* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), pp. 1-17 (6).

the diagnosis of fundamental political and philosophical dilemmas. In the aftermath of the Boom, the 'new historical novel'[7] took inspiration from the postmodernist view of history as a 'grand narrative in need of undermining',[8] and sought to problematise historical knowledge and its production. This phenomenon was exemplified by works such as Alejo Carpentier's *El arpa y la sombra* (1979), Abel Posse's *Los perros del paraíso* (1983), Fernando del Paso's *Noticias del imperio* (1987), and Gabriel García Márquez's *El general en su laberinto* (1989), among others.

In short, the former, earlier works 'were preoccupied with the literary construction of a historical past'[9] and served an 'ontogenetic function of imposing an interpretation over the national historical and cultural scene'.[10] The later novels instead sought 'la descralización del discurso histórico oficial',[11] frequently using innovative and metafictional techniques to 'desmitificar íconos patrióticos o reconsiderar periodos cruciales'.[12] This is demonstrative of the capacity of literature both to build mythologies and historical narratives that become canonical – and also to disassemble them.

The historical novel enjoyed some of its greatest successes in Venezuela. The quantity and popularity of the historical novels produced by Venezuelan writers, particularly in the final three decades of the twentieth century, were such that the genre's predominance constituted a sort of literary 'micro-Boom'. Some of these writers were among 'los grandes renovadores del género, que han hecho algunas de las mayores aportaciones a su desarrollo técnico y estilístico, y por tanto a la evolución del conception mismo de la *novela histórica*'.[13] Among the most notable and influential were Arturo Uslar Pietri (1906-2001), Miguel Otero Silva (1908-1985), Denzil Romero (1938-1999)

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[7] As identified by Balderston (1986), Aínsa (1991), Menton (1993), Pons (1996) and others.
[8] Jerome de Groot, *The Historical Novel* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 110.
[9] Daniel Balderston, 'Introduction', in Daniel Balderston, ed., *The Historical Novel in Latin America: A Symposium* (Gaithersburg, MD: Hispamérica, 1986), pp. 9-12 (9).
[10] William H. Katra, 'Reading *Facundo* as Historical Novel', in Balderston, pp. 31-46 (42).
[11] Fernando Aínsa, *Reescribir el pasado: Historia y ficción en América Latina* (Mérida: Centro de Estudios Latinoamericanos "Rómulo Gallegos", 2003), 29.
[12] Peter Elmore, *La fábrica de la memoria: La crisis de la representación en la novela histórica hispanoamericana* (Mexico City: FCE, 1997), 12.
[13] Alexis Márquez Rodríguez, *Historia y ficción en la novela venezolana* (Caracas: Monte Ávila, 1990), 11.

and Ana Teresa Torres (1945-). Their most renowned works focus on pivotal moments in national and continental history, particularly Conquest and Independence, and either revaluate the figures who shaped these eras, or provide allegorical or panoramic overviews of broader historical processes.

One explanation for these novels' success was the fact that Venezuela's relationship with its own history was, and remains, complex, even tortured. While the spectre of the near-deified Liberator Simón Bolívar permeates all levels of public life, many deeper aspects of Venezuela's past are poorly documented. There exists a rigidly codified national mythology fabricated 'desde una necesidad histórica y social que casi podríamos llamar una razón de Estado, en tanto obedece a la identificación de la conciencia nacional',[14] and the country has frequently been identified as 'una sociedad de escasa memoria histórica'.[15] Shortly after the death of President Hugo Chávez (1954-2013), Rory Carroll wrote that:

> Venezuela had chronic amnesia. Indigenous tribes did not write or build cities, leaving no trace of their existence. Termites devoured parchment, erasing colonial archives. […] Earthquakes levelled eighteenth- and nineteenth- century architecture, and the twentieth century entombed the remains beneath tower blocks and slums. Schoolchildren learned to genuflect before the blessed Simón Bolívar but little about the complex forces that made their nation. Immigrants – millions of Italians, Spaniards and Portuguese came before and after World War II – looked only to the future. Venezuela's history was vague, a blank slate.[16]

A paradoxical result of this historical amnesia is that history is everywhere in Venezuela. The superficiality of, or gaps in, historical knowledge (perhaps best exemplified by the unexplained disappearance of the second volume of *Historia de la conquista y población de la provincia de Venezuela* of José Oviedo y Baños [1671-1738], the country's first true historian) have given rise to

[14] Ana Teresa Torres, *La herencia de la tribu* (Caracas: Alfa, 2009), 52.
[15] Liliane Machuca, '*Manuel Piar, caudillo de dos colores:* La novela histórica de Francisco Herrera Luque', in *Investigaciones literarias*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2004), pp. 75-90 (77).
[16] Rory Carroll, *Comandante: The Life and Legacy of Hugo Chávez* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2013), 187.

'misreadings [which] become cherished myths'.[17] To quote one memorable line from a popular 1980s radio play, 'cuando un pueblo escasea en monumentos vivos y muertos, como es el caso de Venezuela, se recurre a las estatuas, reales o imaginarias, de los héroes' (*HF 1*, 53).

This, in turn, has rendered Venezuelan history malleable, and readily exploitable for cultural and political ends. For Mario Vargas Llosa, 'organizar la memoria colectiva, trocar la historia en instrumento de gobierno encargado de legitimar a quienes mandan […] es una tentación congénita a todo poder'.[18] Doing precisely this has been the express policy of successive Venezuelan governments, who have routinely re-packaged, repurposed, and abused both canonical and non-canonical accounts of the nation's history. Chávez's *Revolución bolivariana* made intensive use of film, literature, television, and new educational materials to apply idiosyncratic readings of history 'no como ella fue […] sino como este régimen desea verla para que sirva a sus intereses'.[19] Historical figures such as Guaicaipuro, Francisco de Miranda and Ezequiel Zamora were reimagined as proto-socialists; the Liberator's remains were exhumed in 2010 to prove a spurious theory of his poisoning; and the post-1958 *Punto Fijo* democratic period was re-cast as 'el ejercicio de la represión, el pillaje y la destrucción de la riqueza petrolera'.[20]

This tendency far predated Chávez. Manipulation and control of history can lend political legitimacy to governments and leaders, and so 'every Venezuelan presidency has defined itself through its own interpretation of the past',[21] often with the goal of being perceived as the inheritor of a particular historical tradition. The nineteenth-century dictator Antonio Guzmán Blanco (1829-1899) had established his personal historical views as 'a real politics of memory' and 'infused the

[17] David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country – Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 508.
[18] Mario Vargas Llosa, *La verdad de las mentiras* (Madrid: Alfaguara, 2002), 26.
[19] Roberto Lovera De Sola, *Un formulador de interrogantes llamado Francisco Herrera Luque* (Caracas: RJLDS Editor, 2011), 224
[20] Torres, 17.
[21] Luisela Alvaray, 'Claiming the Past: Venezuelan Historical Films and Public Politics', in *Cultural Dynamics*, vol. 25, no. 3 (November 2013), pp. 291-306 (294).

Liberal historiography into Venezuelan culture at all levels'.[22] Bolívar was transformed into a national icon, his remains placed in the new Panteón Nacional and innumerable paintings, songs and statues commissioned in his honour – the statues erected alongside ones of Guzmán himself. The later autocrat Juan Vicente Gómez (1857-1935) infamously had the date of his death altered, so that both it and his birthday would coincide with those of the hero of Independence.

This constant re-writing of history, alongside a disjuncture between what we might term an official 'historia con mayúsculas'[23] and poorly documented folk histories, obsessed one of 20th-century Venezuela's most important cultural figures. Francisco Herrera Luque (1927-1991), the writer most closely associated with the Venezuelan historical novel, contended that his nation's 'era una historia silenciada, no bien contada, algunos de cuyos tramos habían sido borrados por intereses'[24], and spoke of an *historia detenida*: a multicausal cultural stagnation characterised by neurotic nostalgia for an imagined national past, which in turn prevented Venezuela from progressing. In response, he came to regard it as his life's mission to 'reactivar en el imaginario colectivo venezolano [una historia] que apenas sobrevivió de manera muy fragmentaria en el folklore'[25] and thereby to 'liberar el venezolano de su pasado'.[26]

I. Francisco Herrera Luque

Francisco Herrera Luque was by some distance the most commercially successful and, in his day, controversial author of late 20th-century Venezuela. No Venezuelan writer has been 'tan

[22] Tomás Straka, 'The Birth of the Myth: The Liberals and the Cult of Bolívar (1840-1900)', in Maureen G. Shanahan and Ana María Reyes, eds., *Simón Bolívar: Travels and Transformations of a Cultural Icon* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2016), pp. 96-112 (104).
[23] Mario Vargas Llosa, *Historia de Mayta* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1984), 77
[24] Roberto Lovera De Sola, *Un formulador de interrogantes llamado Francisco Herrera Luque* (Caracas: RJLDS Editor, 2011), 13.
[25] Robin Lefere, *La novela histórica: (Re)definición, caracterización, tipología* (Madrid: Visor, 2014), 246.
[26] Francisco Herrera Luque, 'El venezolano y su historia', in *El Nacional*, 10th September 1968, p. 25.

ampliamente leído o tan controversial';[27] with the exception of Rómulo Gallegos (1884-1969), Herrera Luque was 'el autor más vendido de todos los tiempos'[28] in his home country. The five historical novels Herrera Luque wrote during his lifetime[29] and four published posthumously[30] – virtually all of which studied the imprint left on the present by charismatic authority figures from the recent or remote past – made him an important cultural touchstone. The vast reach of his works among a rapidly expanding reading public[31] helped to re-fashion popular conceptions of history and nationhood at what would prove to be a pivotal moment for Venezuela.

Despite his untimely death in 1991, Herrera Luque's profound influence on the public imagination endures. He remains an 'autor plenamente vigente en su país, […] referencia obligada cuando se intenta entender la situación venezolana contemporánea, y su nombre resurge con frecuencia como autoridad en temas de historia o de interpretación de la sociedad en artículos de la prensa diaria'.[32] As an indicator of his continuing popularity, Alfaguara republished his works as part of the 'Biblioteca Herrera Luque' collection in 2009; Hugo Chávez referenced him in speeches;[33] and a commonly heard saying in Venezuela – particularly when somebody would defend a dubious account they had just given of an historical event – was 'eso lo leí en Herrera Luque'.[34] The writer also experienced international success. Fidel Castro, Rómulo Betancourt, and Gabriel García

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[27] Michael Moody, 'Entrevista con el Dr. Francisco Herrera Luque', in *Chasqui: Revista de literatura latinoamericana*, vol. 15, no. 2-3 (February-May 1986), pp. 39-47 (39).
[28] Delfín Viera Rojas, '"Médico, no de individuos, sino de pueblos": La obra científica de Francisco Herrera Luque (1927-1991)' (Doctoral thesis, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2008), 24.
[29] *Boves, el urogallo* (1972), *En la casa del pez que escupe el agua* (1975), *Los amos del Valle* (1979), *La luna de Fausto* (1983), and *Manuel Piar, caudillo de dos colores* (1987; hereinafter *Manuel Piar*).
[30] *Los cuatro reyes de la baraja* (1991), *1998* (1992), *Bolívar en vivo* (1997) and *El vuelo del Alcatraz* (1991).
[31] Partly as a consequence of the oil boom in those years, Venezuela's literacy rate increased from 76.5% in 1970 to 89.8% by 1990 – one of the highest in Latin America, behind only Uruguay (c. 96.1%), Argentina (95.6%), Chile (94.3%) and Costa Rica (93.9%).
[32] Viera Rojas, 14.
[33] Viera Rojas, 649. Chávez was familiar with *Los amos del Valle*, using the work's title as a pejorative term for Venezuela's bourgeoisie, and *Los cuatro reyes de la baraja*.
[34] Tomás Straka, 'Francisco Herrera Luque y su tiempo: El triunfo del outsider (I)', *Prodavinci,* 27 May 2021, http://ii.https//prodavinci.com/francisco-herrera-luque-y-su-tiempo-el-triunfo-del-outsider-i/ [accessed 22nd June 2023].

Márquez were all noted admirers of his work, with the Colombian master gifting him a typewriter,[35] and his best-known works were translated into three languages in the 1980s.[36]

Academic interest in Herrera Luque's works has not, however, matched their popular renown. In one of the vanishingly few detailed studies of the writer, Delfín Viera Rojas states that:

> [El] autor es considerado una de las mayores autoridades a la hora de juzgar la historia venezolana, y de darle explicación a los agudos problemas sociales de que adolece la sociedad venezolana, pero pareciera que nadie se ha tomado la molestia de estudiar con detenimiento y detalle su plantamiento y las raíces del mismo.[37]

Herrera Luque's works have almost never been explored in detail – indeed, this thesis constitutes the first substantial English-language study of the writer – and, where they have, thematic considerations have taken precedence over analysis of his literary techniques.

Anglophone critics are most likely to have come across Herrera Luque's name in passing references in longer texts, including those by Pacheco (1987), Aínsa (1991), Menton (1993) and Dabove (2017). Some of these suggest the need for further study. Pacheco, for example, states that his works, alongside other Venezuelan historical novels of the same period, 'traen consigo una óptica y unos planteamientos estéticos originales y renovadores que merecen ser estudiados con mayor detalle'[38] – but this advice has largely been disregarded. Herrera Luque has received only a meagre (albeit steady) trickle of critical attention in recent years. Much of this has been supported by the Fundación Francisco Herrera Luque, founded posthumously in 1992 and based in the Biblioteca

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[35] Tomás Straka, 'Francisco Herrera Luque y su tiempo: La victoria del outsider (II)', *Prodavinci,* 3 June 2021, https://prodavinci.com/francisco-herrera-luque-y-su-tiempo-la- victoria-del-outsider-ii/ [accessed 22nd June 2023].

[36] *La luna de Fausto* (1983) appeared in German as *Faustmond* in 1986, translated by Claudia Sierich and published by R. S. Schulz of Stanberg in 1986. Zofia Siewak-Sojka's Polish translation of *Boves, el urogallo*, entitled *A gdybym został królem?* (*And What If I Became King?*) was published by Wydawnictwo Literackie (Krakow) in 1987. In 1989, *La luna de Fausto* was again translated, this time into Russian, by Aleksandr Bogdanovskyy, and published by Moscow-based Raduga.

[37] Viera Rojas, 14.

[38] Carlos Pacheco, *Narrativa de la dictadura y crítica literaria* (Caracas: CELARG, 1987), 67.

Los Palos Grandes in Caracas. The foundation published an enlightening collection of essays, edited by Dobrudcha González, in 2000, and supported an exhibition of his works entitled *Los avatares de un país*, curated by Manela Lizarzábal, in 2014. Beyond Venezuela, recent studies have included those by Fernando Guzmán Toro (2012) on *La luna de Fausto*, Harringhton and Brito Márquez (2018) on *Los amos del Valle*, and Wilson (1988), Chibán (2003) and Machuca (2004) on *Manuel Piar*. Indeed, Herrera Luque has mainly been relegated to short chapters in academic theses (Isea [1996], Colomina-Garrigós [2003] and Rodríguez [2017]). Only two full-length studies of his works exist: Viera's 2008 doctoral project on his scientific output, and Roberto Lovera De Sola's 2012 biography – a useful account, though almost entirely devoid of literary analysis.

Herrera Luque is thus simultaneously 'poco conocido fuera de su país'[39] and an 'autor referencial en el imaginario colectivo de amplios sectores de [Venezuela]'.[40] There are multiple reasons for this, all of which will be discussed. One relates to a term that forever dogged Herrera Luque: *bestsellerismo*. He was accused of writing to appeal to the mass market, and his books were attacked for their melodrama, moralising, vicious lampooning of his personal enemies, and gratuitous depictions of sex and violence.[41] Another is his novels' apparent specificity to a peculiarly Venezuelan reality, which has perhaps narrowed their appeal.

It is also important to note that Venezuelan literature of the later twentieth century does not figure prominently within the wider Latin American context, and is particularly neglected in British Hispanism. This can be explained, at least in part, by Venezuela's cultural and political circumstances. The stability of the democratic system from 1958 onwards – an outlier in the Americas, where instability and political repression abounded – meant that, unlike their contemporaries in neighbouring lands, few Venezuelan writers experienced exile, and their work 'was not publicised abroad by political émigrés interested in making their homeland known'.[42] A

[39] Lefere, 235.
[40] Viera Rojas, 137.
[41] An uncharitable comparison could be drawn here with the French writer Eugène Sue (1804-1857), with whose works Herrera Luque was familiar.
[42] Miguel Gomes, 'Venezuela: 19th- and 20th-Century Prose and Poetry', in Verity Smith, ed., *Encyclopedia of*

thriving domestic publishing industry, typified by the prolific, profitable Monte Ávila Editores and Biblioteca Ayacucho, was supported by the government, which in 1964 established the Rómulo Gallegos Prize. As Katie Brown states, 'because authors had the option to publish at home, funded by the state, they did not have to search for opportunities elsewhere in the way other Latin American authors did, and could therefore remain insular',[43] thus feeling no compulsion to write with international audiences in mind.

Herrera Luque himself never sought to emulate the literary innovations that made the Boom an international phenomenon. Rather, he adhered to a 'realismo sin pretensiones'[44], and decried 'preocupación excesiva en la experimentación estilística'.[45] Though his novels occasionally demonstrate a certain level of formal flexibility or hallmarks of magical realism, Herrera Luque wrote in a way that was, by the 1970s and 80s, arguably outmoded. An autodidact perennially uncomfortable with his status as a successful novelist, he labelled himself 'un *dilettante* de la literatura, y en especial de la novela',[46] disliked many of his contemporaries' works, and made almost no attempts to establish himself within literary circles, saying shortly before his death that 'no hice antesala ni traté de ganarme la buena pro de grandes maestros; no fui nunca a tertulias (que me aburren horriblemente)'.[47] These factors help to elucidate why Herrera Luque has faded from critical view outside Venezuela. However, his attitude towards literature itself – as well as the extremely idiosyncratic conceptions of Venezuelan history and society that he disseminated through his own – are best explained by Herrera Luque's own background, for he entered the literary world from an altogether different sphere.

Latin American Literature (Chicago, IL: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997), p. 838-841 (840).

[43] Katie Brown, *Writing and the Revolution: Venezuelan Metafiction, 2004-2012* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), 3.

[44] Gisela Kozak-Rovero, 'Ana Teresa Torres: Testigo hasta el final', in *Inti: Revista de literatura hispánica*, no. 87/88 (2018), pp. 11-32 (18).

[45] Moody, 45.

[46] Márquez Rodríguez, 229.

[47] Blanca Elena Pantín, 'Herrera Luque entre amos y dueños del valle', in *El Diario de Caracas*, 18th September 1990, cited in Lovera, pp. 694-700 (696).

II.ii. Scientific and Social Theories

Herrera Luque had no formal training either in the study of history or literature. He was not originally a man of letters, but rather a psychiatrist. Indeed, throughout his life, 'se sintió hombre de ciencias antes de cualquier otra cosa'.[48]

The writer was descended on both sides from Venezuela's colonial oligarchy – the Caracas aristocracy, known as the *mantuanos*, who traced their lineage back to the original Spanish founders of the city – and his difficult relationship with his heritage informed much of his thinking. The Luque branch had enjoyed political favour under the rule of Juan Vicente Gómez. Francisco's father was one of the founders of psychiatry in Venezuela and an important academic, until his fall from grace with the regime resulted in four years of Parisian exile for the family, beginning when Herrera Luque was eight. Herrera Luque eventually followed his father into the same profession. His studies at the Universidad Central in Caracas came to an abrupt end in 1952 thanks to his opposition to the military dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez, and he again went into exile, this time to Spain. Studying at Salamanca and then Madrid under the supervision of Juan José López Ibor,[49] Herrera Luque was heavily influenced by philosophical Positivism[50] and the psychoanalytical works of Sigmund Freud, Wilhelm Reich, Ernst Kretschmer, Emil Kraepelin and, in particular, Carl Jung.

His research in Spain, and his subsequent doctorate back at the Universidad Central, where he became associate professor in 1958, were predicated upon a singular and firmly held hypothesis, from which he would never deviate. Herrera Luque believed that Venezuela's many social ills,

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[48] Viera Rojas, 15.

[49] López Ibor was considered a pioneering psychiatrist at the time, but is best remembered today for administering non-consensual electroshock therapy to 'treat' homosexuality.

[50] Positivist thought was extremely influential in Venezuela in the early part of the twentieth century. Two of the most significant figures associated with the movement were José Gil Fortoul (1861-1943) and Laureano Vallenilla Lanz (1870-1936), whose best-known works (*El hombre y la historia* [1896] and *Cesarismo democrático* [1919], respectively) were a major inspiration for Herrera Luque.

particularly its 'altísima tasa de criminalidad'[51], widespread occurrence of psychopathy and related disorders, and 'accidentado devenir histórico'[52] were all ultimately attributable to the extremely high rate of mental disturbances among the country's first Spanish settlers, who were 'en un setenta por ciento psicópatas'.[53] Herrera Luque contended that extremely high rates of intermarriage between the twenty or so clans descended from them – that is, the *mantuanos*, a group 'cerrado y endogámico hasta el incesto' (*VI*, 17) who had monopolised social, political and economic power in Venezuela since its conquest – had failed to dilute that 'sobrecarga psicopática'.[54] This formed the basis for his first book, an immensely controversial treatise titled *Los viajeros de Indias* (1961), in which he examined accounts of the conquistadors' temperaments alongside demographic data on crime, family composition, sexuality, and mental illness. This work established Herrera Luque as 'un intelectual de reconocido prestigio'[55], and was followed in 1969 by *La huella perenne*, a series of short biographies of European royals and nobles, which aimed to prove that 'la herencia patológica puede mantener su continuidad no solo en los cuatrocientos años que nos separan de la Conquista sino más allá de esos límites' (*HP*, ix).

In this sense, Herrera Luque's first works identified what we might term the Venezuelan nation's congenital defect, or original sin: its dysfunctional nature, its perennial malaise, was the inescapable consequence of the nature of its conception. This was an extremely popular formula in 20th-century Latin America, and works promulgating similar views abounded across the continent, being almost too numerous to list.[56] In Venezuela, Gil Fortoul and Vallenilla Lanz had aimed to do this in their aforementioned treatises.[57] Two examples from further afield that share very many similar

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[51] Viera Rojas, 12.
[52] Herrera Luque, 'Ante una sociedad perturbada', in *El Universal*, 14th October 1970, p. 5.
[53] José Antonio Rial, *La destrucción de Hispanoamérica* (Caracas: Monte Ávila, 1976), 395.
[54] Lovera, 168.
[55] Viera Rojas, 84.
[56] Consider the examples of José Enrique Rodó's *Ariel* (1900), José Vasconcelos's *La raza cósmica* (1925), José Carlos Mariátegui's *Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana* (1928), Gilberto Freyre's *Casa-Grande e Senzala* (1933), Ezequiel Martínez-Estrada's *Radiografía de la pampa* (1933), Mario Briceño-Iragorry's *Mensaje sin destino* (1951), H. A. Murena's *El pecado original de América* (1954), Roberto Fernández Retamar's *Calibán* (1971), and Eduardo Galeano's *Las venas abiertas de América Latina* (1971), all of which were particularly influential.
[57] Prefiguring Herrera Luque, Gil Fortoul talks of the very high frequency of both physical and mental defects among the endogamic *mantuanos*.

propositions with *Los viajeros de Indias* are works by the Bolivian Alcides Arguedas, another Positivist, who attributed his country's problems to racial and geographical determinism in *Pueblo enfermo* (1919), and Octavio Paz, whose renowned *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950) casts the violent encounter between two authoritarian cultures as culpable for many of Mexico's chronic sociopolitical difficulties.

Alongside his theory of the lasting and inescapable damage of the conquistadors' psychopathy, Herrera Luque developed an equally idiosyncratic conception of Venezuela's history more broadly, and worked throughout the 1960s on another long 'scientific' text, which would never be published. That work bore as its working title *La historia detenida*, and although the writer's definitions of this phenomenon were nebulous, the belief that Venezuela's was an *historia detenida* was perhaps his most firmly held. Later editions of *Los viajeros de Indias* explain that 'la historia está detenida por dentro, es decir, que los sucesos exteriores de gran movilidad […] en nada alteran el fondo y las estructuras psicológicas y sociales determinadas por los conquistadores', making it impossible to 'modificar de un modo fundamental arquetipos, valores y motivaciones' (*VI*, 12) in Venezuela. In other words, the nation's basic structures of social and political power have remained stagnant and immutable throughout (and despite) its turbulent history as a consequence of the insurmountable afflictions brought about at conception. For Herrera Luque, this stagnation generated an unshakeable fixation on, and nostalgia for, the past – or at least the dominant canonical narratives that had shaped the population's views of Venezuelan nationhood. This, in turn, prevented the country from advancing and enacting wholesale socioeconomic change, while condemning its leaders to repeat the mistakes and perpetuate the evils of the perennially misunderstood past. Herrera Luque likewise believed that the history of Venezuela's people had been silenced. Stories 'transmitidos a través de la oralidad, narrados por sus abuelos, los cuales a su vez habían sido testidos de las narraciones de los suyos, distaban mucho de la historia enseñada

en los libros',[58] and the more accurate accounts of the past that they provided had been sidelined, even obliterated, by the *crónica oficial* – a 'cúmulo de falsedades'[59] imposed from above.

In the face of this disjuncture, locating and identifying 'la personalidad básica o el carácter nacional [que] es siempre la síntesis del pasado con el presente'[60] became one of Herrera Luque's central aims. Often stating that he was imbued with a 'firme voluntad terapéutica' (*VI*, 28), he believed that it was his duty to 'liberar al venezolano del pasado, es decir, que vea claramente el futuro'.[61] This task could best be achieved through an act of self-recognition: of studying and understanding the national 'self' and the historical processes that had shaped it. After this diagnosis, treatment of the resulting socioeconomic ills could begin.[62] That the most effective method of instigating this act of self-recognition was novelising history – that literature could, in Vargas Llosa's terms, '[contar] la historia que la historia que escriben los historiadores no sabe ni puede contar'[63] – seems almost to have been a fortuitous realisation for Herrera Luque.

II.iii. Literary Beginnings

Herrera Luque's medical career ended in ignominious circumstances in the late 1960s after a series of extremely ugly public disputes with the Universidad Central. Herrera Luque had never been far from controversy since the publication of *Los viajeros de Indias*, and poor relations with colleagues were a defining feature of his working life. In the mid-1960s, his complaints about the parlous

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[58] Carmen Verde Arocha, *El quejido trágico en Herrera Luque: Una lectura de* La luna de Fausto (Caracas: Pomaire, 1992), 19.

[59] Herrera Luque, 'Nadie puede decir que mi "Boves" es distinto al Boves de la Historia', *El Nacional*, 24th December 1974, p. C12.

[60] Herrera Luque, 'El Venezolano y su historia'. Note that Gil Fortoul had earlier written that 'El alma de un pueblo o de una raza es la síntesis de toda su historia y la herencia de todos sus antepasados' (José Gil Fortoul, *El hombre y la historia: Ensayo de sociología venezolana* [Paris: Garnier Hermanos, 1896]), 12).

[61] Joaquín Soler Serrano, *Francisco Herrera Luque: Mis personajes favoritos* (Caracas: C.A. Venezolana de Televisión, 2000 [1983]) (television interview), 21:01-21:08.

[62] This belief is reminiscent, in some ways, of the reflective philosophical intentions of many of the members of Spain's *Generación del 98*.

[63] Vargas Llosa, *La verdad de las mentiras*, 24/

conditions in Venezuela's state-run mental asylums, whose 'psiquiatras-hacendados […] bien podrían calificarse de esclavistas'[64] had been ignored, to his exasperation. Disputes with colleagues over their 'indisciplina y negligencia'[65] escalated to the extent that one colleague 'llegó al extremo de amenazarme con un revólver'.[66] The subsequent inquest caused 'sensación y inquietud en el mundo médico'[67] and resulted in Herrera Luque's resignation from his position in 1970 and (later much-regretted) decision to 'exiliarme de la vida científica y docente'.[68] At the same time, he destroyed all traces of *La historia detenida*, on which he had been working. This was the 'verdadero punto de inflexión en su vida.'[69]

His faith in the ability of 'pure' medicine, of scientific examination, to address pressing questions around Venezuela's pathologies and national identity had been waning for some years. 'Venía buscando una forma de interpretar nuestra realidad de forma distinta, dentro de unos moldes que le dieron total libertad de creación'[70] that might extend beyond the constraints of the scientific essay. *Los viajeros de Indias* had garnered him much renown, and he was a prolific contributor to the Caracas dailies throughout the 1960s, generally producing 'escritos de carácter científico'.[71] By the end of the decade, however, he had begun commenting more frequently and lucidly on literary matters. In a 1968 piece titled 'Valor científico del testimonio literario', Herrera Luque discussed the synergistic relationship between literature and scientific study, asserting that 'el testimonio literario puede ser de inestimable ayuda en la comprensión de la realidad psicológica y social por la libertad de expresión que adquiere el autor a través de sus personajes'.[72] He stated in that essay

[64] José Emilio Castellanos, 'El delito de ser loco: En colonias de esclavos se han convertido los centros rurales para dementes', in *El Nacional*, 27th February 1970, p. C2.
[65] Luis Buitrago Segura, 'Herrera Luque presentó su renuncia a la Cátedra de Siquiatría y acusa a 3 Gobiernos y varios profesores', in *El Nacional*, 31st October 1972, p. D16.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Luis Buitrago Segura, 'El profesor Fernando Valarino respalda al Dr. Herrera Luque', in *El Nacional*, 1st November 1972, p. 62.
[68] Herrera Luque, letter to Adolfo Starosta dated 1st October 1990, cited in Lovera, 713.
[69] Viera Rojas, 86
[70] Lovera, 183.
[71] Viera Rojas, 80.
[72] Herrera Luque, 'Valor científico del testimonio literario', *El Nacional*, 28th August 1968, p. 29.

that 'la novela hispanoamericana no es ficción sino copia fotográfica de la realidad',[73] referring to the contemporaneous upsurge of interest into the artistic and political possibilities provided by the historical novel throughout Latin America.[74] Herrera Luque came to realise that the historical novel, with its use of exaggeration, subjectivity and conjecture, alongside its tendency towards 'reconstitución, añadidura, completamiento'[75], had the capacity to 'expresar verdades profundas e inquietantes'[76] more effectively than science could.

Herrera Luque's conception of the novel as a photocopy of reality reveals his basically realist – and in some ways traditionalist – outlook. He always adhered closely to the realist mode and criticised what he saw as superfluous formal and stylistic experimentation, stating that 'la novela debe tener un inicio, debe tener una trama, un nudo, y después un desenlace.'.[77] Many statements made with regard to his literary principles were contradictory: most notably, Herrera Luque declared himself the progenitor of an altogether new literary form called the *historia fabulada* ('no me gusta el título de "novela histórica" […] yo hago otro tanto'[78]) before later saying that he had made this claim 'en tono de sarcasmo'.[79] Nevertheless, he always used 'una metodología científica para recabar todos los datos'[80] and, in this sense, 'el psiquiatra […] siempre está presente' (*PP*, viii) in his works. The influences upon him are multiple and idiosyncratic. Herrera Luque rarely discussed which authors he admired, but the works that informed his own can be deduced with

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[73] Ibid.

[74] After the publication and success of Arturo Uslar Pietri's *Las lanzas coloradas* (1931) and Alejo Carpentier's *El reino de este mundo* (1949), historical novels (both in the traditional sense and 'new historical novels') appeared with increasing frequency during this period. This phenomenon was epitomised by Carpentier's *El siglo de las luces* (1962) and Reinaldo Arenas's *El mundo alucinante* (1969), alongside a host of less well remembered texts such as Uslar Pietri's *El camino de El Dorado* (1947), David Viñas's *En la semana trágica* (1966), Miguel Ángel Asturias's *Maladrón* (1969), and Sergio Ramírez's debut novel, *Tiempo de fulgor* (1970). Recurrent thematic focuses of historical novels published in those years were the periods of conquest and of independence, which allowed for a reconsideration of national founding myths. See, for example, Jorge Inostrosa's *Bajo las banderas del Libertador* (1969), or Demetrio Aguilar Malta's novels on the lives and deeds of Orellana (*El Quijote de El Dorado*, 1964) and Balboa (*Un nuevo mar para el Rey*, 1965).

[75] Jitrik, *Historia e imaginación*, 16.

[76] Vargas Llosa, *La verdad de las mentiras*, 24.

[77] Moody, 45.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Pantín, 698.

[80] Ibid.

some certainty. He told Michael Moody that he was from an early age 'muy apasionado de Víctor Hugo, Alejandro Dumas, Salgari, Estefan Zweig, Cummings,[81] Gallegos' and 'Irving Wallace en los Estados Unidos porque es un hombre que investiga como científico'.[82] He was an admirer of García Márquez, Isabel Allende, and Vargas Llosa – he particularly liked *La guerra del fin del mundo* (1981) – and knew Carlos Fuentes well, with *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962) being a palpable influence.

Others came from inside Venezuela. Aside from Gil Fortoul and Vallenilla Lanz, Oviedo y Baños is a perpetual point of reference for Herrera Luque, and he praised the nineteenth-century biographer Juan Vicente González. Other important biographies from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century also appear to have been important influences, particularly Gregorio Marañón's biographies of Henry IV of Castile (1930) and the Count-Duke of Olivares (1936) and Rufino Blanco Fombona's work on the temperaments of the conquistadors, in which the writer asks 'En qué consiste el carácter español? ¿Cuáles son sus rasgos dominantes o permanentes?'.[83] Mario Briceño-Iragorry's 1947 biography of the Marqués de Casa León, a dramatic novelistic re-telling of his life that intersperses scenes of heightened drama with fastidious historical detail, is a further key antecedent, as is Briceño-Iragorry's only novel, *Los Riberas* (1957).

Consequently, Herrera Luque's works share several key features. One is their literary realism: the writer characterised each of his novels as an 'historia verídica, fabulada y verosímil' (*BU*, 6). The narrator is always a detached observer, relating events in a factual manner. Herrera Luque's well-known statement that 'Yo no me hago responsible de lo que digan mis personajes. Yo no sé si los condeno o los celebro. La vida es ambigua'[84] alludes to a supposedly objective, even ambivalent outlook. Historical data are integrated meticulously – even excessively – into each work, while structure is rigidly demarcated, with each section, chapter and chapter sub-section usually limited

[81] Herrera Luque does not specify *which* Cummings; Ray is, on balance, a more likely candidate than E. E.
[82] Moody, 45.
[83] Rufino Blanco Fombona, *El conquistador español del Siglo XVI: Ensayo de interpretación* (Madrid: Mundo Latino, 1922), 14.
[84] Pantín, 699.

to a specific period or action. Narrative focus, meanwhile, oscillates frequently between different characters and settings. As a result of these factors, Herrera Luque's novels – for all his eschewing of experimentation – routinely display elements of generic indeterminacy, with interior monologues, essayistic passages, historical accounts and anecdotes abounding. The writer's treatment of his protagonists, often unintentionally subjective, is informed by his efforts to understand the personal experiences and historical processes that shaped them – and, through doing so, to understand Venezuela's national character.

III. On Power and History

Three of Herrera Luque's novels can unambiguously be termed biographical novels (or novelised biographies): *Boves, el urogallo* (1972), *En la casa del pez que escupe el agua* (1975) and *Los cuatro reyes de la baraja* (1991). Each takes an influential and enigmatic leader from Venezuelan history as its protagonist. *Boves, el urogallo*, Herrera Luque's first novel, depicts the life and atrocities of the ferocious royalist commander José Tomás Boves (1782-1814). Herrera Luque and many others perplexingly termed Boves the first *caudillo* of Venezuelan democracy. Boves's actions reveal deeply uncomfortable realities about the genesis of the Venezuelan state, often masked in official historiography. *En la casa del pez que escupe el agua*, a long and complex work, provides a panoramic account of the era dominated by Juan Vicente Gómez. Gómez, a mysterious and despotic figure, has often been cast as an archetypal tyrant and the very embodiment of political power. Herrera Luque's novel explores the ways in which – and how effectively – he was able to discharge this power as an outsider to Venezuela's ossified social hierarchy. *Los cuatro reyes de la baraja*, the writer's final work, was published posthumously, and is the most formally complex of the three. While ostensibly a biography of the extravagant Antonio Guzmán Blanco, the very 'encarnación del personalismo'[85], this post-Caracazo work is set in 1957-58. The novelised biography of the dictator

[85] Elías Pino Iturrieta, *Nada sino un hombre: Los orígenes del personalismo en Venezuela* (Caracas: Alfa, 2007), 11.

serves as a pretext for a codification of the broader historical cycles and patterns that defined Venezuela's history and which elucidate its existential problems.

The sources of power, and the forms it takes, are perennial concerns in each novel. Precisely what constitutes power has long been a topic of philosophical debate. For Rousseau, it is a person's ability to 'unify and control the forces already existing' and create 'a totality of forces sufficient to overcome the obstacles resisting them'.[86] Nietzsche stated that 'life itself is will to power'[87], while Foucault cast power as omnipresent and multidirectional, being 'the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society'.[88] It is not, however, my intention to formulate a precise definition of power in this thesis, since Herrera Luque was not interested in exploring *what power is* – but rather from where it is derived and how the ways in which it is discharged have evolved over the course of Venezuela's history. The writer's focus on important leaders is therefore wholly unsurprising, since personalism has been 'un fenómeno constante en la historia de Venezuela'.[89] Orthodox historical readings affirm that the country's development has been defined almost entirely by the actions of a succession of strongman figures, most of whom have exhibited 'supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities'[90] and thereby fit into Max Weber's conception of charismatic authority. However, it was Herrera Luque's belief that, rather than shaping Venezuela in their own image, Boves, Gómez and Guzmán were instead epiphenomenal avatars of Venezuela over the course of its history. In his classical study of the historical novel, Georg Lukács argues that its protagonist should closely embody the historical forces of their era ('no debe trascender a su tiempo, sino expresarlo',[91] in Elmore's paraphrase), and, indeed, many writers chose fictional 'everyman' types for this purpose, whose trajectories intersected with major events. Herrera Luque not only believed that Venezuela's collective 'soul'

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[86] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. by Christopher Betts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 54.
[87] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. by Judith Norman, 9th edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011 [2002]), 13.
[88] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, tr. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998 [1976]), 93.
[89] Pino Iturrieta, 9.
[90] Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. by A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1947), 358.
[91] Elmore, 177.

could best be read through these leaders, rather than through illustrative fictional characters, but that they derived their authority from their being 'la más vívida expresión de nosotros los venezolanos' (*4RB*, 250) and embodying the nation's *Volksgeist* in their respective periods.

Accordingly, power, and the legitimacy that enables its effective wielding, are shaped by long-term historical processes, rather than the other way round. In broad terms, the writer conceived of Venezuela's history as a protracted, repetitive and generally fruitless struggle to overcome the pathologies and divisions implanted at its conception – a 'self-perpetuating curse'[92] – and to achieve what Herrera Luque characterised as a national synthesis.

This thesis proceeds as a series of case studies. In Chapter One, on *Boves, el urogallo*, I first discuss the explanations for the protagonist's enduring presence and problematic position in national mythology and folklore, and Herrera Luque's ambition to revise Boves's significance. I then examine how effectively the writer achieves this through analysing the aesthetic achievements and shortcomings both of the central biography of the *caudillo* and of the novel's other stylistic and structural features. The latter part of Chapter One focuses on the political aspects of *Boves, el urogallo* – namely, the presentation of the racial and social divisions that underlay the events of the War of Independence, the significance of surrogate characters who enable commentary from Herrera Luque, and the solutions posited to the fundamental national problems set out in the novel. Chapter Two examines *En la casa del pez que escupe el agua*, characterising the work as the novelisation of a long struggle for social and political authority between old and new forms of power: the *mantuano* oligarchy and the enigmatic dictator. In addition to the characterisation of Gómez, the role of domestic space, and the overall trajectory of Venezuela's history as depicted in the novel, a key consideration is how Herrera Luque attempts to foreground subversive oral and anecdotal histories and to present a panoramic vision of Venezuelan society. The final chapter, on *Los cuatro reyes de la baraja*, first explores how Herrera Luque's outlook on history and nationhood was

[92] Steven Boldy, 'Fathers and Sons in Fuentes's *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*', in *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, vol. 61, no. 1 (January 1984), pp. 31-40 (33).

frequently informed by short-term developments in his tempestuous personal life. The chapter subsequently studies the novel's complex narration and problematic codifying intention, the successes and shortcomings of its biography of Guzmán Blanco, and, finally, what Herrera Luque considers to be the patterns inherent to Venezuelan history.

Though diffracted, the principal aim of this thesis is to examine how successfully Herrera Luque charts the origins, dynamics, and development of political power from the War of Independence, through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the dying days of *puntofijismo*. It is my contention that the writer's reconstructions of the lives and contexts of these emblematic figures function as insights into the realities of Venezuela's journey towards synthesis at pivotal moments in its history. Simultaneously, they enable the revaluation of canonical narratives and identify the nation's structural ills as the manifestations of poorly understood historical processes. These have both defined, and been compounded by, the exercise of political power. I propose that Herrera Luque's novelised biographies are didactic works, through which he aimed to disseminate a particular, codified view of history and nationhood – and, in so doing, to provide a diagnosis for Venezuela's greatest social ills, or 'los porqués de nuestros fracasos'[93] – during one of the most tumultuous periods in its history.

[93] Lovera, 627.

Chapter One

Boves, el urogallo

Yo los condeno a perderse en los siglos buscando un Taita.
Y ¡que viva la Patria, coño! ¡Que viva la Patria, carajo!

—Luis Alberto Lamata[94]

The figure of the bogeyman – an imaginary evil being 'invoked to scare, cajole or bully children into obedience and quiet'[95] – is a near-universal cultural phenomenon. In Hispanophone and Lusophone nations, he takes the form of the *coco*, a terrifying monster said to kidnap and devour misbehaving children. The *coco* variously appears as a shapeshifter, a hairy demon, or a fearsome reptilian beast. Such myths as these 'are never factual, but seldom are they totally "untrue"',[96] and, indeed, in Venezuela *el coco* has long appeared in the cultural imagination as a real-life historical figure: the ferocious *caudillo* José Tomás Boves (1782-1814), leader of the royalist *llanero* armies during the nation's War of Independence, and destroyer of the Second Republic in an orgiastic campaign of violence in 1814.

Originally a merchant turned smuggler who hailed from a humble background in Asturias, much of Boves's life remains shrouded in mystery. His military activity during the period of the *Guerra a Muerte* – the bloodiest phase of any of the Spanish American wars of independence, during which

94 Luis Alberto Lamata, *Taita Boves* (Alfarería Cinematográfica, Maraca Producciones, and Factor RH Producciones, 2010), 1:36:27-1:36:49.
95 Marina Warner, *No Go the Bogeyman: Scaring, Lulling, and Making Mock* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998), 31.
96 Alexander Eliot et al., *The Universal Myths: Heroes, Gods, Tricksters and Others* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1990), 1.

the patriot army had 'for its first and chief aim to destroy in Venezuela the accursed race of European Spaniards'[97] – lasted no more than two years, and he died in battle at the age of just thirty-two. Yet 'el caudillo asturiano ha pasado a la historia, e incluso a la imaginería y a la jerga popular'[98] as the very embodiment of evil: 'su nombre sirvió a la gente sencilla para hacerle el coco a los niños: "que te coge Boves!"; y como término de comparación en perversidad: "más malo que Boves"'.[99] Of the litany of conquistadors, pirates, bandits and tyrants whose names feature in Venezuela's chaotic and often violent history, Boves is the figure 'más consubstancialmente identificada con el miedo, en todas sus formas'.[100]

In the canonical historiographical narratives of the War of Independence that compose Venezuela's 'official' history, Boves has traditionally featured not only as 'el espantoso 'coco",[101] 'a byword for anarchic cruelty'[102] and a 'bloodthirsty scourge of civilization',[103] but as the very 'Anticristo de la patria',[104] as the governor of Zulia state christened him. Boves has frequently been cast as a sort of 'internal other'[105] against which the enlightened early republic came to identify itself, with his largely black and *pardo* armies 'portrayed as ferocious savages or, its complement, as ignorant and fanatic'.[106] As Venezuela's founding myths concretised with the passage of the decades, Boves was reductively depicted as an anti-Bolívar – the evil royalist foil for the heroic Liberator. Establishment historian Rufino Blanco Fombona, for example, labelled him a *fiera* and stated that 'Bolívar era hombre de ideas e ideales; Boves de apetitos';[107] 'Bolívar representaba la Revolución, la Independencia, la República; Boves representaba la Tradición, la Colonia, el Rey

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97 Salvador de Madariaga, *Bolívar* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1952), 199.
98 José Semprún, *La División Infernal: Boves, vencedor de Bolívar* (Madrid: Falcata, 2002), 48.
99 Acisclo Valdivieso Montaño, *José Tomás Boves* (Caracas: La Esfera, 1931), 27.
100 Germán Carrera Damas, 'Juan Vicente Gómez: La evasora personalidad de un dictador', in Julio Labastida Martín del Campo, ed., *Dictaduras y dictadores* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI Editores, 1986), pp. 179-203 (182).
101 Juan Uslar Pietri, *Historia de la rebelión popular de 1814* (Caracas: EDIME, 1962), 163.
102 Anthony McFarlane, *War and Independence in Spanish America* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 130.
103 McFarlane, 131.
104 Valdivieso, *José Tomás Boves* (Caracas: La Esfera, 1931), i.
105 Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Natura, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 71.
106 Marcela Echeverri, *Indian and Slave Royalists in the Age of Revolution: Reform, Revolution and Royalism in the Northern Andes, 1780-1824* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 164.
107 Rufino Blanco Fombona, *Bolívar y la Guerra a Muerte: Época de Boves, 1813-1814* (Caracas: Impresores Unidos, 1942), 140.

Absoluto'.[108] In a twentieth-century survey of biographies of the Asturian, José Antonio de Armas Chitty bristled at any tentative comparisons between his talents and Bolívar's, fulminating that 'comparar a quien solo organizó hordas para asesinar pueblos y siempre al servicio de un régimen tirano, con quien crea patrias y deja ideas que hoy son normas de política internacional, es apreciación que exige algo que no tiene respuesta dentro de la más sana crítica histórica'.[109]

Demonising Boves undoubtedly served a political purpose. By 'concretarse solo a las flaquezas de su humana arcilla, para exhibirlo a la posteridad nada más que como un desalmado, un bandido, azote de la humanidad'[110] and by identifying Boves as a 'monster vomited from hell'[111] at the head of the *división infernal*, the uncomfortable realities at the very heart of the nation's foundation could escape examination. While Venezuela's revolutionary war was long characterised domestically as a heroic liberation struggle, more recent scholarship has instead analysed it as the 'war of class and race'[112] that Boves and his followers themselves perceived it to be. Anderson notes that 'a key factor initially spurring the drive for independence […] was the *fear* of the 'lower-class' political mobilizations: to wit, Indian or negro-slave uprisings'[113], the prospect of which 'filled Venezuelan landowners, however liberal-minded in theory, with terror'.[114] In disregarding the reasons behind his actions and his success, earlier Venezuelan historians could strategically ignore the exceedingly complex socioeconomic context that gave rise to the *caudillo*'s brief and bloody military campaign.

Yet this official historical narrative 'contrasta con el recuerdo de un hombre a quien los suyos apodaban el Taita' (*BCH*, 38), particularly in his heartland of the Venezuelan *llanos*. Here, he was 'amado y reverenciado como lo son, entre los primitivos, las deidades sangrientas' (*BCH*, 38), to

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[108] Blanco Fombona, *Bolívar y la guerra a muerte,* 132.
[109] José Antonio de Armas Chitty, *Boves a través de sus biógrafos* (Caracas: Editorial América Libra, 1976), 17.
[110] Valdivieso, 27.
[111] Juan Pablo Dabove, *Bandit Narratives in Latin America: From Villa to Chávez* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017), 51.
[112] Richard W. Slatta and Jane Lucas de Grummond, *Simón Bolívar's Quest for Glory* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 97.
[113] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2016 [1983]), 48.
[114] Hugh Seton-Watson, *Nations and States: An Enquiry into the Origins of Nations and the Politics of Nationalism* (London: Methuen, 1977), 201.

the extent that the anniversary of his death was marked, even a century later, with a commemorative *misa de Boves* in churches throughout the region.[115] Anecdotal accounts of Boves's 'actos de generosidad y hasta de clemencia'[116] and of his bravery – indeed, this 'courage was the source of [his] legitimacy'[117] – featured prominently in oral tradition alongside well-documented stories of his many cruelties. Widespread sympathy persists today in many quarters for his efforts to preserve the liberties of the *llanero* way of life[118] and to emancipate Venezuela's vast black and *pardo* underclass from the self-aggrandising, slave-owning, pro-independence *criollo* oligarchy. In some ways, Boves is thus comparable to other illustrative bandit figures in Latin American history – Juan Facundo Quiroga in Argentina, Manuel García in Cuba, Pancho Villa in Mexico, Lampião in Brazil, and, in Venezuela itself, Maisanto, the 'sometime social bandit whom [Hugo] Chávez claimed as his great-grandfather'.[119] All of these were famed for their charisma, courage and cruelty, vilified as barbaric by the elites, and remembered as champions of resistance by the oppressed. Juan Uslar Pietri summarises the contradictions inherent within Boves thus:

> Sobre su vida han tejido las más controvertidas teorías, para unos era una bestia feroz, llena de odio y sedienta de sangre, y, en cambio, para otros fue un noble guerrero que luchó por el bien del proletariado nacional contra los desmanes y tiranía de los blancos dueños de la tierra. En realidad, Boves fue una rara mezcla de paladín y de bestia feroz, con sus detalles sombríos y sus momentos hermosos. Fue, sin lugar a dudas, el jefe de más personalidad que pisó en el campo realista en la Independencia y el caudillo más formidable que conoce la historia de Venezuela.[120]

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[115] In Chapter 10 of Herrera Luque's *En la casa del pez que escupe el agua*, the quasi-sequel of *Boves, el urogallo*, the character Juan Corrales – Boves's grandson – attends one of these very masses in Guayabal. The narrator notes that 'A Boves le detestan en Caracas. En el Llano le encienden velas' (*CDP*, 51-52). Herrera Luque had himself visited the churches where this ceremony took place, but regrettably, this scene is rushed and lacks detail.

[116] Laureano Vallenilla Lanz, *Cesarismo democrático*, 2nd ed. (Caracas: Tipografía Universal, 1929 [1919]), 120.

[117] Jorge I. Domínguez, *Insurrection or Loyalty: The Breakdown of the Spanish Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 178.

[118] John Lynch, *The Spanish American Revolutions, 1808-1826* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), 205.

[119] Michael Reid, *Forgotten Continent: The Battle for Latin America's Soul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 165.

[120] J. Uslar Pietri, 83-4.

In Boves, 'el héroe y el bandolero se confundieron tanto […] que hubiera sido difícil arrojar una línea divisoria'.[121] While canonical historical tradition caricatured and simplified him, many writers made attempts to revisit Boves's historical role and make sense of his motives. Like those other archetypal bandit figures, Boves became a subject of fascination ('in the strong sense of something that ignites an inextricable mix of horror and admiration, fear and attraction'[122]) in the Venezuelan cultural sphere, figuring prominently in many landmark 19th- and 20th-century works. Most famously, Juan Vicente González, who himself struggled to extricate the *héroe* from the *bandolero*, described Boves as 'el primer jefe de la democracia venezolana'[123] in a romantic 1858 biography of José Félix Ribas, which was for years 'la más sabida'[124] account of Boves's life.

This apparently contradictory epithet – *el primer jefe de la democracia* – informed later writers' interpretations, particularly that of the influential Positivist thinker and sometime Gómez functionary Laureano Vallenilla Lanz who, many decades later, noted that González's statement statement 'penetró muy hondo en las entrañas de nuestra revolución'.[125] Vallenilla's best-known work, *Cesarismo democrático* (1919), is essentially a sociological thesis defending the existence of a *gendarme necesario* – an authoritarian leader needed to maintain order and assure social progress given the supposedly chaotic national character of the Venezuelan people[126] – and arguing that 'dictatorship was natural […] to Venezuela, an expression rather than a denial of true democracy'.[127] In attempting to account for the early development of political power and charismatic authority in Venezuela, Vallenilla re-examined Boves's biography and his relationship with the *pardos*, but lamented that:

> La psicología de aquel 'hombre pavoroso' no ha sido estudiada aún con criterio libre de prejuicios, ya por el empeño que han tenido nuestros historiadores en adulterar el verdadero carácter de guerra civil que tuvo la revolución, para echar sobre España las

[121] Juan Vicente González, *Biografía del general José Félix Ribas* (Madrid: Editorial América, 1918), 134.
[122] Dabove, 42.
[123] J.V. González, 139.
[124] Tomás Pérez Tenreiro, *José Tomás Boves: Primera Lanza del Rey* (Caracas: Ministerio de la Defensa, 1969), 11.
[125] Vallenilla Lanz, *Cesarismo democrático*, 122.
[126] It was Vallenilla Lanz's (racist) belief that Venezuelan society had been rendered nigh ungovernable by both its racial and geographic diversity.
[127] McFarlane, 421.

> responsabilidades de aquellos grandes crímenes de 1814, como porque la tradición y la leyenda enseñoreándose de la imaginación nacional, han venido dando a la figura del heroico soldado relieves absolutamente caprichosos; y arrancándole de la escena en que se desarrollan sus hazañas y del grupo inmenso de venezolanos que compartió con él sus triunfos y sus crímenes.[128]

That final point alludes to a crucial aspect of the War of Independence. While Vallenilla skilfully dissected Boves's short-term motivations and Venezuela's sociopolitical climate at the time, his study of Boves's psychological makeup and political outlook (insofar as the latter truly existed) was only cursory. In a similar fashion, Boves appears in Arturo Uslar Pietri's celebrated *Las lanzas coloradas* (1931), in which characters must decide whom to support amid a civilisation-versus-barbarism conflict 'between the plainsmen and the city people […] between capital and province'[129] – but it is the 'fearful expectation of attack by Boves and his troops'[130] rather than the man himself that is of import. The *caudillo* scarcely appears.

In short, whilst the exact significance of the historical Boves, the contradictions he embodied, and his lasting impact on official and popular perceptions of the Venezuelan state's early development were all analysed and re-analysed at length, the sources of his legitimacy as a commander and, more, the complexities of his personality remained elusive. As Juan Uslar Pietri explained, it is on this point that 'allí como siempre vuelve a perderse el rastro de Boves en la fantasía y la oscuridad. Nada se sabe de él a ciencia cierta'.[131] Indeed, it this very dearth of in-depth psychoanalytical depictions of Boves's character that sparked Herrera Luque's own fixation with the *caudillo*. Given his long preoccupation with the mental pathologies supposedly exhibited by modern Venezuela's forebears, the psychotic Boves was an obvious object of interest; moreover, Herrera Luque 'siempre comentaba que a nuestra historia le sobran documentos y le faltan hombres'.[132] As the writer stated in 1983:

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[128] Vallenilla Lanz, *Cesarismo democrático*, 123.
[129] John Brushwood, *The Spanish American Novel: A Twentieth-Century Survey* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1975), 90.
[130] Brushwood, 91.
[131] J. Uslar Pietri, 85.
[132] Verde Arocha, 21

> Hace mucho tiempo me interesé por Boves. Siempre me pregunté cómo era posible que un capitán de bandoleros – como lo pinta la historia escolar[133] – haya sido capaz de desatar una hecatombe semejante. Cuando años más tarde me propuse profundizar en su estudio, aumentaron mis dudas al advertir las muchas contradicciones de que está llena la Historia de Venezuela, y cómo, por debajo del esfuerzo de la crónica oficial por condenar a este antihéroe venezolano por excelencia, se notaba la existencia de una personalidad que parecía expresar significados diferentes. (*BCH*, 37)

We see in this short extract the reasons for Boves's attractiveness as a subject, as well as the germs of Herrera Luque's primary fixations – particularly the pitfalls of a *crónica oficial* or *historia escolar* that obliterate history's nuances and Boves's own personality. From the beginning of his literary career, Herrera Luque criticised the superficial national History disseminated from above to the Venezuelan people: a history which 'en gran parte, y hoy por hoy, es un cúmulo de falsedades'.[134] More importantly, 'comprendió que los conocimientos de historia transmitidos a través de la oralidad, narrados por sus abuelos, los cuales a su vez habían sido testigos de las narraciones de los suyos, distaban mucho de la historia enseñada en los libros'.[135] These competing visions of the past, he believed, needed to be reconciled.

Prior to 1969 (concurrent to the composition and perhaps as part of *La historia detenida*), Herrera Luque had begun 'un estudio psiquiátrico de José Tomás Boves'.[136] Finalising his turn from the medical sciences to literary pursuits, he abandoned the study that year 'y se entregó a tratarlo imaginativamente'.[137] Boves's enduring presence in folk memory had, it seems, become more interesting for the writer than the precise contours of his psychological makeup. Indeed, Herrera Luque had witnessed the *caudillo*'s lingering imprint firsthand during his travels through Venezuela:

> En el Llano, monte adentro, a donde no llegan los investigadores de archivos y papelotes, la imagen del Taita, como lo llamaban sus seguidores, continúa presente y omnisciente, y

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[133] In the same piece, Herrera Luque attacked 'irreverentes textos escolares' (*BCH*, 46) for grossly minimising – or failing to understand – Boves's true significance for the foundation of independent Venezuela.
[134] Herrera Luque, 'Nadie puede decir…'
[135] Verde Arocha, 19.
[136] Lovera, 153.
[137] Ibid.

> se le invoca y se le reza en silencio, como a esos dioses celtas a quien la Iglesia católica expulsó del culto.[138]

Boves's quasi-divine status as a *Taita* (an honorific which 'refers both to father and to spontaneous autocratic leaders'[139]) and his affection *en la voz de los viejos* a century and a half after his death greatly perplexed Herrera Luque. He recounted further examples of Boves's godlike reputation in the form of 'hermosas herejías'[140] such as that practised by 'un zambo viejo […] que le enciende sus velas al Caudillo, cuando le conmina al pago el mayorista, llega al pueblo el gobernador o se le hace más angosta la calle polvorienta',[141] and noted that:

> La historia oficial de este capitán de bandidos está salpicada de anécdotas donde se dan la mano el humor negro y el odio feral, y contrasta con el recuerdo de un hombre a quien los suyos apodaban el Taita, denomativo propio de pueblos huérfanos para sus caudillos y sus protectores. […] Fue detestado y temido, pero también amado y reverenciado como lo son, entre los primitivos, las deidades sangrientas, pues para el pensamiento del hombre adormitado en su esencia, tan solo aquel capaz de ser temido merece ser amado, ya que sin odio no puede haber amor. (*BCH*, 39)

One is reminded here of Hobsbawm's statement that 'it is at first sight strange to encounter bandits who not only practise terror and cruelty […] but whose terror actually forms part of their public image. They are heroes not in spite of the fear and horror their actions inspire, but in some ways because of them'.[142] Herrera Luque thus began asking the same question that Freud, Popper, and the writers of the great Latin American novels of dictatorship had asked themselves in the face of popular reverence for outlandish autocrats and charismatic *caudillos*:[143] 'why were large sections of the people attracted to these figures?'.[144]

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138 Herrera Luque, 'Boves en la voz de los viejos', in *El Nacional*, 9th September 1971, p. 33.
139 Alvaray, 298.
140 Herrera Luque, 'Boves en la voz de los viejos'.
141 Ibid.
142 Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (London: Abacus, 2001 [1969]), 63.
143 For Herrera Luque, this was the 'más fiero arquetipo que haya tenido la América hispana' (*BCH*, 38), and Boves its most illustrative manifestation.
144 Gerald Martin, *Gabriel García Márquez: A Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), 236.

Herrera Luque sought to disentangle this incongruity, to establish the reasons behind Boves's continued resonance in folk memory, to penetrate the morass of popular anecdotes that surrounded him, and to ascertain the 'true' nature of his character and the reasons for his longstanding resonance. He resolved to trace the paths travelled by Boves during the War of Independence, where 'con un grabador a cuestas y aires de buhonero […] interrogué a los viejos y a las familias patricias que se cuentan la historia de padres a hijos'.[145] As he later reflected:

> Un día se me ocurrió recorrer su ruta. Estar en los sitios donde existió. Quise hablar con los viejos. Quise conocer los escenarios naturales que lo contuvieron, y sobre todo, medir qué impactos había dejado en la conseja y en la tradición populares. De esta forma recogí una información cuantiosa, la cual, además de discrepar con la historia oficial, correspondía a la imagen que me venía haciendo de la caracteriología del caudillo. (*BCH*, 37)

What began as a study of this *caracterología* and of Boves's legacy in oral tradition soon metamorphosed from a research project into a novel. The self-professed dilettante characterised his novel's creation as unintentional or spontaneous, stating in the work's *Advertencia* that 'en un comienzo me asomé a él con la metódica del sistematizador, pero me encontré de pronto impedido de hablar, por eso puse de lado lo que me enseñaron y dejé que las ideas y las palabras, por ellas mismas, encontraran su forma' (6). Many of Herrera Luque's statements about *Boves* suggest, like this one, that the work's evolution into a full-length novel was in some way spontaneous and instinctive, even beyond its author's control. In 1976, he observed that 'un día salió *Boves, el Urogallo*. En un comienzo lo hice por dar vida al novelista que siempre presentí en mí'.[146] This remark is fitting, considering that the historical Boves likewise 'surgió de forma espontánea'.[147] Márquez Rodriguez believes that the novel's very subject matter facilitated its creation, noting that 'la *ficcionación* de la realidad se facilitó en este caso, porque el personaje central de la novela, Boves, fue por sí una personalidad novelesca, un especimen de *lo real maravilloso* […] que pasaba de lo sublime a lo abyecto con pasmosa facilidad'.[148] However, in reality this created a major problem for Herrera

[145] Herrera Luque, 'Boves en la voz de los viejos'.
[146] Lovera, 188.
[147] Semprún, 7.
[148] Márquez Rodríguez, *Historia y ficción*, 231.

Luque: a problem of verisimilitude. Carlos Fuentes identified a perennial difficulty in Latin American fiction when he asked '¿Cómo puede un novelista inventar personajes ficticios superiores a los personajes de nuestra historia?'.[149] Plausible invention or, in Aristotle's terms, '[speaking] not of events which have occurred, but of the kind of events which *could* occur',[150] would have been an easier task than novelising the story of Boves, many aspects of which were scarcely believable. Herrera Luque was quite cognisant of this challenge, later noting that the representation of certain outrageous events had been softened, and that 'silencié hechos por su inverosimilidad' (*BCH*, 50). It was his intention, above all, to produce 'la historia verídica, fabulada y verosímil de José Tomás Boves' (6).

The fact that Herrera Luque, a physician with no literary training, could so clearly perceive and address the problem of verisimilitude suggests that he had an intuitive literary sensibility. Nevertheless, as the novel was coming together, he held it in very low esteem. He described the work as little more than a disjointed 'conjunto de conocimientos fragmentarios expuestos, sin unidad, en la forma alcanzada de la novela' (*BCH,* 38), and told Lovera that:

> Aunque tentado por un material tan estupendo no pude menos que recordar mi condición de hombre de ciencia que también usted recuerda, y renuncié a la idea de hacer una biografía, como usted y yo la concebimos; pero jugando y jugando me fue saliendo de entre las manos una novela, que algunos amigos han considerado publicable.[151]

Boves, el urogallo[152] was eventually released on 12th June 1972, published by Domingo Fuentes, and was an overnight 'éxito fulgurante':[153] it became the third most widely read Venezuelan work of the twentieth century. Within three weeks, its first edition sold out, and was followed by several re-prints; within a year, even Fidel Castro had become an admirer. He 'deseaba desde hacía tiempo conocer'[154] Herrera Luque and, in 1973, greeted a Venezuelan delegation to Havana at which the

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149 Carlos Fuentes, *Valiente mundo nuevo* (Madrid: Mondadori, 1990), 193-94.
150 Aristotle, *The* Poetics *of Aristotle*, trans. by Stephen Halliwell (London: Duckworth, 1987), 40.
151 Lovera, 192.
152 Hereinafter *Boves*.
153 Lovera, 194.
154 Lovera, 237.

author was present by asking '¿Quién es el autor del *Urogallo*?'.[155] *Boves*'s success quickly 'puso en el centro de nuestra vida literaria al escritor más veces editado en la segunda mitad del siglo XX',[156] and had become a classic within two years of its publication, at which point it was adapted into a *telenovela* adapted by José Ignacio Carabujas and directed by Román Chalbaud. The series 'obtuvo un enorme éxito de público',[157] with its leading actor, Gustavo Rodríguez, being awarded the Premio Guaicaipuro de Oro in 1975. A six-part television series and a film adaptation were also mooted, but never made it beyond the preliminary stages of development.[158] Its cultural impact has proven enduring. As recently as 2010, it was the subject of a cinematic adaptation by the filmmaker Luis Alberto Lamata – a landmark of the period termed the 'edad de plata del cine venezolano'[159] – amid a resurgence of historical films, whose production was heavily promoted under Chávez.[160] Only Gallegos's *Doña Bárbara* surpassed *Boves* in its number of editions and translations.[161] By 2012, the novel's fortieth anniversary, well over a million copies had been sold.

As with so many of Herrera Luque's works, however, the novel has been under-appreciated in critical circles. This is partly attributable to the familiar allegation of *bestsellerismo*: the work's commercial success outstrips its aesthetic sophistication, and there can be no doubt that it is often inconsistent, crude, and naïve. The writer's intentions and ambitions in producing this novel – that is, reformulating popular conceptions of Venezuelan history by giving voice to those parts of it that were repressed and by reassessing one of its most vilified figures, as previously discussed – were commented on at length by critics, journalists, and casual readers alike. However, the

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155 Ibid.

156 Ibid.

157 María Gabriela Aimaretti, 'Memoriales culturales heterogéneas. Una aproximación comparada a las representaciones de las revoluciones independentistas (1970-2010)', in Ana Laura Lusnich, Pablo Piedras and Silvana Flores, eds., *Cine y revolución en América Latina: Una perspectiva comparada de las cinematografías de la region* (Buenos Aires: Imago Mundi, 2013), pp. 271-288 (280).

158 Lovera, 106.

159 Jaime López, 'La 'edad de plata' del cine venezolano', in *El Mundo*, 25th August 2010 <https://www.elmundo.es/america/2010/08/25/venezuela/1282767680.html> [accessed 30th October 2024].

160 Much has been made of the role of history in Chávez's cultural policy. In a letter to Lamata that most likely went unanswered, Lovera denounced the film as 'un acto de militancia política en la cual la historia se utiliza […] como un arma de la controversia política' (227), though he was far more upset about the director's omission of Eugenia Blanco's storyline.

161 Lovera, 204.

particular way in which Herrera Luque attempts to achieve this objective, and with what degree of success, have never been the subject of detailed analysis.

The present chapter aims to answer both questions, and to determine how Boves, depicted as the progenitor of political power and charismatic authority in modern Venezuela, 'penetró muy hondo en las entrañas de nuestra revolución'.[162] This analysis is structured around multiple avenues of investigation. I first focus on Boves himself – that is to say, the techniques by which Herrera Luque elaborates his character study-turned-historical novel, and how he approaches his titular subject. I aim to ascertain how 'complete' a biography this truly is, identifying the key characteristics of (and tensions within) Boves's characterisation, development, plausibility, and narrative function. Crucially, I seek to discern where precisely the writer and his intended audience's sympathies lie in relation to this most contradictory of historical figures. The second section briefly analyses the novel's stylistic and structural features, working to establish *Boves*'s aesthetic qualities and shortcomings. These features inform Herrera Luque's thematic considerations: the novel's structure facilitates Herrera Luque's presentation of the social context that engendered Boves and his violent uprising, which in turn reveals much about the writer's view of the Venezuelan state's foundational processes. This chapter's third section focuses on the writer's depiction of the *mantuano* class and those secondary stories that seemingly have least to do with Boves himself, before exploring the complex racial dynamics at play within the novel and the solutions Herrera Luque posits to Venezuela's entrenched racial and social divides. The fourth section outlines the role of authorly surrogates and their role in influencing the reader's perception of the events portrayed in the novel. The chapter concludes with an extended analysis of the genesis of political power within Venezuela, of what Herrera Luque identifies as the country's original sins, and how Boves became 'la expresión del alma irredenta de este pueblo buscando su síntesis' (163). In short, I aim to answer three fundamental questions: *who* is Boves; *how* this novel tells his story; and *why*.

[162] Vallenilla Lanz, *Cesarismo democrático*, 122.

I. Man and Myth

In *The Pursuit of History*, John Tosh writes that 'biography is indispensable to the understanding of motive and intention [and] the actions of an individual can only be fully understood in the light of his or her emotional make-up, temperament and prejudices'.[163] This 'conviction […] has given rise to the only radical innovation in the recent writing of biography – the application of psycho-analysis to the past'.[164] For Hermione Lee, 'psychoanalytical biography – sometimes fused with Marxist political analysis or sociological data – placed its subjects on the couch and fitted their behaviour into a pattern'.[165] Certainly, this strategy (the Marxist element notwithstanding) is fundamental to Herrera Luque's early publications. *Los viajeros de Indias* and, in particular, *La huella perenne* were largely composed of short, albeit detailed, analyses of the personalities and character typologies of figures who illustrated Venezuela's 'sobrecarga de enfermedades mentales' (*HP*, 325).

Traces of the scientific character study from which *Boves, el urogallo* derived are visible throughout the novel. Herrera Luque talked at length of how the psychopathic Boves's personality fitted neatly into the archetypal mould of the *paranoide* (*BCH*, 39): a type to whom he had ascribed in the 1960s 'necesidades de dominio y sujeción', 'gran voracidad sexual' (*PP*, 12), and extreme levels of jealousy and vengefulness ('con los que los han traicionado, o creen ellos que los han traicionado, son feroces e implacables en su persecución y aniquilamiento, pudiendo llegar hasta el crimen y la crueldad, si las circunstancias se lo permiten' [*PP*, 69]). Furthermore, he had asserted that 'el paranoide, más que ningún otro psicópata […] suele tener éxito en la vida en lo que respecta a pompa, gloria y posesión material, fracasando, por el contrario, ruidosamente en su vida sentimental'. Paranoid psychopaths 'suelen llegar al final de sus días abandonados o temidos por todos' (*PP*, 71). In this analysis, Herrera Luque had sketched out, without yet knowing it, the life trajectory of the historical Boves as well as that of his 1972 (re)creation. This tracing of behavioural patterns is certainly how Herrera Luque first approached his study of Boves, but Lee's metaphor

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[163] John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods, and New Directions in the Study of Modern History,* 2nd edn. (London: Longman, 1991), 79.
[164] Ibid.
[165] Hermione Lee, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 87.

of biographer as psychiatrist and subject as patient would be a simplistic and reductive interpretation of the work. The novelised biography that emerged became far more complex and wide-ranging in its focus than a mere 'diagnostic' character study.

There are two further metaphors, as identified by Lee, that are frequently employed to characterise different approaches to life writing: the autopsy and the portrait. In the autopsy (or thanatography), 'the medical examiner trained as a forensic pathologist opens up the corpse' and 'employs his or her expertise in anatomy and pathology to investigate, understand, describe, and explain what may have seemed obscure, strange, or inexplicable'.[166] The portrait, meanwhile, risks 'flattery, idealization, flatness, inaccuracy, distortion',[167] but also 'suggests empathy, bringing to life, capturing the character'.[168]

The contrast between these strategies is apt in the case of *Boves*. Given Herrera Luque's background, we might extrapolate Lee's words somewhat. *Boves*, the first product of Herrera Luque's transition from medic to writer, contains elements of both the portrait and autopsy; it is by turns clinical and pictorial. The work itself has generally been appraised either as a 'novela decididamente histórica',[169] or as 'both novel and historical account'.[170] Regardless of genre, or the terminology used to define the novel, there is no doubt that 'el psiquiatra que lo escribe siempre está presente' (*PP*, viii). In portraying Boves's personality and life story, Herrera Luque blends objective biographical and historical data, internal monologues, anecdotes about the *caudillo* preserved in folk memory (often with much artistic licence), and, crucially, a narrative style that recalls medical observation – detached, factual doctor's notes describing Boves's behavioural patterns. These shift and intertwine as the novel progresses, but are predicated upon three central

166 Lee, 1.
167 Lee, 3.
168 Lee, 2.
169 Ana Teresa Torres, 'El escritor ante la realidad política venezolana', in *Inti: Revista de literatura hiapánica*, vol. 37/38 (1993), pp. 37-45 (44).
170 S. R. Wilson, '*Manuel Piar, caudillo de dos colores* by Francisco Herrera Luque', in *Chasqui: Revista de literatura latinoamericana*, vol. 17, no. 1 (May 1988), pp. 120-122 (121).

tenets: *observation* or *portraiture*; the narration of Boves's deeds and atrocities; and the exploration of his emotions, motives, and formative experiences. Each will be examined in turn.

It seems logical to begin our analysis of Herrera Luque's protagonist as both a forensic pathologist and a portraitist would: by observing his outermost layer. Central to Boves's magnetism was his striking appearance. Indeed, it is a recurrent focus (often the first information related) in the main historical accounts of his life. Juan Vicente González's physical account of Boves, one greatly embellished by his 'capacidades de exageración y de hermosísima fraseología',[171] demonstrated that his physiognomy, stature and manner of movement were especially ingrained in popular memory:

> La tradición, espantada, conserva el retrato de este bárbaro: de cuerpo mediano y ancha espalda, de cabeza enorme, de ojos azules y turbios como el mar, tenía la frente espaciosa y chata, la barba escasa y roja, la nariz y la boca como las del ave de rapiña. Su cuello, que tiraba hacia atrás, y sus miradas, que concentraba á veces, y á veces paseaba con inquieta curiosidad, daban á sus movimientos aquel imperio y fiereza de que no le fué dado eximirse á sus mismos superiores.[172]

For Valdivieso, meanwhile, Boves was 'un hombre de sugestivo físico: alto, bien proporcionado, de cabello rubio, ojos azules y blanca tez, fuerte a toda fatiga'.[173] The term *sugestivo* is apt here, since Boves's very physical features emphasised his white Asturian background and themselves underscored a major contradiction. His military campaign was predicated upon extreme violence against Venezuela's white, largely pro-independence *criollo* population by his mainly black and *pardo* armies amid the *Guerra a Muerte* declared by Bolívar, which demanded the extermination of all loyalist Spanish residents of Venezuela. Herrera Luque once characterised Boves's anti-republic actions as his 'tratando de hacerse perdonar que tiene […] el pelo amarillo rojizo parecido al trigo en sazón en sus tierras de Asturias' (*BCH*, 46). Alongside his looks, the *caudillo*'s physical prowess and imperious mannerisms were closely intertwined with his legendary indefatigability, horsemanship, magnetic hypermasculinity, and reckless bravery – 'sobre el valor y la audacia del

[171] Pérez Tenreiro, 11.
[172] J.V. González, 134-5.
[173] Valdivieso, 19.

Taita se contaban innumerables anécdotas' (78). Boves embodied 'every activity of daring and physical skill that [the *llaneros*] found admirable',[174] and these were the key ingredients – the 'supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities' in Weber's definition – of his charisma.[175] His charisma was such that many appear to have regarded him as near-messianic, or at least providential: in many accounts of the War of Independence, it is said that 'con solo aparecer su prestigiosa figura en el campo de la lucha comenzó el odio de los pardos contra los blancos',[176] or that his presence alone could '[despertar] a las masas' (*BCH*, 46). All of this underscored both his original appeal and the fascination, reverence and revulsion he inspired long after his death.

Many later editions of *Boves* feature bloodthirsty cover art – stylised illustrations of lynchings and spears – but the inaugural Fuentes edition displayed a crude pastel portrait of the *caudillo*, his sword held aloft, his manic expression framed with bright ginger hair and glowing, demonic eyes. But Herrera Luque's account can have provided very little artistic inspiration, as his own *physical* portrait of the *caudillo* consists of extremely broad brush strokes. When the young Boves is introduced, the reader learns only the most basic details of his physiology, along with the sense that he is old beyond his years: we are told that 'tenía quince años y una estatura de mozo veinteañero' (14), and the fullest description of him states that 'veintiún años lleva el mozo y parece que fueran treinta. Tiene la talla hercúlea, los ojos verdosos y la barba rojiza de pirata asirio' (12). On many occasions, however, his outward appearance reflects or elucidates his personality and psychological makeup. We learn through a pointed comment from a supposed friend that he possesses 'manazas de leñador y […] patotas de labriego' (21), a feature that complements his brash mannerisms. Shortly before the outbreak of the revolutionary war, Herrera Luque describes how 'los cuatro años desde su liberación de Puerto Cabello lo habían robustecido. Tenía la tez quemada por el sol llanero y sus ojos de tigre centelleaban enérgicos a pesar del aire afable que se empeñaba en comunicar a sus palabras y a sus gestos' (55). Here, one detects two physical details that reflect important aspects

[174] Stephen K. Stoan, *Pablo Morillo and Venezuela, 1815-1820* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1974), 51.
[175] Weber, 358-59.
[176] J. Uslar Pietri, 83.

of Boves's characterisation. The first is the physical changes he has undergone during his time in the *llanos* – a period of much emotional development as he adapted to his new environment – while the second, the discrepancy between his amiable outward manner and the ferocity that burns within him, accentuates his fractured personality.

As Boves is almost always seen from the outside and rarely acts as the focaliser, his eyes and gaze are frequently used by Herrera Luque as a means of ascertaining his internal thoughts. 'Ojos de tigre' is a constant. When reminiscing about past lovers, 'los ojos de tigre del asturiano brillaron con regocijo' (14) or 'centellean de deseo' (18); in moments of intense anger, Boves's fury contracts or dilates his pupils ('la pupila se le contrajo de ira' [125]; 'la pupila cada vez más dilatada por el odio y la sorpresa' [138]; 'el Caudillo tiene la expresión atormentada. Sus verdes ojos tienen la pupila homicida' [198]).

On one occasion, his eyes burn with 'extraños fulgores' (138) as he meets a past enemy. This latter quotation demonstrates an externality to Herrera Luque's narration. The word *extraño* suggests that, for all the writer attempts to understand what gave rise to Boves's complex character and informed his motives, the *caudillo*'s true self remains mysterious and elusive. The same is seen in an earlier episode in which the young Boves is rejected by the *mantuano* girls of Calabozo, who '*probablemente* le recordaban a sus compañeras de la Academia' (22, my emphasis). Much of the time, *what* Boves thinks can only be inferred. The difficulty in reading the *caudillo* is further underscored by his recurrent animalisation. In addition to the feline qualities of his eyes, to which Herrera Luque refers almost excessively, he is likened to beasts throughout, compared to a 'buey' (75), a 'gavilán' (207), a 'pájaro carnicero' (147), and an 'oso' (22, 207) – he is less human and less readable.

The narrator usually acts, therefore, as an external observer of Boves. At times, we see the pattern-identifying strategy of Herrera Luque's earlier works re-emerging, as in the following passage. Here, the narrator switches to the imperfect tense to describe Boves's predilection towards excessive drinking:

> Lástima que tuviera tan mala bebida. A veces, sin que se le pidiera echar la culpa al torco o al lavagallo, o a que hubiera bebido de más o de menos, José Tomás, sombrío, tramontaba la cuesta. Entonces sus ojos, que de ordinario eran claros y brillantes como los de un tigre harto, tomaban los destellos de un tigre herido. Era el momento en que maldecía e increpaba a la gente. (19-20)

Alcohol and sex figure very prominently in Herrera Luque's portrayal of Boves and have multiple significances. A particularly illustrative example is the Boves's reaction to the first declaration of Independence in 1811:

> Aquella noche José Tomás se embriagó. Primero lo hizo alegremente, luego se volvió como un tigre y finalmente se revolcó como un cerdo. Como un tigre, maldijo y renegó de los mantuanos, y de los negros, y de los pardos, y de Calabozo, y de este país, y de todos los países. Cuando estuvo de cerdo, se vomitó en la plaza, perdió el equilibrio y se quedó dormido sobre sus horruras. En andas se lo llevaron a casa Juan Caribe y el indio Eulogio. Por el camino decía con voz de borracho:
> —¡Malditos sean los indios, los negros, los pardos, los blancos! ¡Y que viva la patria, carajo! (83)

This scene is comical and bathetic (bathos, as will be seen, became a favoured technique of Herrera Luque's), being preceded in the text by the momentous declaration of the First Republic and ensuing scenes of jubilation in Calabozo, which are promptly undercut with ridiculous and repulsive imagery. Boves's simultaneous lauding of the *patria* and condemnation of each of the racial groups that comprise it darkly prefigures the eventual senselessness of his campaign. Venezuela, it seems, means nothing to him beyond a catchphrase (Zahler notes that, at the time, 'people did not hold to a vision of 'the nation' so much as a notion of *patria*, which referred to birthplace or home area'[177]). Boves, in common with Presentación Campos in *Las lanzas coloradas*, 'has no clue about Venezuela, or any interest in it'[178] at this stage.[179] His exclamation is thus amusing

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[177] Ruben Zahler, *Ambitious Rebels: Remaking Honor, Law and Liberalism in Venezuela, 1780-1850* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2013), 54.

[178] Dabove, 75

[179] A more tenuous explanation for the line '¡Malditos sean los indios, los negros, los pardos, los blancos! ¡Y que viva la patria, carajo!' could be that it refers to the 'proceso igualitario' (*BCH*, 46) which Herrera Luque believed Boves had inadvertently initiated. Boves curses each of the four different ethnic groups in turn, before

and absurd. As Boves makes a scene of himself, the narration becomes somewhat voyeuristic. In moments of indulging this particular vice – drinking – his vulnerabilities and the competing aspects of his character become most apparent.

The same is true of Herrera Luque's focus on Boves's sexual appetites. These had attracted comment before (Juan Vicente González famously declared that 'el Monstruo amó'[180]), but Herrera Luque's accounts sparked criticism from many who attacked the preponderance of 'escenas lúbricas y macabras de la extraña conducta privada de Boves'[181] in the novel. In an early review, Guillermo José Schael wrote that 'a ratos impresiona la crudeza de algunas expresiones, porque Boves, además de un hombre implacable, era un redomado mujeriego. Dejó mujeres preñadas en casi todos los pueblos. A unas sedujo por la fuerza y a otras por atractivo personal'.[182] There are multiple explanations for this thematic focus. An uncharitable, though by no means invalid, interpretation is simply that sex sells – Herrera Luque was repeatedly accused of exaggerating such plot elements as this 'como concesión a un tipo de *best-sellerismo*'.[183] More pertinently, Boves's virility and renowned sexual conquests formed an important element of his charisma, and his well-documented and widespread use of sexual violence a major aspect of his notoriety:[184] he '[took] particular care to inflict physical violence and psychological harm on the womenfolk of his patriot enemies'.[185]

Indeed, sex and power are closely intertwined in Herrera Luque's novel, and the writer is often at pains to emphasise this relationship (a technique which may well stem from Wilhelm Reich, a key influence, who noted that the 'effect of militarism is based essentially on a libidinous

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lauding the rather vague idea of the *patria*. It is possible to read in this an attack on social and ethnic stratification – a curse upon the notion of Venezuela being the sum of its internecine parts – and a rallying cry for unity, or synthesis.

180 Pérez Tenreiro, 11.

181 Guillermo José Schael, 'Las mujeres de Boves', in *El Universal*, 22 June 1972, p. 2:1.

182 Ibid.

183 Alexis Márquez Rodríguez, *Acción y pasión en los personajes de Miguel Otero Silva y otros ensayos* (Caracas: Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1985), 139.

184 This tactic precludes Boves from fitting neatly into Hobsbawm's mould of the social bandit; men like Villa and Lampião were seen (accurately or otherwise) to uphold sexual morality.

185 Karen Racine, 'Message by Massacre: Venezuela's War to the Death, 1810-1814', in *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2013), pp. 201-217 (213).

mechanism'[186]). Certainly, the greatest massacres he commits – the infamous dances at Valencia and Barcelona – have sexually charged undertones, being described by Schael as carnivalesque 'orgías y bacanales'.[187] At the zenith of Boves's campaign, he exercises the *droit du seigneur* in Urica ('–Pues vas a tener que cambiar de novio por esta noche –y diciendo esto la tomó en vilo y se la llevó a la casa de enfrente' [267]) and his armies become more closely identified with sexual violence and rape as their spiral of bloodlust accelerates. In one instance, a woman is spared death so that she can be handed over to the *caudillo* ('No, no la mates, ésa es para el Taita' [259]). Boves's emasculation of his subordinates is another important technique, though is usually used to comic effect: two foot soldiers are punished for fainting in the heat of the day, branded 'mujeres', flogged and dragged along naked by horses, and later appear 'desnudos y lacerados […] Uno de ellos tiene el miembro tumefacto, el otro, casi desprendido' (145-6).

On the other hand, Boves's sexuality also victimises him. He unsuccessfully attempts to suppress his sexual and romantic urges, noting that 'el hombre que conduce hombres no debe entregarse a ninguna mujer' (268) and that 'la verdadera hembra de un caudillo […] es la muchedumbre que conduce' (266). One of his first acts in Venezuela is to disregard a warning from Alexander von Humboldt about the venereal diseases endemic to La Guaira, promptly contracting gonorrhea. In his early *pulpero* days, we learn that 'dos semanas sin mujer tenía José Tomás, lo que era demasiado para su tremenda incontinencia' (71) – another quality proper to paranoid psychopaths, in Herrera Luque's definition – and that 'el deseo de mujer le hacía insoportable el contacto con las cabuyeras' (72). Many short liaisons with women are described, but his two longer relationships with María Trinidad and Inés Corrales (both of whom persuade Boves to practice exhibitionism, despite his reticence) also render him vulnerable and allow for further insight into his character to emerge.

His relationship with María Trinidad, though depicted almost exclusively in sexual rather than romantic terms, produces a child, and her brutal rape and murder by Valencia's *mantuanos* bring Boves to heights of emotional outpouring rarely seen elsewhere – and acts as the pretext for the

[186] Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism,* trans. by Vincent R. Carfagno (London: Souvenir Press, 1972), 32.
[187] Schael, 2:1.

extreme atrocities he carries out against the city. Upon hearing of her death, Boves's plaintive cry ('—¡María Trinidad! ¡María Trinidad! —se dice el Caudillo con amargura—. Tu sangre no quedará sin venganza' [198]) engenders sympathy for him even amid the most lurid scenes of his savage attack on the city. So, too, does the later depiction of his 'triste mirada a la cruz […] clavada sobre la tumba de la mulata' and 'expresión melancólica' (211) – though these instantly fade, only to be followed immediately by the impalement of Remigio, one of the novel's most graphic and revulsive scenes. Comparably, his relationship with Inés and the prospect of his marrying her induces Boves to reflect, just before the Battle of Urica and therefore all too late, on his past acts and on his future, suddenly instigating 'una inmensa pereza por proseguir la lucha' (268).

A word on this. As Boves's campaign gathers momentum, its degeneration into violence is accompanied by increased focus on its most outlandishly brutal events even as the *caudillo* himself fades into the background. The depiction of these atrocities often reads as gratuitous, as though designed to shock, and Herrera Luque routinely uses these occurrences to conclude a chapter, thereby making for lasting impact. The writer noted that 'sobre [Boves] hay toda clase de cuentos y consejas como para dejar chiquito a un psicoanalista confeso'[188] and, in line with his aim to recreate folk anecdotes about the *caudillo*, he is at pains to foreground these. They become lengthier and increasingly graphic as the novel continues, with the treatment of intervening events becoming more cursory. For example, the chapter 'La noche de Martiniana', relating one of Boves's first misdeeds, is a tense account of a Calabozo woman's plot to kill Boves to avenge her husband's death. The scheme's background, plan, execution and failure are confined to one chapter, with its grisly denouement – the discovery of her severed head the next morning – taking up just a few lines. Soon after, Vicente Berroterán's execution is afforded an entire chapter, culminating in the famous, highly descriptive, and lengthy account of his demise.

> Vicente Berroterán fue enterrado hasta el cuello a pocos pasos del hormiguero. El sol de las nueve de la mañana comenzaba a quemar. […] Boves, con su propia mano, derramó un terro de melado sobre la cabeza del ganadero. A los cinco minutos llegó la primera hormiga. Media hora después, la cabeza de Vicente era una masa sanguinolenta, cubierta de insectos, que se fue comiendo sus gritos. Otra hora más tarde solo quedaba una calavera,

[188] Herrera Luque, *Boves en la voz de los viejos*.

> pulcramente disecada, que parecía mirar desde el fondo de las órbitas la recua trágica de sus asesinos. (139)

Meanwhile, the aforementioned death of Remigio – one of María Trinidad's four murderers – makes for similarly distressing reading. Herrera Luque provides a grisly, highly detailed account of how Remigio is captured and stripped naked. His 'grito […] cuando la estaca perforó el intestino' (211), and he writhes in agony for hours on end while Boves watches on impassively, drinking 'largos tragos de ron' (211).

The account of the Valencia massacre immediately after this scene marks the apogee of Boves's savagery. Taking place over three chapters, it culminates in the infamous *baile* at which the townswomen were forced to dance to the strains of the *Piquirico* as their sons, husbands, fathers and brothers were put to the sword outside. This event, in which Boves 'indulged his penchant for the carnivalesque'[189] and 'took morbid delight in […] mixing the festive with the funereal',[190] became legendary. It was a source of much interest for Herrera Luque, who commented that:

> El baile de Valencia, con sus víctimas bailando la sonata gachupina mientras afuera tronaba la muerte, constituye claro ejemplo de lo que afirmo. ¡Qué brutal contraste! Convertir un suceso festivo en acontecimiento trágico. Se advierte la voluntad de invertir los valores, el afán de destruir un sistema, la obsesión por exterminar a los que lo humillaron, a sus próximos, a sus semejantes y, finalmente, hasta a los que son diferentes de ellos, pues los hombres son seres maléficos que merecen castigo. (*BCH*, 45)

Herrera Luque's ventriloquising of Boves's supposed belief that all men are 'seres maléficos' is redolent of the *caudillo*'s cursing all Venezuela's inhabitants; in both cases, his misanthropy is so great as to be virtually unfathomable. Indeed, many of the events and atrocities portrayed in *Boves* are so outlandish as to render the thought processes behind them utterly incomprehensible to the reader, to other characters, and sometimes to the protagonist himself. This is closely tied to Herrera Luque's interpretation of power and legitimacy: Boves, as a manifestation of popular impulse and

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189 Racine, 210.

190 Jeremy Adelman, 'The Rites of Statehood: Violence and Sovereignty in Spanish America, 1789-1821', in *Hispanic American Historical Review*, vol. 90, no. 2 (2010), pp. 391-422 (409).

collective will, does not act according to his own agency. Yet those parts of the novel where Herrera Luque explores his motives and instincts are among the most memorable.

Boves's military involvement appears as random and spontaneous even to him ('no se dio cuenta de cuándo ni cómo se encontró sumergido en el medio del combate' [100]). His direction of the campaign is not premeditated or even particularly active; Herrera Luque later noted that he made no 'decisión auténtica o torcida […] de convertirse en caudillo o dirigente' (*BCH*, 46). Much debate has surrounded Boves's political principles and his unrealised plans for Venezuela cut short by his death. Stoan, for example, says that precisely 'how far he would have gone to preserve social and racial democracy in his army and in his government […] is difficult to say';[191] Alvaray's assertion that he was 'indifferent to politics'[192] is borne out in the novel. Virtually all of his deeds are informed by a desire for personal revenge and underscored by an intense nihilism, since 'su odio […] era superior a sus convicciones políticas' (88). The most memorable and comprehensively described events of his campaign are those instigated by vengeance. Even upon taking Caracas, Boves is myopic and resentful: at his moment of triumph, 'el rencor le inundó la cabeza. Pensó en las humillaciones' (225) that he had earlier suffered. He later vows not to cease his violent actions 'hasta que haya acabado con todos los que destrozaron mi vida. […] A mí el que me la hace me la paga. Conmigo nadie tuvo compasión, yo tampoco la tendré con ninguno' (235) – though this revenge is tempered by 'actos de generosidad y hasta clemencia[193], such as the following statement, in which he spares the life of a woman and her daughters:

> —No tienen nada que temer —les dice risueño al ser conocido. Vine tan solo a agradecerles lo que ustedes hicieron por mí, hace un año. Yo soy un hombre agradecido. José Tomás se refiere a la vez en que, huyendo de su fracaso en Valencia y retirada hacia Calabozo, llegó una noche a ese hato, herido y hambriento y esa familia, sin preguntarle quién era ni a qué bando servía, lo cuidaron y ayudaron hasta su total recuperación. (175)

[191] Stoan, 56

[192] Alvaray, 298.

[193] Vallenilla Lanz, *Cesarismo democrático*, 130.

From the outset and throughout, Boves is governed by the *incontinencia* that underlies his psychology. It is only through the indulging of this *incontinencia* that external observers, the narrator included, can interpret the underpinnings of his motives and inner tensions. The historian Jeremy Adelman notes that 'Boves was not always a mass murderer; he became one',[194] but Herrera Luque's re-telling of the biography already known to history provides no outright explanations for *why* he acted as he did, beyond a desire for revenge. The factors that drove him to the extremes depicted so graphically in the novel cannot be discerned here; a recapitulation of well-documented parts of the *caudillo*'s life is insufficient in explaining his true motives – or, indeed, the sympathy that we are, at times, meant to feel for him. Herrera Luque himself claimed a degree of identification with the homicidal *caudillo*. In a 1983 interview, the journalist Joaquín Soler Serrano asked him why 'ha dicho usted que quizá de todos los personajes de sus libros, con el que se identifica más es con Boves',[195] while Augusto Mijares once commented 'eso no es Boves, es Herrera Luque'.[196] That interview also reveals that Boves's character was based partially on Herrera Luque's maternal grandfather, himself a sometime *caudillo* in Miranda state ('Reconozco que la parte simpática de mi Boves, el Urogallo proyecto mucho de ese gran afecto que le profesé [sic]',[197] as he told Lovera). Luis Buitrago Seguro, meanwhile, suggested that Herrera Luque's tumultuous fall-out with the Faculty of Medicine sparked vengeful ideation within him, as he was 'perseguido hasta que – como en el *Boves* de Herrera Luque – le dan a uno una paliza tan grande como la de Calabozo y obligan al Urogallo a violentarse, estrellarse y finalmente renunciar'.[198]

In Herrera Luque's account, Boves is awaiting execution on charges fabricated by Calabozo's *mantuano* authorities, when royalist general Eusebio Antoñanzas storms the town and saves his life. Grieving the recent murder of his protégé Juan Caribe by the same *mantuanos* and moved by the grief of the boy's mother, Boves decides at that point to join the royalist armies. Yet these events only spur Boves into action, and the factors that truly forge his character have their roots much earlier.

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[194] Adelman, 409.
[195] Soler Serrano interview, 9:20-9:30.
[196] Pantín, 697.
[197] Lovera, 32.
[198] Buitrago Seguro, 'El Profesor Fernando Valarino…'.

Herrera Luque began the novel by writing its opening and final chapters;[199] this is revealing, as it is in these chapters that his depiction of Boves's thoughts and feelings is at its most lucid and informative. The novel's opening section,[200] titled 'El pulpero de Calabozo', is composed of eight vignette-like chapters, which together construct a prismatic account of Boves's early life and first years in Venezuela. Each is focused on a particular experience that marked the young man, aligning with Lee's assertion that 'biographies of leaders or activists must set the central performance of their subjects in the context of the political conditions that produce them, the society in and on which they operate, their race, class, nationality and gender, and the many other figures who surround them'.[201] Salwak notes, too, that 'from the 1920s to the 1960s psychological conjecture as an approach to literary biography was *de rigueur*'.[202]

Boves opens *in medias res*, depicting the arrival of the protagonist's troops to a backwater town in a whirlwind of lances and machetes ('Como estaba previsto, la guerra llegó a Guacara el 17 de junio de 1814' [9]). This opening sentence establishes many of the novel's key characteristics: the heightened drama of martial scenes, a rigorous historical and geographical precision and – as will be discussed – a sense of the violent maelstrom of the war (instigated and incarnated by Boves) being in some way preordained. This scene, and 'El pulpero de Calabozo' as a whole, exist outside the novel's otherwise strict chronological chapter order, with the storming of Guacara not revisited until Chapter 85: the body of the novel's action begins in 1806, months after Francisco de Miranda's failed landing at Ocumare. 'El pulpero de Calabozo' thus functions as a prologue of sorts, detailing Boves's origins and the conditions in which his motivations were established; his chance meeting with his ailing former acquaintance Rosaliano acts as a framing narrative. While

[199] Lovera, 153.
[200] The novel is split into three 'Libros', each of which is further divided into multiple 'Capítulos', each made up of several short sections. For terminological consistency, I refer to these in English as 'books', 'sections' and 'chapters' respectively.
[201] Lee, 104.
[202] Dale Salwak, 'Literary Biography in the Twentieth Century', in Richard Bradford, ed., *A Companion to Literary Biography* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2019), pp. 107-120 (109).

tending to his friend, Boves 'tenía los ojos abiertos y relampagueantes, pero no lo miraban. El Caudillo[203] tenía los ojos fijos en un recuerdo adolorido' (11).

The narration then switches to this *recuerdo*, focalised by Boves, slipping in and out of it and darting from one memory to the next: 'sus ojos adormilados se volvieron rendijas cuando apuntaron hacia el bulto indefinido que lo llamaba entre brumas' (14); 'José Tomás sintió miedo ante el recuerdo de Diego y conjuró la sombra cálida y reconfortable de su amigo Juan Palacios' (15); 'se encogió febricitante ante el recuerdo del negro y decidió pensar en términos de venganza' (18).[204] Each recollection constitutes a rare moment of introspection at the height of Boves's campaign – chronologically, Chapter One immediately precedes the bloody events at Valencia – and showcases how certain people, places and seemingly inconsequential interactions shaped his psyche and triggered his psychopathy. We see his relationships with his immediate family, his father in particular; Diego Jalón, a friend who betrays him; his imprisonment for piracy in Puerto Cabello; Juan Palacios, who prophesies Boves's rise to power and alerts him to the sufferings and latent resentments of Venezuela's oppressed black population; María Trinidad, his first love; and the town of Calabozo, where he had his first unfortunate dealings with the *mantuano* oligarchy. This tour of Boves's early life in Venezuela fluctuates sharply in tone, perhaps reflecting (and explaining) his contradictory personality and volatile temperament. Certain memories are comforting, while others leave him feeling despair and anger.

The vignettes vary, too, in style. 'El Urogallo', the novel's second chapter and its most unambiguously biographical, contains the following long section, elucidating the nature and lasting effects of Boves's childhood misfortunes. Though framed as an introspection from Boves, the style is incongruously detached and factual, such that it seems that Dr Francisco Herrera Luque –

[203] The precise epithets by which Herrera Luque refers to Boves are deliberately chosen and evolve alongside his character. He is otherwise not referred to as 'el Caudillo' until Chapter 58, tellingly entitled 'Segunda muerte del padre', which is set some nine months prior to events at Guacara.

[204] This technique is almost certainly deployed in response to a well-known passage of González's biography of Boves, where the writer states that 'distraído en medio de sus pensamientos lúgubres, que visitaban, sin duda, sangrientos fantasmas, volvía en sí por una sonrisa feroz ó por miradas de fuego, que precedían á sus silenciosos furores' (135). Here, Herrera Luque attempts to identify these *pensamientos* and *fantasmas*.

or, at least, a psychoanalyst, historian, or researcher – has interceded, particularly concerning his father's death.

> De niño fue la miseria y la orfandad. De joven la cárcel y de nuevo la afrenta. A los cinco años, se le murió el padre, un hidalgo de gotera que vivió y murió como trovador harto y corpulento, alegre y decidor. Tenía buena voz y por ella se hacía pagar buenos culines de sidra con queso de Cabrales en las tabernas de Oviedo. Era un hombrón de buen plantaje que hacía suspirar con sus canciones a todas las mozas de la ciudad, y esponjarse al muchacho como palomo casero. Cuando cantaba en bable era tal su embeleso que se quedaba sordo y ciego, igual que el Urogallo, ese heráldico pájaro astur que se vuelve piedra cuando reclama a la hembra con su canto de amor. De ahí que no viese al marido celoso cuando le hizo en la espalda un ojal de sangre. Por eso, de ahí en adelante lo apodaron el Urogallo, aunque nunca más pudo volver a cantar ya que murió de tristeza delirante cuantro meses más tarde.
>
> Con la muerte del padre se agravó el hambre y se fue definitivamente la alegría. A los pocos meses tuvieron que vender por nada la casona solariega y la madre se empleó de sirvienta en casa de sus iguales. A los once años ingresó al Instituto Real de Oviedo, como mandadero que se paga sus estudios, y luego de cuatro años de humillaciones se graduó de piloto. La necesitad de trabajar y la falta de algo mejor lo aventó hacia Puerto Cabello, una plaza podrida en medio de una marisma negra. (12)

His father's death is not explored at length here, but it becomes a recurrent focus throughout the novel. Freud – a major influence on Herrera Luque – argued that 'the problems of social psychology [are] soluble on the basis of one single point – man's relation to his father'[205] and claimed that the loss of the father was 'the most important event, the most poignant loss, of a man's life'.[206] In his scientific publications, Herrera Luque focused repeatedly on 'la ausencia del padre en el hogar venezolano' (*PP*, 82) as the root cause of many social phenomena prevalent in Venezuela, ranging from 'la extraordinaria incidencia de homosexualidad' (*PP,* 82) to violent crime. Boves's orphanhood establishes a close link between him and the *pardo* community, one of whose fundamental characteristics is their being a dispossessed 'pueblo huérfano' (*BCH*, 39) in search of a 'Taita'. Boves himself seeks paternal figures on several occasions, including in Juan Palacios and, in particular, in his first commanding officer, Antoñanzas – 'la imagen del padre que hubiera deseado tener: afectuoso y fuerte, sabio y protector' (133). Antoñanzas's death in Chapter 58 is

[205] Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. by James Strachey (London: Routledge, 1961), 157.
[206] Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. by James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 47.

described as the 'segundo muerte del padre'. Upon learning of this event, Boves has many prisoners massacred in a paroxysm of rage, and, tellingly, it is only from this point that Boves is referred to by the narrator as 'Caudillo', an honorific that does not appear before. A Freudian reading would suggest that this is the moment at which Boves himself comes to occupy the role of the 'violent and jealous father'[207] at the head of the primal horde.

Despite Herrera Luque accentuating the effects of the *caudillo*'s traumatic childhood, Boves's novelistic 'birth' does not correspond to his actual birth, but rather his transplantation to Venezuela. In the chapters describing this, Boves is depicted as naïve, emotionally malleable, and extremely impressionable. Appearing as a passive figure and rarely speaking during these early reminiscences, Boves is easily impressed by the beauty of his new homeland: 'Cómo le impresionó La Guayra, aquel pueblecito en todo el borde de la montaña que hacía maromas para no caerse al mar' (15) and 'José Tomás amó a Calabozo desde el momento mismo en que divisó sus cúpulas batidas por el sol mañanero' (19) are two textual examples of this, rich in visual imagery (and reminiscent of a key argument made in *Los viajeros de Indias*). They have an important early counterpoint, as no sooner does Boves arrive in La Guaira then the following scene is related:

> Ese mismo año habían ejecutado al traidor José María España. Su cabeza, frita en aceite, se exhibía a las puertas de La Guayra en una jaula de hierro. A pocas varas un negro con aspecto de mandril vendía pirulís. Las moscas volaban continuamente de los caramelos al despojo. (15)

Though vividly described, the importance of this scene is marked by its throwaway nature – Herrera Luque instantly moves on to introducing Jalón – but we see, at the height of Boves's formative period, the same jarring juxtaposition of gruesome and cheerful images that characterise the novel and in which Boves delights, as well as the seeming banality of extreme violence that underscores his later conduct. There is no indication that Boves is remotely conscious of this, but the sight of the unfortunate man's head imprints strongly on him at a vulnerable moment in his psychological development. That the memory of this sight in La Guaira emerges at this moment

[207] Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 141.

is notable, since the encounter with Rosaliano comes (chronologically) just after the execution of Jalón, when Boves 'puso su cabeza frita en aceite en una jaula' (184), drawing a direct parallel between the two incidents. In *Los viajeros de Indias*, Herrera Luque stated that 'el extranjero, en cualquier parte y en especial en Venezuela, está sometido a una tremenda tensión psicológica, en la que contribuyen a perturbarlo por igual desde el medio físico hasta el medio ambiente cultural' (*VI*, 79).[208]

Herrera Luque directly identifies Boves's sadism as being instigated by an inability to reconcile his Spanish background and new Venezuelan *milieu*, alongside his run-ins with the law and simultaneous denigration by the *mantuano* class. In a 1973 speech titled '"La cólera de Dios" visto por un psiquiatra', he remarked:

> Esa dualidad de su origen, nunca superada, lo llevará a las posiciones radicales que terminan por destruirlo. Dualidad que al impedirle una identificación franca y profunda con ningún grupo humano, favorece y explica su fracaso afectivo, fuente importante de su resentimiento. (*BCH*, 42)

This comes to be the overriding theme of 'El pulpero de Calabozo'. Boves repeatedly tries and fails to efface the memory of his miserable Asturian childhood and to find acceptance in his newly adopted homeland: he changes his surname ('deseoso de borrar en lo posible sus ataduras con el pasado, decidió utilizar de ahí en adelanta su segundo apellido, Boves, y renunciar al Rodríguez; pero no pudo olvidar' [21]) and attempts to adopt local mannerisms, but neither succeeds. He cannot escape his past nor integrate into the *mantuano* socio-economic sphere, a liminal condition outlined in Chapter 6:

> De su ancestro astur no quedaba nada. Hablaba y vestía como criollo. Había que ver a José Tomás en un parrando. No había quien le diera lo vuelto en el escobilleo, ni modo que le llevara la delantera en la jarana. […] Y lloraba y rabiaba hasta caer exánime, porque cuando

[208] Gil Fortoul said of the *llanos*, where many of Boves's formative experiences took place, that 'en ninguna otra parte es más notable la influencia del medio sobre el hombre. Mezcla de indio, blanco y negro, el llanero debe su carácter y costrumbres, más que a las razas madres, a las condiciones de la naturaleza que le rodea' (42).

> bebía lo envolvía como un fresco trágico: Puerto Cabello y el Castillo[209] y D. Lorenzo y se le revolvía hasta el fondo la amargura, porque no podía olvidar la cara que le puso el mundo cuando salió del presidio. (19-20)

Illustrations of Boves's inner tension and anguish at his lack of belonging are often related in rather clumsy fashion. Upon his appointment as a Royalist captain, for example, Boves engages in a rare and unprompted moment of introspection: 'José Tomás era español, ¿era por eso que se sentía incapaz de traicionar? Pero, a su vez, se preguntaba: ¿Soy español?' (127). His questioning the significance of his Spanish origins informs much of his early character development, and he later dwells on how his time in Asturias has faded into 'un brumoso sueño que comenzaba a desvanecerse después de quince años de ausencia. Apenas tenía 15 años cuando salió de Gijón en aquella fragata. Recuerda la cabeza del ajusticiado, la gonorrea y Humbold [sic]. Menuda trilogía la que preludió su historia en en país' (127). Concrete memories of his homeland, key to his sense of belonging, become increasingly indistinct. Herrera Luque depicts, too, Boves's willingness to alter his mannerisms and speech patterns according to the identity of his interlocutor,[210] which itself marks his gradual adoption of the linguistic and philosophical identity of the *llaneros*, who exist on the geographic as well as social edges of the *mantuanos*' world:

> Boves podía pasar, en cuestión de segundos, de la posición del discípulo imitativo, ejemplo y satisfacción del maestro, a la más precoz y antagónica figura. Bastaba que llegase a la pulpería uno de sus tantos compadres de los alrededores para que José Tomás repitiese como un diapasón los tonos y timbres de su interlocutor, haciendo caso omiso de su pulido maestro. En ese momento José Tomás era tan vulgar y jactancioso como Juancho Corrales, y tan naturalizado con el primitivismo de aquellos hombres, que el Padre Llamozas se quebraba la cabeza en las noches tratando de responderse cuál de estas dos naturalezas, tan opuestas, era la que en verdad correspondía a su discípulo. (70)

His identification with the *llaneros* does not come entirely of his own accord: his formative period (and 'El pulpero de Calabozo') concludes with his definitive rejection by the *mantuanos*. Boves reveals his lack of social nous and humble origins through his 'franqueza estúpida' in blithely

[209] That is, the Castillo San Felipe, the prison where Boves was held upon his arrival to Venezuela.
[210] It is notable that Boves resorts (consciously or otherwise) to mimicry; he again comes to replicate the *llaneros*.

regaling influential aristocrats with tales of his lowly family's misfortunes. This leads the 'muchachas distinguidas de la oligarquía' (22) to reject him as an uncouth creature, so that 'dejaron de invitarlo, le enfriaron el saludo y finalmente se lo suspendieron por completo' (22) without his realising why ('no lo sabia José Tomás, por eso no percibió aquella discreta distancia que los mantuanos de Calabozo lo opinían' [23]). He only becomes aware of this in the climactic seventh and eighth chapters. Jalón, who had previously abandoned Boves upon his brief imprisonment in Puerto Cabello, tells him that his mere physical appearance marks him out as inferior ('¿cuándo has visto tú un verdadero señorito con esas manazas de leñador y esas patotas de labriego? Patán viene de patón y en ti hay por lo menos cinco generaciones de gente descalza. Por eso no puedes ser noble, mi querido amigo, ni encontrarás quien te quiera' [21]) – a further wounding rejection. An old man further elucidates the situation to Boves, saying 'Que bien pendejo eres tú si pretendes igualárteles. Que tú no eres más que un pirata degradado a pulpero' (23). As this chapter ends, Boves, who gradually 'se identificaba con la fuerza agresora' (22) and exhibited a 'secreta ambición de alcanzar el nivel de privilegio de sus ofensores' (22) instead rejects the entire system that ostracised him and the aristocrats whom he later describes as 'un grupo de hombres que se consideran superiores a los demás mortales' (94-95). 'El pulpero de Calabozo' ends in the following scene, in which Boves reacts to the old man's barb:

> En un principio sintió más vergüenza que rencor, y luego más odio que resentimiento. Comprendió de pronto la miseria que había en su empeño de ingresar a un mundo que negaba su esencia; como también descubrió en aquel momento que él no había hablado nunca ni jamás hablaría el lenguaje de aquellos hombres. Su lenguaje procedía y venía de los arrabales, de los bajos fondos de Oviedo, de los muelles de Gijón y de Puerto Cabello, de las pulperías camineras y de las posadas de pueblo. El sólo se sentía a sus anchas entre marineros soeces, pardos resentidos y negros bullangueros. Entonces sí se sentía libre y gozoso. Entonces sí era él mismo. Entonces su palabra resonaba como un trino claro y la oían y celebraban los hombres entre carcajadas o réplicas doloridas. Por eso agradeció el chisme con una sonrisa amarga, y montando de un salto sobre su caballo galopó posesivo hasta que derritió la bestia en la llanura. (23)

Here, Boves adopts outsider status and takes ownership of his own (now mostly fully formed) personality, casting himself in opposition to the established hierarchies of socio-political power in Venezuela. Crucially, this introspective moment comes to an end as he gallops off: Boves recedes

into the distance, his nascent personality and beliefs having crystallised. This moment functions as an awakening. After this, his decisions or motives are afforded far less scrutiny, the narrator being reduced to a more distant observer. Insights into Boves's character development are limited to cursory descriptions of turning points in his life. For example, upon his much later return to Calabozo at the head of a large army, the narrator notes that 'Hace cinco meses que salió de la ciudad que tantas penas y venturas le ha deparado. El tiempo y la guerra lo han ido cambiando. Ahora ni él mismo se reconoce. Se ha tornado feral y despiadado. No hace prisioneros' (133). Shortly after, we see how 'Boves se deja ir por el fuego de la hoguera. Su mirada es fija. La barba la tiene recrecida, el bigote poblado; a los 31 años tiene la edad indefinida de los caudillos' (146). He is depicted as somehow less human, having evolved into an archetype.

At the end of the novel – specifically in its penultimate chapter, 'La hembra de los Caudillos', which takes place just before the fatal Battle of Urica – Herrera Luque returns to Boves as a focaliser, and, using *style indirect libre*, depicts an extensive introspective monologue, instigated by a letter from Inés. This chapter bookends the body of Boves's biography, stylistically recalling the 'El pulpero de Calabozo' section and expounding Boves's thought processes. Considering the prospect of marriage between himself and the daughter of a Calabozo landowner, Boves experiences a sudden moment of clarity.

> Eso es, él quería de Inés el estado de privilegio que su madre, la expósita, le arrebató a su padre, el hidalgo. El quería hacerse borrar en Inés todas las humillaciones que desde niño viene arrastrando. Inés, como su mujer, es su aceptación en el mundo del privilegio y de los mantuanos, aunque él, más tarde, destruya a ese mundo. ¿Destruirá ese mundo? –se preguntaba ansioso José Tomás, mientras espoleaba el caballo que le había regalado Inés. Y se quedó sorprendido de que el odio se le hubiese ido del cuerpo. Pensó en Jalón y en Berroterán y se alarmó por la sombra de añoranza y arrepentimiento que pretendió insinuársele. Por un instante lamentó esta guerra organizada y conducida por él, y vio sin sentido el campamento de sus hombres semidesnudos aprestándose para el próximo combate. (268)

Here, Boves is at his most readily comprehensible, both to himself and to the reader. This rare moment of tenderness shows Boves's regret and humanity, functioning as a Jungian enantiodromia – and, notably, there is no historical evidence for it. Its effectiveness lies in outlining what *could*

have happened, and a universally human theme. Upon thinking of his becoming a father to Inés's unborn child, he wishes that 'nunca hubiese habido guerra, ni odios ni matanzas' (268-69) and he gently caresses his horse at the edge of the Amana River. In a scene that lends the novel a certain cyclicality and recalls the earlier death of Boves's father, the protagonist decides to name his horse 'Urogallo', and conducts the same act of diagnosis that Herrera Luque had attempted, realising that he has been weakened by 'su enfermedad: Inés, el amor, la paz' (269). With this, the chapter ends. The following, final chapter consists entirely of a dramatic, breathless description of the Battle of Urica on 4th December 1814. Boves sees his two former allies, Andrés Machado and Juan Palacios, in the opposing army of José Félix Ribas, before engaging in a 'choque de los lanceros [que] cubrió el pantano de lamentos, sangre e insolencias' (272). Amid repeated cries of '¡Arre, Urogallo!' (273) as he attempts to spur on his paralysed steed, the novel ends as Boves sees 'seis lanzas que buscan su cuerpo' (273).

The *caudillo*'s actual death is not depicted; he perishes off-screen. That the novel concludes with his cry of '¡Arre, Urogallo!' (273) is especially notable. Boves's voice, or its echo, seems to outlive him, just as echoes of the historical Boves resounded throughout Venezuelan history. He is afforded a transcendent, eternal nature. As in the scene in which Boves 'tiene la edad indefinida de los caudillos' (146), Herrera Luque is at pains to demonstrate that Boves has a transcendent quality – that he represented far more than looting or banditry or the royalism for which he fought. Yet we cannot discern what this is from an examination of his biography alone. As Madariaga has it, 'the republic had been defeated, but with Boves, what had triumphed?' [211]

Men such as Boves 'owe their role in history to the mass of their followers, and are significant as social phenomena, or not at all',[212] being always 'representative either of existing forces or of forces which he helps to create by way of challenge to existing authority'.[213] To explain Boves further – to consider the limits of his agency and his relation to overarching historical problems – these existing forces must be analysed. Lovera writes that 'el conjunto de *Boves, el urogallo* es el de una

[211] Madariaga, 230.
[212] E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (London: Penguin Classics, 2008 [1961]), 47.
[213] Carr, 50.

novela biográfica-histórica sobre el asturiano colocado dentro de sus días. Pero es, a la vez, como todas las de Herrera Luque, una meditación sobre Venezuela y sus muchas dolencias.'[214] To identify the *huella perenne* that Boves left on the course of Venezuelan history, and to determine precisely *why* he 'penetró muy hondo en las entrañas de nuestra revolución',[215] it is important to look not just to the forces that engendered *him*, but which enabled the successes of his campaign. For Hobsbawm, 'to understand banditry and its history we must […] see it in the context of the history of power, i.e. of the control of governments or other power centres […] of what goes on in the territories and among the populations over which they claim control.'[216] Therefore, it is necessary to examine those parts of the novel that seemingly have least to do with Boves – that is, the chapters that detail the stories of the many *mantuano* characters, which are particularly instructive as regards Herrera Luque's attitude towards the pro-independence *criollo* oligarchy – and the political and philosophical judgements that Herrera Luque outsources to his two most important 'mouthpiece' narrators.

II: Structure and Style

Neither the trajectory of Boves's life, nor his significance within the broader processes that governed Venezuelan history, can be understood without focus on his relationship with the entrenched power structures of Venezuela. The effectiveness of the portrayal of this relationship rests largely on the novel's structure.

Boves is divided, as has been seen, into three parts, titled 'El Taita', 'El Caudillo' and 'El Urogallo'. Through the names of these books, the antihero protagonist's development through three phases of his life – three identities – can be traced. These are each divided into sections (four in part one, three in parts two and three); these sections, in turn, are divided into chapters rarely exceeding a few pages in length and almost always focused on a self-contained episode restricted to one

[214] Lovera, 212.
[215] Vallenilla Lanz, *Cesarismo democrático*, 122.
[216] Hobsbawm, 11.

geographical location. This neat formula is a constant in Herrera Luque's output, allowing for well-demarcated chronological, geographical and thematic focuses; indeed, it characterises both his scientific and novelistic works. Viera suggests that this rigid structure stems from the writer's desire to emulate 'estrechamente la característica y compleja distribución temática y por capítulos de la obra de José de Oviedo y Baños',[217] Venezuela's first historian – though one notes that Gregorio Marañón's biographies of the Count-Duke of Olivares and Henry IV of Castile exhibit similar internal organisation. We have seen that the first section of 'El Taita', 'El pulpero de Calabozo', pieces together Boves's biographical background and posits explanations for his sadism; the following section, 'Los Mantuanos', which will be analysed presently, introduces a range of characters belonging to the colonial aristocracy and members of the Blanco clan, among them Fernando Ascanio, Vicente Berroterán, Doñana, and the novel's somewhat problematic female protagonist, Eugenia. This section also serves to provide a panoramic picture of their customs, attitudes and social mores, and acts as a complement to 'El pulpero de Calabozo', establishing Boves and the Caracas *mantuanaje* as distinct and opposing forces. From that point on, however, chapters alternate irregularly and in haphazard order between Boves's campaign and scenes of *mantuano* life.

Episodes belonging to the 'Boves' axis follow a rigorous chronology, and all editions of the novel contain a lengthy appendix in which Herrera Luque characterises events as being either 'ciertos' or as well-established anecdotes that stem from 'tradición oral' (279).[218] Historical facts are related alongside individual folk memories of Boves, in accordance with Benedetto Croce's well-known statement that 'anecdote persists and will persist side by side with history, each serving diverse and complementary purposes in the harmony of the spirit'.[219] Factual historical occurrences are

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[217] Viera Rojas, 209.

[218] On at least one occasion, it appears that Herrera Luque has failed to transpose eyewitness accounts collected during his assiduous research into Boves's life from raw data into the novelistic mode. This is most evident in the following lines from Chapter 115 (my italics), which read as a citation of an historical firsthand account:

'—Hizo su entrada en Barcelona —*refería un testigo presente que alcanzó a la Emigración el 23 de agosto*—, aparentando magnanimidad. Como los vecinos enarbolaran en la calle pendones de Castilla, les hizo saber su complacencia y el deseo de reconciliarse con los fugitivos.' (241)

[219] Benedetto Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty*, trans. by Sylvia Sprigge (New York, NY: Norton, 1941), 122.

provided with exact dates and locations, though occasionally with a degree of precision and stylistic aridity that acts to the work's aesthetic detriment. Some of these passages resemble campaign diaries ('La marcha a través del llano es difícil en esta época del año. Llueve copiosamente y la planicie comienza a inundarse' [127]), and others are characterised by splendid lucidity – Boves's final introspection, the tense scenes of Eugenia hiding in Cumaná Cathedral, and the many lyrical passages describing Venezuelan landscape and folk customs best exemplify these. However, these routinely give way to scenes where historical accuracy is prioritised over style and even narrative interest, as in the following depiction of a major battle:

> El 23 de septiembre de 1813, Boves se encontró en el caño de Santa Catalina con el Comandante Tomás Montilla y un ejército considerable.
> Durante horas combatieron insurgentes y realistas.
> Con los últimos destellos del sol terminó la batalla. Boves, con habilidad increíble derrotó al enemigo. Más de seiscientos prisioneros se amontonan en círculo estrecho, mientras fusiles y lanzas lo apuntan homicidas. (135)

There are jarring shifts in style and focus between other chapters. The most notable disjunct is that between chapters 66 (a 'campaign diary'-type chapter, comprised of short sentences that describe engagements in Caracas where 'los seminaristas de Caracas en casi su totalidad pierden la vida [149]) and 67, which relates a bathetic and almost inappropriately humorous anecdote in which Boves falsely promises to spare the life of a beautiful young woman's husband.

This is perhaps the novel's major flaw. Those same canonical historical accounts that Herrera Luque wished to undermine focused on key battles rather than 'generic human drama which accompanies the specific historical drama',[220] so the foregrounding of the latter over matters of historical record is arguably an inevitable corollary of this approach. All biographies and historical novels, by their very nature, must 'reduce the chaos of potential data – the virtually infinite subject matter potentially available – to some sort of order within a narrative',[221] so certain events of less narrative interest must be cast aside. More, this stylistic inconsistency is redolent of Juan Vicente

[220] Croce, 119.
[221] Beverley Southgate, *History Meets Fiction* (Harlow: Pearson, 2009), 19.

González's biographies. González's biography of Ribas swings between grandiose, Ciceronian scene-setting and extremely sterile sections describing supposedly important developments.

Whatever the explanation, the abrupt shifts in focus disrupt the novel's flow and occasionally render it rather discordant. One might expect Boves's first engagement with Bolívar, who scarcely appears in the novel, and to whom Herrera Luque's attitude was complex – he 'emerges as a rather nasty, incompetent, envious and even scurrilous personage'[222] in the writer's *œuvre* – at San Mateo to be dwelt on at length, given these figures' being cast as opposing leaders in historiographical and literary accounts of the Revolution (including *Laz lanzas coloradas*). It is not: all Herrera Luque reports is that 'Es la pelea más sangrienta y más larga de la guerra. Dura casi un mes' (153), before moving swiftly on. This is curious. We have already seen that the writer had an eye for the graphic and the salacious, so a battle as bloody and protracted as this *ought* to be of interest. Indeed, battle scenes become shorter and more tersely described as the novel progresses. Writing (in an Anglophone context) of popular books depreciatively termed the 'sex-and-violence' or 'blood-and-guts' novel, Hoggart states that 'when 'when it moves away from situations which excite it falls into banality'.[223] The same is true of *Boves*, though it is paradoxically those scenes that we might expect to be climactic that become banal.

For all its imperfections, however, the 'Boves' axis progresses consistently and cogently, seeing continual development of its major thematic questions and characters. It alone provides the impetus for the plot, while for much of the novel – certainly from Part One, Chapter Three (also called 'El Taita') to Part Three – the intervening *mantuano* chapters exhibit a greatly diffracted focus and only a weak overarching narrative, consisting mainly of side plots that introduce short-lived characters or that detail reactions to the novel's main plot. Some, again, are of relatively little narrative interest, particularly the strange subplot that sees Eugenia rather implausibly sent to and then released from a convent; others are repetitive, detailing news being brought to Caracas of endless far-off uprisings.

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[222] Wilson, 121.

[223] Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literary* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), 265.

It is not until the book's ninth section ('De Valencia a Calabozo'; Chapter 102) that these diffuse *mantuano* storylines coalesce behind one trajectory of action, namely the Caracas Exodus of 1814, when the *criollos* fled the capital eastwards towards Barcelona and thence to Cumaná. From this point, the story is far more coherent and unitary, as Boves and the *mantuanos* are finally placed in direct opposition to each other. Throughout the novel, as their storylines have alternated, Boves appears in the *mantuano* chapters as a far-off but steadily encroaching threat, with news of his advances constantly sowing consternation among Caracas's inhabitants. There are tenuous links between Boves and the Blancos – they are aware of his business exploits, he meets Eugenia during her confinement, and Andrés Machado, Vicente Berroterán and Juan Palacios all have dealings with each side – but, throughout, Boves is depicted as active and the *mantuanos* as passive, able only to react emotionally to, and comment on, his actions, including Berroterán's execution.

During the exodus, the two camps are set on a collision course, as Boves becomes a real rather than potential threat to their lives. The *mantuanos*' flight begins in earnest after the Valencia scenes in Section Eight, and again relies on tense vignettes. Highly visual descriptions pick out moments of individual suffering and death, emulating the sights that Eugenia and others would have witnessed on the roadside during their flight: 'Un hombre ha sido mordido por un cascabel. Echa espumarajos y se retuerce de dolor en el suelo' (232); 'Una mujer, que ha debido ser bella, avanza con un niño muerto en los brazos' (232); 'Sobre el lomo de una mula se pudre, desde hace tres días, el cadáver de un niño, porque sus padres quieren enterrarlo en un lugar bendecido' (218); 'Una madre loca tira por el abismo a un niño de tres meses que le secó los senos' (218). Personal tragedies and the dehumanisation of families and individuals are emphasised here. Other events, particularly the deaths of Eugenia's husband and cousins, are far less successfully realised – partly due to their lack of characterisation and reader sympathy, and partly to the blunt, factual language with which their demise is related. Francisco's death from a lancehead bite is dispassionate and medical in tone; Eugenia's cousin's death from typhus is an incidental detail; and the cannonball bombardment that kills her cousins ('Una bala parte en dos a Matilde. Otra le arranca la cabeza a

Santiago, el único nieto de Doñana.' [221-22]) is so abrupt and exaggeratedly gory as to become comical. Each of these is wholly devoid of emotional weight.

Nevertheless, the effect is to depict the acceleration and increasing inevitability of the collision between Boves's trajectory and that of the *mantuanos*. This is demonstrated best in Chapter 107, 'Y entonces vino ella'. Here, 'ella' is 'la duende que se le aparece a los Blanco en trances de muerte' (*CDP*, 32) – an apparition based, given Herrera Luque's allusion to this legend in *La huella perenne*, on the ghost of Kunigunde von Orlamünde, who supposedly haunted members of German princely dynasties at inauspicious moments.[224] The aged Doñana, who has long suffered the 'enfermedad familiar' (45) of heart failure,[225] is on the brink of death in Chapter 107 and sees the apparition, but here, this symbol of life, death and the passing of power within the *mantuano* oligarchy appears in the guise of Boves himself:

> La aparición estuvo frente a ella, inmóvil y de espaldas, por minutos centenarios. De pronto las manos del fantasma se elevaron hasta la cabeza, y lenta y suavemente se bajaron el manto. Doñana se sintió aterrorizada. Lejos de ser una matrona entrada en años, como ella suponía, la luz de la lamparilla dejaba ver la cabeza grande y redonda de un hombre de pelo rojizo, que antes de volverse, rasgó sin hacer el menor ruido el grueso manto de la aristocracia criolla. (229)

Herrera Luque returned to this technique in later novels, in which 'Ella' resembles the political figures who most imperilled the oligarchy's grip on political power. This visitation is immediately followed by the real Boves's passing by the Blanco house, and Doñana has an epiphany in which she recognises Boves as representing 'la ley efímera del poder inmutable de un mundo que se hizo mundo desde el Conquista' (230). Recognising that he is but a temporary embodiment of an eternal, transcendent, and undefined power, she acts at once to disavow her family's republican principles and to ensure their continued closeness to authority over Venezuela:

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[224] 'Will the White Ladies of the Hohenzollerns and Hapsburgs Walk Again?: Appearance of These Mysterious Ghosts Said to Presage Disaster to Ruling Houses of Germany', in *New York Times*, 18th October 1914, p. SM9.
[225] This was the same ailment that plagued (and eventually killed) Herrera Luque himself. The author had a keen sense of his own mortality, which Viera Rojas suggests informed his pessimistic outlook, and myocardial infarction is the leading (natural) cause of death among his characters.

> [E]lla es un símbolo del poder de una familia, es el eslabón, un simple eslabón que une el pasado con el futuro. ¿Qué importa la suerte de un eslabón si ha de seguir viva la cadena? Si Boves se le acerca, ella lo acogerá como al triunfador. Estar cerca del poder, y administrarlo, es el destino de su familia. (230-31)

As she exits the house and greets Boves, 'siente que la vida se le va en aquel instante' (231) and Boves carries her dead body back inside. This is an important scene; Doñana rejects the prevailing opinion of Boves as 'el enviado de Dios, como lo fue Gengis Khan' (230) and decides that 'Boves es la restauración de todos los principios en los que ella ha creído,[226] aunque para restablecerlos tenga que valerse de la espada y del fuego' (230). The principles of the Republic collapse in the face of all-encompassing power. That Boves had earlier been turned away from the Blanco house – *la casa del pez que escupe el agua* – in Chapter 19 while attempting to collect debt from Berroterán demonstrates a certain cyclicality. That he enters the Blanco house, embodiment of the *mantuanos*' society, not as a brigand but as a sort of undertaker carrying the deceased Doñana indicates the success of his circuitous attempts to become the oligarchs' equal, as well as the disruption of their centuries-old grip on power.

III. Social Context

III.i. The *Mantuanos*

With only one exception, *mantuano* characters have a very minor bearing on the novel's narrative, generally existing for the purpose of elucidating the cruelty and motives of Boves's campaign. Very rarely are these characters focalised, apart from short asides from Montera, the dying Doñana, and

[226] These principles are subservience to the immutable will of God and the earthly supremacy of the King (both of whom could be read as a *gendarme necesario* of sorts). Doñana is never seen to believe in these beforehand, but her rather contradictory beliefs in this chapter seem to underscore the fact that Boves's precise loyalties were immaterial. What mattered in his campaign was his charisma and capacity to amass, wield, and *be* power.

Eugenia. Instead, their role is to expose the social mores and structures that underlay the First Republic. These are established as entrenched and sclerotic from the outset. An outsider's glimpse into the oligarchy's incestuous world is witnessed in 'El pulpero de Calabozo', though it is in the second section ('Los Mantuanos') that Herrera Luque lays out the nature of this world and sets out why Boves's ferocious attacks against it gained so much support. The thirteen chapters comprising this section are geared mostly towards introducing characters of varying importance, and to describing their social attitudes. Again, this run of chapters is uneven in focus, quality and even genre. For example, Chapter 13, 'La pagapeos', consists of lengthy exposition of *mantuano* life and its fatuous rituals. It is framed almost as a sociological essay that elucidates the extent of their arrogance, though voiced conversationally by a *párroco*:

> La misa de diez los domingos en Catedral es el acontecimiento más sonado del mantuanaje criollo. Los hombres, según van llegando, se arremolinan en el atrio; en tanto que las mujeres, rodeadas por sus esclavas, se anclan en sus alfombras dentro de la nave. El número de esclavas que las acompañan es significativo para la vanidad lugareña. Nadie que se estime es capaz de asistir a misa sin ir acompañada por lo menos de dos de sus negras. Las mujeres de la familia Tovar no bajan nunca de cinco esclavas. Catedral es el santuario de la oligarquía caraqueña. Los isleños tienen que oír misa en Candelaria, los pardos en Altagracia, los negros en San Mauricio. Sólo los blancos pueden ir a la iglesia matriz. Pero hay muchas clases de blancos: desde los blancos de orilla, como son la casi totalidad de los peninsulares, y hacia los cuales los criollos tienen manifiesto desprecio, hasta los vascos llegados con la Guipuzcoana, enemigos mortales de la aristocracia criolla.
>
> Todos ellos son desdeñados por los mantuanos, o sea, los descendientes de los conquistadores. A fin de hacer más ostensible la diferencia social, esta empingorotada gente ha tenido el privilegio de que sólo sus mujeres pueden usar mantos. De ahí les viene el nombre de mantuanos. «La vanidad de estas familias es inmensa» —le decía al provincial de los dominicos, el cura párroco de Catedral—. Por ahí murmuran que hay ciertas matronas que cuando le rezan a la Virgen le dicen: «Virgen María, Madre de Dios y prima nuestra». El pueblo se venga de la soberbia de ellos llamándoles «grandes cacaos» o inventándoles cuentos cual más gracioso, como el de una señora muy importante que es víctima de una flatulencia sonora y continua que no puede disimular. En misa y de rodillas, como usted se imaginará, el mal se acrecienta dando lugar a una serie de situaciones a cual más risible. ¿Qué cree usted que inventaron para resolver esta situación? Pues nada menos que ponerle al lado una negrita para que cada vez que se le salga un cuesco echarle la culpa a ella y meterle un coscorrón a la infeliz, lo que le ha merecido el sobrenombre de «la pagapeos». (31-32)

An educative, didactive intent of the kind that would characterise Herrera Luque's later works seems to underscore this passage. He depicts Caracas's extremely segregated racial and class hierarchy with its ostentatious markers – particularly the Tovars' abundance of slaves and the use of the *manto* from which the oligarchy derives its name. The writer's own attitude towards the *mantuanaje* is manifest, not only in the low-brow comical juxtaposition of extreme social propriety and flatulence humour (this stemming from an anecdotal lampoon devised by the lower classes – the kind of historical story expunged from the official record that Herrera Luque wished to publicise), but also through the use of the terms 'esta empingorotada gente', 'risible', and 'la soberbia de ellos'. Quite unobtrusively, Herrera Luque establishes the latent possibility of violent vengeance in the resentment of the lower classes at the *mantuanos*' 'desprecio'; that the cathedral is their *santuario* eventually becomes ironic, since a sizeable proportion of this class is massacred in another cathedral, that of Cumaná. Their treatment of black slaves as commodities, either to bolster their vanity and social standing or as scapegoats and recipients of physical violence draws the reader's antipathy.

Despite often letting events speak for themselves, the narrator routinely makes explicit value judgements about the *mantuanos*. It is at these moments that Herrera Luque's own views and resentments seem to bleed through. He said much over his lifetime about his distaste for the oligarchic class from which he hailed, such that certain contemporaries branded him a traitor for 'su renuncia a su clase social'.[227] Berroterán is described as afraid to 'rebelarse contra los prejuicios de casta en los que había crecido' (42); Boves's impending execution in Chapter 39 is attributed to 'un grupo de hombres que se consideran superiores a los demás mortales [que] han decretado su ruina por el hecho de habérseles igualado' (94-95); and on another occasion, Boves offers to free a *mantuana*'s brother from the La Guayra dungeon where he languishes. She replies '—Prefiero que se pudra en las bóvedas a tener que deberle la libterad a hombres como usted'. The narrator intervenes instantly to qualify this, stating that 'Los mantuanos son soberbios. En ello estriba su debilidad y su grandeza' (111). The precarity of their dominance belies throughout their cruelty and arrogance; *debilidad* and *grandeza* appear as two sides of the same coin.

[227] Viera Rojas, 173.

The above scene is illustrative of a common theme in the novel: the elite's desire to maintain social capital and respectability far outweighs emotional freedom. This accurately reflects *mantuano* beliefs at the time, for the aristocracy exhibited 'deep class consciousness, born of their close clan ties and sharpened by conflict with Spaniards on one hand and *pardos* on the other'.[228] For Doñana, 'el matrimonio era una alianza entre dos familias, destinadas a prevalacer sobre el mundo que los rodea y a tratar de perpetuar esa fuerza a todo lo largo de la historia, como habían hecho sus padres y sus abuelos desde los tiempos de la Conquista' (44), an attitude that perpetuates social supremacy as well as the transmission of the genetic mental disorders that supposedly afflicted the first settlers of Venezuela. She rejoices that Berroterán, her daughter's husband, is grave and humourless ('su padre sonrió tres veces en su vida: al nacerle su primer hijo varón, después de diez años de una larga enfermedad y luego de enterarse de la muerte de uno de sus amigos' [36]), and even when her closest family members abandon Caracas without her, meaningless pride takes precedence:

> —Nada de besos, abrazos ni amapuches —ha dicho Doñana—, eso es para gente de orilla. Que no te vean llorar tus negros, porque se te alzan –le ha dicho la anciana a su nieto. Nosotros podemos hacer de todo, menos llorar. (194)

This unfeeling nature abounds in their characterisation, and establishes them as the antagonists from early on. The loathsome Ascanio thinks nothing of the brutal scene of a dead enslaved woman's baby being cut from her womb, and absolves his son of guilt for sexually harassing Tomasa Machado – instead he finds it amusing, and feels pride that his son should take after his own exploits ('hijo de tigre sale pintado. A los quince años él hacía lo mismo. Es mejor eso a que me vaya a salir marico' [25]). Ascanio cannot understand that Francisco de Miranda's motivations could extend beyond his being wounded by 'lo que hicimos a su padre los mantuanos' (41), and it is telling that he denigrates Miranda's ambition ('imagínese, que siendo pulpero y canario, pretendió usar bastón y uniforme' [41]) rather than supporting his rebellion, with whose aims he identifies.

[228] Lynch, *The Spanish American Revolutions*, 191.

Eugenia's husband, Francisco de Montera, acts as a conduit for Herrera Luque's thoughts on the *mantuanos*; he comments at some length on their ways. Montera, rejected, like Boves, from their inner circle ('El hecho de haber nacido en España era suficiente para que los mantuanos lo tratasen con distancia a pesar de su fortuna y de los innumerables vínculos que tenía con ellos' [167]), grows exasperated at their inflexibility, stating that 'Estos mantuanos no tienen remedio […] Si pasa algo en este país, ellos llegarán a ser los únicos culpables' (167). This is the historical interpretation that Herrera Luque sets out in this novel: the reader is set up to loathe the *mantuanos* and to conceive of Boves's brutal campaign as the logical reaction of Venezuela to their inhumanity.

III.ii. Questions of Race

This last point is inextricably tied to the question of race. As in the historical period it portrays, 'race is class and power'[229] throughout the novel. The War of Independence was, to a great extent, the culmination of 'the age-long conflict of castes [and] oppression met by profound and implacable hatred'.[230] The 'potent mixture of race and reward [that] animated the *llaneros* and gave Boves and other royalist caudillos their troops'[231] could not have come about without the ingrained racism present in Venezuela and the *mantuanos*' desire to perpetuate, codify and deepen it. Even the folkloric memory of Boves as the *coco* has a racial dimension; the very fact that 'the *coco* […] is imagined as a black devil'[232] is indicative of what Echeverri terms 'the complicated association between popular fury and blackness that characterised Boves's movement'.[233] Herrera Luque noted that hierarchies of power in Venezuelan society were the product of both racial and socio-economic divisions, asserting that 'en Hispanoamérica el problema de las clases sociales se complicó al confundirlo con los grupos étnicos' (*BCH*, 49-50). This had given rise to a deeply embedded caste system. As Wright states:

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229 Wilson, 121.
230 Lynch, *The Spanish American Revolutions,* 191.
231 Lynch, *The Spanish American Revolutions,* 205.
232 Warner, 25.
233 Echeverri, 59.

> By the later eighteenth century, the elites' antipathy towards blacks and *pardos* took on an emotional quality akin to modern racism, but different in important ways. They made no attempt to attribute inferiority to innate racial characteristics. But they publicly demeaned blacks and *zambos* as cultural inferiors and accused them of any number of vile crimes and vices.[234]

This attitude informed the passing of a series of laws in the late eighteenth century that advanced private landownership at the expense of the 'undisciplined and largely nonwhite *llaneros*, who would be reduced to the status of a regimented peon class. [As a result], the *llaneros* were receptive to the call of royalist guerrilla leaders, while elsewhere in Venezuela bands of slaves rose up against their masters in the name of the king'.[235] Indeed, the second chapter of 'Los Mantuanos' depicts a scene of horrific racial violence meted out by Ascanio to one of his captured slaves. It is rendered more hard-hitting due to the slave in question being heavily pregnant, the blunt, simple language describing the event, and the use of tricolon, rare in Herrera Luque's rhetorically austere works:

> Entre las cuatro estacas clavadas en el suelo como una cruz de San Andrés, colocan a la negra Teresa. Un hueco se abre en el medio para que le quepa el vientre recrecido. Los esclavos callan y se amontonan como chamiza mojada. Resuena el primer latigazo. Un ¡ay! leve que se quedó en el aire hace callar a los pájaros. Siguen cayendo los latigazos. La negra Teresa ya no se queja. La negra Teresa sonríe. La negra Teresa ya no siente. (28)

Ascanio later urges the more liberal Montera to subject his own slaves to harsher treatment, telling him 'No confíes en esos negros, Francisco […] Negro es negro y su apellido… Fíjate lo que le pasó a Perucho Vegas, que era como tú. ¿No lo descuartizaron vivo sus propios negros, a quienes trataba como si fueran sus hijos?' (167). Later, Herrera Luque describes how the *mantuanos*' caste-based values have been exported to, and internalised by, the very groups they oppress:

> No hubo, sin embargo, fraternidad entre los esclavos. Los negros despreciaban a los indios, de la misma forma que los mulatos y los zambos despreciaban a los negros.

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234 Winthrop R. Wright, *Café con leche: Race, Class and National Image in Venezuela* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), 23.

235 David Bushnell, 'The Independence of Spanish South America', in Leslie Bethell, ed., *The Independence of Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 93-154 (109).

> El regimen de castas impuesto por España ya había penetrado en la idiosincrasia nativa, mucho más de lo que, en un primer momento, suponía el cura.
> ¿Tú cómo que te crees más blanco que yo? Era frecuente oír entre los pardos cuando discutían; de la misma forma que los mulatos se enorgullecían de los tonos claros de su piel o del cabello liso.
> —Es curioso —se decía don Ambrosio— que odien en otro lo que aman en ellos. Ese es el germen de su propia destrucción. (252-53)

It is against this backdrop that the intense hatred that nourishes Boves and his troops begins to make sense. Herrera Luque makes it clear that the War of Independence is not necessarily between patriots and royalists, but rather between the black and *pardo* population and the *criollos*, who are continually placed in opposition throughout: when Boves is made an officer, 'La noticia fue recibida con júbilo dentro del pardaje donde el asturiano tenía grandes amigos; pero envolvió como una mancha tenebrosa el alma de mantuanos y criollos' (120), and the *caudillo* is compelled to kill his friend Boada because 'está visto que blanco es blanco, y que ésta es una pelea de blanco contra negro' (160). In Boves's own apparently binary worldview, it is the realisation that 'Los negros y los pardos habían sido sus únicos amigos a lo largo de su dolorosa vida. Así como los blancos lo odiaban y desdeñaban, todo lo bueno que recordaba de este mundo venía de los negros' (95) that finally animates him to join Monteverde's battalions.

This constitutes a further contradiction within the protagonist. The historical Boves exhibited 'un entendimiento despectivo del pueblo que lo sigue en la lucha contra la república',[236] which Herrera Luque replicates in the novel. Having been ostracised by the white oligarchy, Boves finds acceptance, but not necessarily belonging, among the *llanero* masses:

> Cuando veía a sus negros y zambos bailar en derredor suyo, se sentía cómodo entre ellos, pero no parte de ellos. Tenía por sus hombres la espléndida complacencia del criador ante la bestia bella. Hay hombres que se quedan entre las bestias sin que quiera decir que se les han igualado, tan solo se han apartado de sus semejantes. (127)

[236] Pino Iturrieta, 58.

The *caudillo*, whom historical accounts characterise as a 'clever practitioner of psychological warfare',[237] is shown to understand and actively manipulate his followers' hatred of the *criollos*, though he does not necessarily share it. Boves's loathing of the *mantuanaje* stems from personal rather than political resentment. Nevertheless, he proves adept and even cynical at harnessing the *pardos*' anger: he does not himself necessarily believe in pillage and sacking, but realises that 'para reunir gente se vale de toda clase de estratagemas, desde proclamar bandos donde decreta la libertad de los esclavos, a prometer a los negros y pardos la posesión de toda la riqueza de los blancos' (130), and notes that 'es la forma de atraer a nuestra causa a esos negros semisalvajes' (147) – using a revealingly derogatory adjective. Padre Llamozas, his chaplain, summarises this succinctly:

> [T]odo cuanto ha hecho no es por amor a los negros y a los pardos, a quienes en el fondo desprecia, sino por odio a los blancos que a su vez lo desprecian. Su tendencia hacia abajo no es democracia, ha sido demonio gracia. No es afecto hacia los humildes, sino odio hacia los que son más soberbios que él. (266)

Indeed, in the scene previously discussed in which Boves drunkenly writhes and vomits in the square in Calabozo, he curses *all* of Venezuela's socio-ethnic groups – '¡Malditos sean los indios, los negros, los pardos, los blancos!' (82) – demonstrating that his true loyalties lie with none of them. He is influenced only by all-consuming hatred.

Herrera Luque does not devote a great deal of attention to describing the background and motivations of Boves's black soldiers; with a handful of exceptions, few are even named. On those occasions on which they speak, they do so with one unanimous voice or in collective, disembodied exchanges. The narrator also appears, at times, to demonstrate some of the same *entendimiento despectivo* as Boves. Arana notes that Boves's followers 'were acting on age-old democratic impulse',[238] using the same term as Juan Vicente González. Herrera Luque elects to depict this impulse as basal, even animalistic. Boves's acolytes appear as an indeterminate mass, guided only

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[237] Leslie B. Rout, Jr., *The African Experience in Spanish America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 173.

[238] Marie Arana, *Bolívar: American Liberator* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2013), 153.

by instinct ('Los esclavos y los pardos de servicio comenzaron a desertar de sus amos. Como animales sedientos que buscan la charca, recorren distancias increíbles persiguiendo la luz que emanaba del Taita' [156]; 'De todos partes del Llano seguían llegando indios, negros y pardos, al saberse la invasión general que proyectaba el asturiano' [247]). Physical descriptions of them carry somewhat racist undertones, which might be attributable to the typology that Herrera Luque studied during his psychiatric career (Andrés Machado, 'de no ser por el color más que oscuro de su piel y las encías color de obispo, tendría una belleza clásica' [28], while in contrast to 'los indios del Alto Apure y del Meta, que eran deformes y achaparrados, los caribes tenían buena talla y hermosas facciones' [252]).

Indigenous characters do not feature prominently in Herrera Luque's works. This is not particularly surprising, given that the indigenous population of Venezuela had been low (and in continual decline) ever since conquest.[239] Nor would the writer have found much material relating to indigenous involvement in the independence struggle: indigenous actors 'are rarely mentioned in contemporary accounts as a significant racialized actor in the War to the Death. Instead, they seemed mainly to play a rhetorical and symbolic role'.[240] Viera Rojas, it is worth noting, regards Herrera Luque as 'indiferente a los indígenas contemporáneos y su problemática'.[241] Padre Llamozas – one of a handful of apparent mouthpieces for the writer in the novel, and one able to analyse the historical situation perceptively and almost with the benefit of hindsight – rhetorically asks '¿Qué le puede importar a uno de esos indios errantes la maldad o crueldad de un hombre cuando la maldad, la crueldad y la aspereza han sido los nortes de su existencia? Del hombre fuerte el indio quiere carne, sal y fuego. Si se los da, es un taita, de negárselos, lo roba…' (77). This is reflective of the writer's prevailing attitude towards Venezuela's underclasses: the sympathy towards them is essential to the novel, and yet they are two-dimensional, and instrumentalised.

[239] Gil Fortoul's essay asserts that many of Venezuela's remaining indigenous communities 'no forman en realidad parte de la nación' (26). The same view appears to be borne out in Herrera Luque's novels; to Pantín, he stated that 'soy antiindigenista, soy partidario de que celebremos el mestizaje' (699).
[240] Racine, 211.
[241] Viera Rojas, 112.

III.iii. The Case of Eugenia Blanco and Andrés Machado

The most illustrative case of character instrumentalization, however, comes in the form of Eugenia Blanco. Eugenia, supposedly *Boves*'s female protagonist, occupies an interesting and problematic space at the centre of the novel. There are sections near its conclusion, particularly when the *mantuanas* hide in Cumaná Cathedral, and during the exodus, in which Eugenia appears as a well-rounded, sensitively portrayed and plausible character. These are, however, the exceptions rather than the rule. In his literary biography of Herrera Luque, Roberto Lovera de Sola makes the following effusive assertion:

> Eugenia Blanco es una de las grandes creaciones literarias de Herrera Luque, persona producto de su febril imaginación y de la honda comprensión del ser humano que nos ofrece este novelista. Es, sin duda, el mayor protagonista femenino creado por novelista venezolano alguno, varón o hembra, en el último medio siglo y cuidado si no es la mayor figura erótica de la novela venezolana, siempre tan llena, como la vida venezolana, de represión y cruzada, casi siempre, por una ola de sadismo.[242]

This claim is nothing short of bizarre. Eugenia is, for much of the work, extremely thinly characterised, being quite passive and looking on at events 'con mirada indiferente'. However, Lovera's characterisation of her as a 'figura erótica' (244) is certainly accurate – indeed, for large sections, this is all she represents. Detailed physical descriptions of characters in Herrera Luque's works are very rare, and Eugenia is a notable exception, being introduced as follows:

> Era rubia por el color verde esmeralda de sus ojos y por los mechones amarillos que ondulaban entre la maleza castaña de su pelo. Pero su piel tenía esa tonalidad amarillento-cobrizo del caribe que hacía preguntar por los abuelos muertos. Era alta y serena como un chaguarama, y tenía ese dejo nasal y atontado de las caraqueñas viejas, que cuando hablan no se sabe si suplican, copulan o gimen. (38)

This is deliberate, and establishes Eugenia the object of viewing pleasure for male characters – a role she occupies throughout. She interacts with Boves twice, once when he visits her during the

[242] Lovera, 222.

convent subplot and once after the siege of Cumaná ('José Tomás tuvo la sensación de que estaba prisionero' [108]; 'le dirigió una mirada de apetito' [262]). Eugenia is presented as a figure of intense sexual appetites from very early on; one of her first actions as a young teenager is to shoot 'una lúbrica mirada' (39) at the Blancos' *mayordomo*, and over the course of the novel she is involved in numerous erotic scenes ('entornó impúdica los ojos y abrió la boca' [108] upon meeting Boves; 'esa noche Simeón y Eugenia se desquitaron de ocho años de fantasía en una cama copetona de la mayor caoba de la región' [220]). An uncharitable interpretation here might be – yet again – that sex sells, and Eugenia's purpose amid her multiple affairs, sexual encounters and unresolved sexual subplots is to add drama to the novel and to broaden its appeal. There is a titillating aspect to her rather loveless marriage to Montera, with the narrator noting during their unremarkable honeymoon that 'Eugenia, para humedecer las sábanas de Holanda, imaginaba estar muy lejos de la alcoba nupcial y entre la maleza o sobre un catre de madera crujientes, soñaba besos ardientes y largos con Andrés Machado y con Simeón' (168).

These episodes are actually explained outright by the narrator, who furnishes them with a rather heavy-handed racial dimension. Rather than relying on scenes such as her first sight of Andrés Machado, overhearing the mixed-race Simeón having sex, or having a brief affair with Manuel Piar[243] to prove his point, the narrator intercedes directly to inform the reader that 'Eugenia se reconocía atraída hacia los hombres de color. No lo podía remediar. La vista de un mulato perfilado, como el mayordomo de su tía, la lubricaba los prejuicios de casta' (156). From near the novel's opening – specifically, Eugenia's first glance at Andrés, which functions as a sort of sexual awakening for her – Herrera Luque outlines the seeming inevitability of a symbolic and caste system-defying match between the progeny of the oligarchy and an illustrative member of Venezuela's oppressed underclass.

Machado is treated with more sensitivity by the narrator than many other royalist, black and *pardo* figures within the novel. He is introduced in Chapter 12, the second 'mantuano' chapter, and

[243] The historical significance of Piar and the racial undertones of execution on Bolívar's orders fascinated Herrera Luque and eventually became the subject of his 1987 novel.

afforded a long introductory exposition of his emotions and inner turmoil, which reflect those of Venezuela at large. Machado is described as 'inestable, multiple y torturante en sus lealtades', despising the oligarchs but finding his own people – the *pardos* – to be 'ineptos, falsos y arrastrados […] que pertenecen a tres razas y no son parte de ninguna' (29). He regards Venezuela as a fundamentally divided 'pueblo de mendigos y de explotadores' (29), with the *mantuanos* terrified of the *pardos* but the *pardos* too motivated by short-term self-interest to unite for their own advancement. Andrés, Herrera Luque notes, 'odia a los negros porque es la piel la parte de su cuerpo que más detesta' (29).

Machado – rather like Boves, in some senses – cannot belong either to one group or another, as demonstrated by his run-ins with both *mantuanos* and *pardos* in Chapter 22. Machado is not necessarily a sympathetic character, committing a string of atrocities (his decapitation of Ascanio in Chapter 93 may, however, be read as rather cathartic), but is useful to Herrera Luque's exposition of the atmosphere of loathing that underlay Venezuela's divided society at the time of independence. One might argue that he, perhaps more closely than Boves, 'encarna y representa la voluntad de la nación o de la Humanidad' (*HF 2*, 161) through his anguished desire for an elusive *síntesis*. When Eugenia is captured at Cumaná, it is Machado who carries her away; he later deserts Boves's forces in order to consummate with her the union hinted at from the start of the novel.

> Cuando llegaron a la esquina dieron vuelta en dirección contraria y nadie les impidió el paso. Dos horas más tarde se detuvieron a la orilla de un río. La luna brillaba desvaída. La arena de la playa guardaba el calor de la tarde. Eugenia sintió su contacto como una caricia y se revolcó en ella. Una dulce y lánguida quietud abrasaba el aire. Eugenia se volvió de cara toda al mulato y le vio los ojos encendidos por el deseo. Con la mirada fija, a pasos menudos, avanzó hasta Andrés y lo desnudó ella misma. (262)

Machado's desertion from Boves's forces is not especially plausible. There is no previous explanation for why the *caudillo*'s increasingly senseless violence could have disgusted him, or of his political positions – but it is interesting that it is prompted by his affair with Eugenia. Their tryst symbolically helps instigate the process of synthesis towards which Venezuela's historical development was directed, with the *mantuanos* and *pardos* of the land coalescing in the form of these

two characters.[244] Indeed, the match is a productive one: Eugenia later becomes the matriarch of a large and powerful family, through whom Venezuela's historical progress is later read in *En la casa del pez que escupe el agua*. In the final chapters of *Boves*, Herrera Luque depicts the republican frontline containing the *mantuano* general José Félix Ribas, Piar (who magnanimously and optimistically accepts the desertion of Machado, his former enemy, with the words 'nada nos importa el pasado; lo que interesa es la libertad' [263]), Machado, and Juan Palacios, representing a spectrum of Venezuela's society. Some level of unity has been achieved here. While Boves, having descended irrevocably into madness and bloodlust, no longer appears to spearhead Venezuela's popular will, he has nonetheless given shape to it by bringing about an amalgamation of castes and characters, which represents a tentative hope for reconciliation. Just as telling, perhaps, is the reaction of Juan Palacios to Eugenia and Andrés's relationship, the consummation of which he witnesses. Having acted in some ways as the supernatural bestower of legitimacy, anointing Boves as *Taita* and foreseeing his arrival as the redeemer of the *pardos*, Palacios's approval of their union is made more momentous by the fact that judgements and observations on the country's social realities – ones that reflect the writer's own opinions – are left to him throughout the novel.

V. Author Surrogates

The narration of *Boves* reveals a large amount of information about Herrera Luque's attitude towards his protagonist, as well as towards other individuals and groups, both historical and fictional. We detect much sympathy for the *pardos*' pursuit of vengeance against the perpetuators of Venezuela's entrenched caste system and brutal racial hierarchy. The narrator's loathing of the *mantuanos* is also made obvious through the occasionally overwrought representation of their fatuous rituals, backward social attitudes, and much-emphasised cruelty.

[244] Reconciliation and/or nation-building through productive romantic and sexual relationships is a recurrent feature in earlier Latin American historical novels and those texts that Sommer (1991) terms foundational fictions. Herrera Luque was a fierce proponent of cultural hybridity and *mestizaje*.

As regards Boves himself, it is notable that the narrator never provides a definitive diagnosis of his motives, despite the author's classification of the novel as a renewed attempt to understand a man 'mutilado por las memorias del pueblo'.[245] Instead, we simultaneously see a pervasive sense of revulsion at, and perverse fascination with, his charisma and (particularly) his violence – this is a phenomenon common in *caudillo* and dictator novels and is notably exhibited by Sarmiento towards Facundo and by Martín Luis Guzmán towards Villa in *El águila y la serpiente* (1928). Moreover, Herrera Luque's extremely negative depiction of his enemies, Berroterán and Jalón above all, and his highly emotive presentation of Boves's string of misfortunes, even suggests a partial exoneration of his excesses. That Boves's greatest atrocities are described either in morbid detail or with dispassionate, objective language likewise indicates a lack of definitive judgement passed upon them by the writer. Nor – crucially – does the omniscient narrator make any *conclusive* comment on Boves's historical significance or his legacy: nothing is said explicitly about how this 'first *caudillo* of democracy' influenced the form or development of power in the post-Independence Venezuelan state.

These judgements are instead outsourced to the small handful of characters that can be identified as the spokesmen, or surrogates, for the interpretations of history that Herrera Luque himself had reached and that he wished to promulgate. Reference has already been made, in passing, to comments and brief interior monologues by Vicente Salias, Francisco de la Montera, Doñana, and Boves himself as they attempt to identify the royalist rebellion's true purpose. These are, however, all cursory and inconclusive. Instead, it is through detailed analyses of three of Herrera Luque's most interesting characters – Juan Palacios, Padre Llamozas, and Dr. Espejo, the prophet, the priest, and the philosopher – that the reasons for Boves's resonance, and his true historical importance, might best be discerned.

Juan Palacios is a character of transcendent importance in *Boves* for a variety of reasons. Introduced early on as a paternal figure for the Asturian while the two of them are imprisoned, this 'negro

[245] Lovera, 731.

adivinador' (16) is described as 'amargo como un profeta' (17) and exhibiting clairvoyant abilities: he predicts his own imminent liberty through communing with the 'alma amiga' (17) of a bat, and it is he who tells Boves that 'Tú serás un gran hombre, José Tomás, aunque lo pagarás muy caro, y yo también por andar contigo' (18). More importantly, however, Juan Palacios first ignites Boves's awareness of the parlous situation and routine abuses suffered by Venezuela's *pardo* population, correctly foreseeing the outbreak of a rebellion:

> ¿—Tú crees —le interpeló con voz grave a José Tomás—, que estos blanquitos de papelón hubieran soportado los malos tratos que hemos aguantado los negros? Nosotros, con todas las vainas que nos echan, somos fuertes, alegres y tiradores, como las cabras del monte y algún día nos tocará la nuestra. Viviremos para verlo, José Tomás, viviremos para verlo. (17)

In the following chapters, Juan Palacios routinely appears and disappears, cropping up on Ascanio's estate and later as the leader of slave revolts in La Guayra. It is implied that he travels, Mackandal-like, through the country attracting a following of Venezuelan *pardos* in his guise as the Gran Bulú, the mysterious leader of a syncretic *llanero* religious cult that foresaw liberty for the downtrodden masses.[246] This is centred on the town of San Gerónimo de Guayabal, an isolated backwater and 'paraíso de todos los bandoleros y negros cimarrones del Llano Alto' (54) to which Boves travels in the third section ('El Taita') of Book One. Upon their reunion, Juan Palacios rides a mule and is directly likened to Christ ('como el Señor entrando a Jerusalén el Domingo de Ramos. Los negros se arrodillaban a su paso' [56]), but in subsequent chapters he takes on a role more akin to that of his namesake John the Baptist.[247] In a richly described scene, Juan Palacios declares before the crowds of *pardos* gathered in an abandoned convent[248] that 'Ha llegado el Taita. El Taita que los redima de las injusticias de los blancos. Bajo su mando ustedes harán temblar la tierra' (64-65) and anoints Boves as their messiah:

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[246] There was, of course, a significant proliferation of syncretic religious practices throughout the Americas; the best-known in Venezuela is that of María Lionza, though this emerged about a century after Boves's death.
[247] Palacios's visions – induced by tobacco smoking in Lamata's adaptation – of a bloody Judgement Day ('Veo caballos desbocados, lanzas rojas y negros felices' [65]) also liken him in some ways to John of Patmos.
[248] In the appendix, Herrera Luque notes that Humboldt mentioned this place; in his own travels, however, 'el autor no encontró huellas del referido convento' (279).

—Que resuenen los tambores, el bongo y las chirimías; que bailen las negras buenas y Fray Tiburcio nos bendiga.
Al conjuro de Juan Palacios retumbaron las cajas, las arpas y las maracas. Siete negras de ancas rellenas meneaban muellemente las caderas. Fray Tiburcio, con su palma, llevaba el compás a paso menudo desde el altar. El Gran Bulú avanzó grave y mayestático hasta José Tomás. Parecía un obispo copto con su capa color de lluvia. Ya para alcanzarlo en su abrazo, gritó:
—Que suenen más fuerte esos tambores para que lleguen hasta Camaguán.
La música y los alaridos de los negros hicieron inaudibles las palabras que con aire de ritual mágico le decía Juan Palacios a José Tomás, mientras lo besaba en la frente, lo tocaba en los hombros, lo persignaba en el pecho. (65)

Palacios seemingly rouses a disembodied voice, or chorus of voices, to proclaim that:

—El hombre es el Taita.
—El Taita nos está esperando en Guayabal.
—Ha llegado la hora de la venganza. Llanero, deja tu rancho, quema la casa, mata la siembra, que el Taita espera. (144)

He advises Boves on military manoeuvres, but at this point declares that 'Yo soy hombre de paz. Yo te atizo la candela desde aquí, pero no me pidas que sea carbón' (148). For the remainder of the novel, Palacios fulfils the function of Boves's conscience – he is described as 'el alma blanca de Boves' (226) – and acts as a moderating influence, though his interventions become increasingly exasperated and unheeded, eventually waymarking Boves's spiral into depravity and deviation away from the original promise of his campaign. When Boves takes Caracas, Palacios stops him from drinking, thereby averting a massacre similar to that at Valencia ('En Valencia metiste la pata porque estabas borracho, y te emborrachaste porque yo no estaba' [227]) and ensuring that not a single execution takes place during the occupation. However, his influence wanes greatly after Boves, drunk on power, begins to think of himself as a would-be king. Palacios warns a surprised Boves of the consequences of his senseless violence in Chapter 121 after the *caudillo* unintentionally causes a man to die of sheer fright:

> —¿Y la gente dice que soy malo? —preguntó empalideciendo, como si la afirmación del negro le revelara un mundo.
> —Pero bueno, José Tomás, ¿y tú no lo sabes? ¿Cómo quieres que llamen a un hombre que haga lo que hiciste en Valencia, La Puerta y La Cabrera, por no nombrarte sino los más mentados? ¿De qué crees que se murió aquel pulpero de Pariaguán? Se murió de miedo. Tenía cagados los pantalones cuando cayó muerto. […] Por eso estaba por decirte, José Tomás, que si tú no cambias, vas a terminar muy mal, y que yo, con todo lo que te quiero, no estoy dispuesto a acompañarte por ese barrial de sangre. (254)

It is no use. Juan Palacios's warnings fall on deaf ears, and he is unable to prevent Boves's ruthless massacre of defenceless *mantuanos* in Cumaná, looking on as an impotent observer ('le dirigía una furibunda mirada a Boves' [260]) as the Asturian responds 'con una carcajada, como jamás Juan Palacios se le había oído' (260). Palacios deserts Boves that night and – after stumbling upon Eugenia and Machado together in the undergrowth – joins Piar's forces, plunging the *Taita* into 'la ira y el abatimiento' (263).[249] Little is explained about Palacios's background. His supernatural abilities and clairvoyance, used primarily for Boves's advantage, identify him with Spike Lee's definition of the highly problematic 'magical Negro' trope. He is responsible for providing legitimacy through which Boves can wield authority, but as Boves is consumed by the maddening influence of the *caudillo*-archetype (as in Viera Rojas's Jungian reading) and deviates from what Palacios originally saw as his mission of emancipating the *pardo* classes, Palacios's hopes of complete liberation risk going unfulfilled. His recognition and ordaining of Boves, however, enables the inception of the synthesising process. It also constitutes the earliest form of a technique commonly used by Herrera Luque when presenting the origins and transfer of political power.

The second of these surrogate figures is Padre Llamozas. While Juan Palacios, 'aunque muy venezolano y central, es un personaje de ficción' (278), José Ambrosio Llamozas was the historical Boves's chaplain and a figure 'de gran importancia en la vida de Boves' (279). Llamozas himself

[249] An interesting scene in Lamata's film, not described in the novel, depicts Padre Llamozas and Juan Palacios on the eve of the Battle of Urica. Shots of the two men and of a soldier sharpening his sword for the next day's fighting are superimposed and interspersed with images of smoke, incense and sparks. Llamozas self-flagellates while reciting Latin prayers; Palacios, chanting indistinctly in an unidentified language, ties a symbolic knot in a reference to his earlier statement that he had metaphorically tied the knot of Boves's destiny (1:32:28-1:33:16).

held a somewhat contradictory view of his captain. In a later letter to the King of Spain, he decried 'la insaciable sed de sangre de Boves' and how 'en los pueblos pacíficos se cometieron por su orden horrors de que hay pocos ejemplares'[250] – but in the same letter 'seemed more concerned with the fact that they had not been permitted a last confession than with condemning the mass murder itself'.[251] Llamozas is introduced in Chapter 8 as 'uno de esos filósofos de la llanura' (22), and this accurately summarises his role in the novel. Like Palacios, he advises Boves and acts as a mentor of sorts: for example, he tries to help Boves rationalise his conflicting sexual and romantic feelings towards Inés Corrales ('eres un tímido y al mismo tiempo sensual […] Temes ser esclavizado. Querer y desear al mismo tiempo sería para ti, demasiado' [245]). His vain warnings to the increasingly bloodthirsty *caudillo* that 'Una cosa es el gobernante y otra el hombre […] yo comprendo que tú, como ser humano, estás resentido, pero es imposible que confundas los intereses del Estado con tus problemas personales' (120) and that 'ni somos policías ni perros de presa', naturally, have no effect. Though the massacres horrify him ('Lo del baile de Valencia lo había puesto fuera de sí' [248]), he ceases trying to prevent them. As Boves downs a bottle of rum in Santa Catalina – a sure sign of an impending brutal act – the impotent priest 'lo ve y se santigua, sabe que todo terminará en matanza' (135), and finally tells Boves 'obedezco, pero no creo' (249).

More importantly, however, Llamozas acts as a conduit for what we might identify as Herrera Luque's (or an imagined reader's) thoughts, making a series of increasingly articulate and essayistic speeches as the campaign unravels. He begins by expressing confusion at Boves's elusive and contradictory nature ('se quebraba la cabeza en las noches tratando de responderse cuál de estas dos naturalezas, tan opuestas, era la que en verdad correspondía a su discípulo' [70]). His inquiry then evolves significantly. He agonises over religious readings of Boves, the 'azote de Dios'[252] likened in the novel to Genghis Khan (230). He notes, too, that 'Boves es la venganza del Caribe […] El español que se quedó en la costa arrojó el Caribe hacia los Llanos. Ahora Dios, en sus inescrutables designios, y como hizo con los judíos, le va a devolver su tierra a sus legítimos dueños'

[250] Jorge Flores González, 'Muerte, exequias y corazones en tiempos de la guerra de Independencia venezolana', in Neller Ochoa, ed., *¡He aquí el año terrible! 1814: Mitos, hitos y redefiniciones* (Caracas: Centro Nacional de Estudios Históricos, 2017), pp. 15-80 (24).
[251] Racine, 211.
[252] J. Uslar Pietri, 101.

(247-48). Herrera Luque states explicitly that 'La significación de Boves dentro de los designios del Señor y la conducta criminal del Caudillo, eran un verdadero quebradero de cabeza para el Padre Llamozas' [248]). Llamozas even informs the Archbishop of Caracas of his 'tesis' of Boves's providential nature, believing that 'el asturiano era un instrumento cruel de la voluntad divina para restablecer la paz en Venezuela' (248) – echoing, on one level, Doñana's dying realisation, and Herrera Luque's own (frequently ill-defined) conception of power.

Elsewhere, Llamozas's musings are more existential, as he queries Boves's obliviousness towards his own purpose, lack of political principles, and seemingly inexplicable appeal ('Este hombre es un misterio de la naturaleza. […] Con tan inmenso poder y todavía no sabe para qué ha nacido. Con todas sus crueldades e iniquidades tiene un extraño encanto sobre los menesterosos, negros y desvalidos, como nadie hasta la fecha, en este país, ha tenido' [236]). In this sense, Llamozas functions almost in the same way as Herrera Luque did during the author's period of research for the novel, following the *caudillo*'s path around Venezuela and attempting to answer the unresolved questions that surround him. As Llamozas's views become more defined, his musings shift towards the racial foundations of Boves's campaign. Herrera Luque's intense interest in the *personalidad básica* of Venezuela and the factors that engendered it is in evidence here, particularly in the following observation not long before the novel's denouement:

> [Los negros] son tan víctimas de la codicia del hombre blanco, como el indio; por eso huyeron al llano. El zambo, que es su mezcla […] es la expresión más acabada del alma popular. El blanco, hay que reconocerlo, aunque escupamos hacia arriba, es un usurpador, y como todo ladrón, debe ser desposeído. (248)

The theme of *mestizaje* being Venezuela's destiny and the expression of its collective soul – if not necessarily the answer to its existential social divides – is again present. By the time of Llamozas's penultimate appearance, his views have become more defined. His final monologue, included in its entirety below, expounds them.

> —¿Cómo es posible que un pueblo de negros y hombres de color en abierta rebelión contra los blancos, tengan como caudillo a un hombre que además de todo era español,

> rubio y pulpero? Es tal la degradación a la que llega el alma del esclavo —se respondió el presbítero—, que nada bueno espera de sus iguales. Hasta ese extremo —exclamó con indignación el cura—, ha llegado la explotación del vencedor.
> José Tomás, como decía Su Ilustrísima, es un instrumento ciego de la Divina Providencia para imponer la justicia en esta tierra —continuaba diciéndose el cura—, pero está destinado a desaparecer en el momento justo y que triunfe, o terminará traicionando a esa rebelión que acaudilla. José Tomás es un resentido. Todo cuando ha hecho es por odio y su odio tiene por fundamento el desprecio y las afrentas a que lo sometió su propia gente. Cuando triunfe será aclamado y ensalzado por los que una vez los [sic] humillaron, trocando lo que hubiese sido un ciclo histórico por menguado elipse personal. Esa es la historia de todos los osos revolucionarios, nobles y ricos. ¿No sucedió en Francia con Orléans y Napoleón? ¿No se hizo coronar emperador quien se proclamaba paladín de la República?
> El Padre Llamozas oscurecía aún más su cetrino rostro a tiempo que observaba como dos zambos esgrimían sus garrotes en una extraña danza homicida que todas palmeaban y aplaudían. El cura continuó en su esquinado monólogo:
> —Sólo los pobres podrán liberar a los pobres, y sólo los negros liberarán a los negros. Hasta que no llegue un caudillo pardo y pobre, todas las revoluciones serán traicionadas. ¿La traicionará José Tomás? […] El odio ya lo ha aislado de sus iguales. Su último vínculo con la raza en la que ha nacido lo segó en Cumaná, cuando hizo fusilar a los 50 soldados españoles que lo seguían. Dejó tan solo a los canarios, a quienes se trata como pardos y a él con su perfil de viaje o tumaco. ¿Pero puede un hombre sin una pizca de amor hacer un pueblo cuando llegue a su fin? La era del odio. José Tomás, todo cuanto ha hecho no es por amor a los negros y a los pardos, a quienes en el fondo desprecia, sino por odio a los blancos que a su vez lo desprecian. Su tendencia hacia abajo no es democracia, ha sido demonio gracia. No es afecto hacia los humildes, sino odio hacia los que son más soberbios que él. Cuando un tirano no tiene amor, la locura y la muerte son su corona y su cetro. ¿Estaremos frente a una réplica equinoccial de Calígula?

The reader never finds out. Llamozas never makes another cogent speech of this sort, and Boves dies shortly thereafter. His musings instead read as more general comments on human impulse.

Llamozas and Palacios are not the only commentators on Boves's campaign, and nor are they the most succinct. The most pessimistic, and at times most incisive, analysis is that provided by Dr Francisco Espejo, the jurist who was governor of Valencia at the time of its siege. Espejo appears on only a few occasions and appears to act as the good conscience of pro-independence Venezuelans; he is, Eugenia excepted, one of the most sympathetic *mantuano* or patriot characters. His first utterance, spoken to Boves, demonstrates (perhaps too obviously) what his role is to be: 'Señor, como le dice mi nombre, soy espejo de realidades. Yo devuelvo la luz que se me ponga

enfrente' (207). Virtually the entirety of Chapter 73 is dedicated to Espejo's theorising, and he gives a lucid, if extremely pessimistic, account of the paradoxes at hand:

> Boves, misteriosamente, ya que es blanco, ha sido el encargado de agitar este menjurje de razas, y no está tan equivocado cuando dice que este país hay que pardizarlo, es decir, que sea solo para los pardos. ¿Y cómo es la única forma de lograrlo? Pues haciendo lo que está haciendo el coronel Boves —dijo con un leve dejo de respeto—; matando blancos y petateándole a sus mujeres. Con este sistema no quedará un blanco ni para remedio, dentro de poco tiempo. Lo mismo que en Santo Domingo. (164-65) [253]

As Espejo despairs at the unviability of the republic, Manuel Antonio Malpica asks him 'Y usted, ¿qué propone, Dr. Espejo?' (165). Their conversation is immediately interrupted; the question goes unanswered, and Espejo is killed shortly afterwards. The figure in the novel who is perhaps most readily identifiable with its author – whose very name suggests an ability to reflect truly and faithfully the realities of the world – can offer no solution. But the root cause of the manifold national anguishes that engendered Boves can be found in an earlier observation from Espejo: 'Boves no es un accidente; no es tan sólo un bandido, como piensan muchos con un criterio superficial,[254] sino la expresión del alma irredenta de este pueblo buscando su síntesis' (163).[255] If we paraphrase Vallenilla Lanz, Espejo's observation strikes at the heart of Venezuela's genesis – or, rather, the vaguely Biblical terms of original sin and redemption in which Herrera Luque conceives of it.

VI: Venezuela's Original Sin

What is not made explicit in Espejo's observations is from what sins Venezuela's national 'soul' was to be redeemed – or how. Writing in the early stages of *Boves*'s composition, Herrera Luque

[253] This is the only mention of the 1791-1804 Haitian Revolution – an event which petrified Venezuela's *criollo* class – in the novel.

[254] This could be a metafictional criticism of the many establishment historians and public figures who sought to downplay Boves's role.

[255] The notion of the 'alma irredenta' here is reminiscent of Alberto Solís's famous verdict on Mexico's national psychology in Mariano Azuela's *Los de abajo* (1916).

produced a newspaper article that characterised Venezuela as a 'suma de contrarios'.[256] In it, he agonised over what he saw as the problems caused by a pronounced cultural heterogeneity, which had turned Venezuela's existence into 'eterna pugna o […] prolongada incomprensión'.[257] In this heterogeneity, he argued, 'se refleja la heterogeneidad de los pueblos y de las culturas que intervinieron en su fragua. El malestar que observamos puede significar lucha, acortamiento, aproximación: busca angustiante de la síntesis'.[258] Herrera Luque did not make the problematic contention, as Vallenilla Lanz had done in his paternalistic *Cesarismo democrático*, that this heterogeneity was itself a problem, or the symptom of an immature nation. Rather, he sought to explain how it, and the country's malaise more generally, had come about – and why *síntesis* was necessary.

Canonical historical accounts of Venezuela's war of independence had painted Boves as the cause of the violent convulsions that doomed the Second Republic. He was cast as an evil, bestial figure, whose motives were often so opaque that they could only be attributed to insatiable bloodlust, the desire to exact a terrible revenge, or even to his being a divine punishment or satanic being. Herrera Luque believed these prevailing interpretations to be fundamentally misguided. While he hoped that novelising Boves's life would enable fuller comprehension of the *caudillo*, the novel does not rehabilitate this monstered figure. Nor does it wholly realise the writer's stated aim of clarifying his emotional make-up or his decision-making processes. The most Herrera Luque can achieve is reasoned conjecture, alongside the provision of an account of Boves's psychological temperament and the early experiences that gave rise to his unbalanced personality.

Indeed, as the novel progresses, Boves becomes less – not more – comprehensible. The first run of chapters detail his reminiscences, and the penultimate chapter comprises his final, introspective monologue. These bookend a sequence of increasingly violent deeds whose explanation and purpose escape even the narrator. At points, these events, related in intensely graphic detail, become the novel's primary focus, but they are so numerous and extreme that both the reader and,

256 Francisco Herrera Luque, 'Venezuela y la suma de contrarios', in *El Nacional*, 10th August 1968, p. 4.
257 Ibid.
258 Ibid.

it seems, the narrator eventually become desensitised to them. That depicting Boves's mentality comprehensively is a task beyond the narrator's capacity is suggested by an important quotation to which we might return: the opening of Chapter 65, when the narrator, an external observer, depicts Boves exhibiting 'la edad indefinida de los caudillos' (146).

This narratorial limitation is not necessarily an aesthetic flaw of the novel; it is likely intentional. In his 1973 'La cólera de Dios' speech, Herrera Luque noted that Boves's 'simple resentido contra los mantuanos de Calabozo' (*BCH*, 46) is insufficient in explaining his transcendent significance. He also identified Boves as being imbued with what Jung termed mana – 'some occult or bewitching quality',[259] which can transform a subject into the archetype of 'the hero and the godlike being'.[260] In becoming overwhelmed by this archetype, the timeless archetype of the hero or the *caudillo*, Herrera Luque asserts, Boves loses his humanity and descends into madness. His final, introspective monologue can thus be seen to represent the last articulation of his vestigial personhood. Jung also characterises mana as '[corresponding] to a dominant of the collective unconscious'.[261] In Herrera Luque's novel, this 'inconsciente colectivo' (*BCH*, 48) – what he defined as Venezuela's national soul, and its labouring under the evils of racial and class-based division – is projected onto, and thus incarnated by, Boves, who 'se convirtió en el depositario y conductor de los ideales de un pueblo' (*BCH*, 46). As a vessel for these ideals, Boves's own psychological makeup is far less important than what he represented. Indeed, it was Herrera Luque's view that 'todo conductor de almas da a los hombres que conduce lo que ya tienen contenido' (*BCH*, 47).

Herrera Luque's extended depiction of the injustices meted out by the incestuous *mantuano* class, alongside the (sometimes implausibly articulate) judgements of Llamozas and Espejo, provide explanations for Boves's actions in a way that a psychological study by itself could not. An overriding concern of the novel is to produce a detailed portrayal of the maelstrom of resentment

[259] Carl Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, trans. by R. F. C. Hull, 2nd edn., *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, vol. 7 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 227.
[260] Jung, 233.
[261] Ibid.

that gave rise to Boves, and which he – or perhaps a figure *like* him – could easily, even unconsciously, manipulate. Herrera Luque unambiguously depicts racism as one of Venezuela's original sins, producing social divisions with a long-lasting historical imprint. The modern Republic, it is implied, had obscured the fact that it had been born out of a race war, promoting deliberately misleading historical narratives.

Espejo's claim that Boves is 'la expresión del alma irredenta de este pueblo buscando su síntesis' (163) is quite evidently an articulation of Herrera Luque's own belief. Yet, based on what is presented in the novel, this national soul is a dark and anguished thing indeed. How this synthesis could be achieved is only hinted at: the union of Eugenia and Andrés is merely a small step in what the writer casts as an evolutionary process that may take many thousands of years to achieve its arim, but which must necessarily involve the dilution of the *sobrecarga psicopática* of Venezuela's original Spanish settlers. The sacrifice of Boves – a providential, even Christ-like figure – at Urica is the first step in this process of redemption.

Boves himself is cast as a product and a symptom of a narrowly Venezuelan context. It is notable that his more 'human' moments – his final introspection, and the string of events that formed him – are the least historical, and allow for the consideration of certain human universals. Yet the *caudillo*'s biography can perhaps best be read as an attempt by Herrera Luque to expound his conception of power. Rather than requiring a 'gendarme necesario', as Vallenilla Lanz had argued, the people can only be effectively led by a *conductor* who embodies their collective soul and activates their latent political instinct. A cousin of Eugenia Blanco says of Boves that 'a este rey de los zamuros, como a los reyes medioevales, nada lo separa del bajo pueblo. Esa es su fuerza' (243). It is his identification with, and manifestation of, Venezuela's turbulent soul that makes him the first *caudillo* of democracy – and it is for this reason that, in Lamata's words, Venezuela's people would always 'perderse en los siglos buscando un Taita'.[262]

[262] Lamata, 1:36:29-1:36:33.

Chapter Two

En la casa del pez que escupe el agua

> En nada alteraba el orden rígido y la inmutabilidad del presente
> y el futuro en aquel centenario palacio, an aquella sociedad de piedra,
> en aquel país del pasado sin sobresaltos, donde todo funcionaba
> como el lento mecanismo de aquellos antiguos relojes dorados
> con estatuas y lambreguines, que repetían un tiempo inalterable.
>
> —Arturo Uslar Pietri[263]

Though the Liberator, Simón Bolívar, occupied a defining position at the centre of national mythology, and despite the long shadows of the myriad strongmen who led the country in the decades after Independence, the concept of power in twentieth-century Venezuela was associated more than anyone else with Juan Vicente Gómez, the former *hacendado* from the remote Andean state of Táchira who ruled the country from 1908 until his death in 1935. Known for the repressiveness, longevity, and positivist leanings of his regime, the 'primitivo y semianalfabeto'[264] Gómez was, for many, the very incarnation of political power: he was the 'archetypal strongman and patriarch'[265] and '[ran] Venezuela as if it were a large cattle ranch'.[266] Moreover, in many recent historical accounts, Gómez – much like Boves – 'has stood as an internal other against which contemporary Venezuela is evaluated'.[267] A common refrain is that Venezuela's entry into the

263 Arturo Uslar Pietri, *Oficio de difuntos* (Barcelona: Editorial Planeta, 1999), 15.
264 Márquez Rodríguez, *Historia y ficción*, 248.
265 Martin, *Gabriel García Márquez,* 235.
266 Martin, *Gabriel García Márquez,* 236.
267 Coronil, 71.

twentieth century (and, by extension, the modern world) was delayed for thirty-five years by Gómez's draconian and parochial tendencies.[268]

Gómez and his regime consequently provided fertile ground for writers both within and beyond Venezuela. The tyrant is never named directly in Rómulo Gallegos's *Doña Bárbara* (1929), published a year after the student protests that represented the one serious threat to his regime. His spectre can nevertheless be discerned in the forces of oppression and barbarity that wield unchecked power in the *llanos* and that the enlightened philosophy of Santos Luzardo opposes. Some notable works broaching Gómez's personality, regime and era more directly appeared in the decades after his death, among them Miguel Otero Silva's *Fiebre* (1939), often termed 'la novela del 28'[269] and Ramón David León's curious *El hombre misterioso de Macarigua* (1966), a generically indeterminate *apologia* for the dictator. It was, however, in the 1970s that interest in Gómez underwent an astonishing upsurge. The trend designated the 'fenómeno Gómez'[270] by Pacheco coincided with what critics regard as the apogee of the *novela del dictador* in the middle of that decade, as well as the concurrent 'micro-boom' of Venezuelan historical fiction. These innumerable *novelas del gomecismo* varied greatly 'tanto en lo cuantitativo como en lo cualitativo',[271] and few are especially well-remembered today. Among the most successful are Francisco Salazar Martínez's *Tiempo de compadres* (1972), Domingo Alberto Rangel's *Gómez, el amo del poder* (1975), León's *El brujo de La Mulera* (1976), Arturo Uslar Pietri's *Oficio de difuntos* (1976), Mario Perico Ramírez's *El gran capagatos* (1979), and Ramón J. Velásquez's *Confidencias imaginaries de Juan Vicente Gómez* (1980)[272] – not to mention the fact that Gómez was, of course, 'perhaps *the* central model for *The Autumn of the Patriarch*'.[273]

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[268] Torres, *La herencia,* 113.

[269] Márquez Rodríguez, *Historia y ficción*, 90.

[270] Carlos Pacheco, 'Supergómez ataca de nuevo', in *Revista SIC,* vol. 439 (November 1981), pp. 414-417 (416).

[271] Márquez Rodríguez, *Historia y ficción*, 90.

[272] This work is comprised of a series of imaginary interviews between a fictional journalist and the ageing dictator, and bears many resemblances to Herrera Luque's own *Bolívar en vivo*, on which he began work shortly after the appearance of Velásquez's text.

[273] Martin, *Gabriel García Márquez*, 235.

The reasons for Gómez's appeal are manifold and well-documented. He was a 'rico botín anecdótico, materia prima privilegiada para la elaboración novelística',[274] comparable only to those most oppressive and outlandish Latin American dictators – the likes of Santa Anna, Melgarejo, and Trujillo – in that regard. Closely reflecting Herrera Luque's own hypothesis of the historical evolution of legitimacy and power in Venezuela, Thomas Rourke expressed a belief in his influential early biography of Gómez that 'if any man was ever the product of the race that bore him and the land that fed him it was this man'.[275] He was seen as nothing less than an 'extensión de este mundo'[276] – that is, the Andean cultural sphere so alien to that of the *caraqueño* intellectuals and oligarchs who labelled his and his predecessor Cipriano Castro's regimes the *invasión andina* – in the same way that Boves gave shape to the collective will of the *pardos* for revenge, and then that of Venezuela for conciliation. A manifestation, like Boves, of a people and a nation engaged in a convulsive search for their own synthesis, Gómez was also 'la expresión del sentir y del pensar del hombre medio venezolano a mitad de camino entre la barbarie y la civilización' (CDP, 433). Intriguing, too, was the extreme, unbroken duration of his rule, unparalleled in Venezuelan history. As Fuentes states, 'la longevidad de tiranos como Gómez […] se convierte así en un mito: el mito de la eternidad' such that 'la historia empieza con él. La historia dura tanto como dure él. Y la historia terminará con él'.[277] This is a recurrent focus in much of the literature inspired by Gómez – García Márquez's 'tiempo incontable de la eternidad',[278] and the symbolism of the perpetually stuck bell-tower clock in Gallegos's *El forastero* (1952) epitomise this – recalling the key tenets of Herrera Luque's conception of Venezuela's *historia detenida.*

Equally closely linked to Herrera Luque's novelistic and historical concerns, particularly his conceptualisation of Venezuela's history as an *historia silenciada*, were the very reasons for which 'el mero paso de las décadas hace de la dictadura de Juan Vicente Gómez un nuevo reino ficcional'.[279]

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[274] Pacheco, *Narrativa de la dictadura*, 30.
[275] Thomas Rourke, *Tyrant of the Andes: The Life of Juan Vicente Gómez* (London: Michael Joseph, 1937), 22.
[276] Ramón J. Velásquez, *Confidencias imaginarias de Juan Vicente Gómez* (Caracas: Ediciones Centauro, 1980), 8.
[277] Fuentes, *Valiente mundo nuevo*, 199.
[278] Gabriel García Márquez, *El otoño del patriarca*, 3rd edn. (Barcelona: Debolsillo, 2019 [1975]), 299.
[279] Luis Britto García, 'La vitrina rota: Narrativa y crisis en la Venezuela contemporánea', in Dobrudcha González, ed., *Cinco siglos de historia irreverente: Herrera Luque, de* Los Viajeros de Indias*, a* 1998*: Ensayos* (Caracas: Fundación Francisco Herrera Luque, 2000), pp. 37-54 (43).

Rourke asserts that '[for] twenty-seven years the printed history of Venezuela is an absolutely blank page […] the history of a whole nation completely unchronicled, or worse, written falsely to the glorification of a conceited and power-mad tyrant'[13] – the same national amnesia that recurs throughout Venezuela's history, from the writings of Oviedo y Baños to the ascendancy of Chávez. The day-to-day nature, the true reality, of Gómez's personality and life under rule were obfuscated by what Herrera Luque conceived of as a mendacious *verdad oficial*. That is, they formed part of 'la historia secreta del venezolano, aquella que no ha pasado a los libros de historia, aquella que ha sido vivencia real'[280] and were never transmitted. Historical information pertaining to this period 'luce abrumada por anécdotas y recuerdos entre los cuales resulta en extremo difícil diferenciar los que se adaptan al estereotipo ya formado de los que pudieron darle origen',[281] a problem exacerbated by a 'casi total ausencia de documentos personales'[282] belonging to the dictator. The fact that he 'he never made a speech in his life [and that] even his literacy has been questioned'[283] means that, even today, many Venezuelans 'tienden a considerar al dictador más como un personaje folklórico, como una fuente de infinitas anécdotas humorísticas, y no como una nota negra en su historia'.[284] All of these factors posed major difficulties for the writers concerned; as Rangel states in the forward to *El amo del poder*, 'un libro sobre Gómez es una marcha por camino lleno de dificultades'.[285]

Herrera Luque's intense interest in Gómez can be attributed to his evolving views on history, Gómez's enormous influence on Venezuelan society, and the challenge of extricating reliable information from truth-suppressing official documentation and a morass of popular, orally transmitted anecdotes. However, Gómez was a far more personal and problematic figure for Herrera Luque than was Boves, Philipp von Hutten, Manuel Piar, or any other of his literary

[280] Lovera, 181.
[281] Carrera Damas, 182.
[282] Ibid.
[283] Rourke, 9.
[284] Adriana Sandoval, *Los dictadores y la dictadura en la novela hispanoamericana 1851-1978* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1989), 65.
[285] Domingo Alberto Rangel, *Gómez: El amo del poder* (Caracas: Impresora Macanao, 1975), 5.

subjects. Indeed, perhaps no writer has exhibited as intense a fascination, or as contradictory a relationship, with *El Benemérito* as he did.

Francisco's mother's family, the politically active Luques, enjoyed significant power under the Andean autocrat. His grandfather, José Rafael Luque Ortega – the 'gran caudillo y un hombre incondicional de Gómez'[286] who was the writer's 'personaje inolvidable infantil'[287] – became governor of Miranda state during this period.[288] Herrera Luque often recalled a childhood meeting with Gómez in the 1930s,[289] during which the young Francisco was gifted a golden *morocotas* coin by the dictator. In his interview with Soler Serrano, Herrera Luque even stated that 'lo veo [a Gómez] sentimentalmente como a un buen abuelo',[290] an attitude that permeates his literary portrayals of the tyrant.

Conversely, 'por el lado de los Herrera – godos, académicos – Gómez era un monstruo'.[291] Francisco's father and grandfather were both avowed enemies of the regime: 'Gómez […] los persuiguió a muerte'.[292] His grandfather was imprisoned in La Rotunda, and the family exiled. Herrera Luque repeatedly acknowledged that his opinion of Gómez 'cabalgó sobre el odio y el amor',[293] and frequently spoke of an *ambivalencia* and *dualidad* that complicated his conception of the dictator. He was conscious, too, of a conflict between his sentimental and academic views of Gómez's lengthy regime, which he termed 'el fundamento del estado moderno venezolano' (*BCH*,

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286 Moody, 40.

287 Soler Serrano interview, 9:41-9:43.

288 José Rafael appears in *En la casa del pez*…, in which he attends Gómez's seventieth birthday party at his Maracay *hacienda* in 1927. In a later scene, set in Los Teques in 1935, Herrera Luque notes offhandedly that 'ahí tiene gobernando a Evencito Luque, el hijo de José Rafael. Cuando murió Luque todos querían el cargo, pero él sentenció tribal: a un Luque otro Luque' (539); this is demonstrative of the writer's fixation with questions of heredity among Venezuela's *oligarquía colonial*, and of his well-publicised discomfort about his own place within it.

289 In his final years, Gómez became known as the 'General de Carreteras' (536) for his embarrassing, uraemia-induced compulsion to stop in his subjects' houses to urinate while undertaking longer voyages. As a result of this, a great many Venezuelans encountered Gómez personally and were left with lasting personal memories of the dictator.

290 Soler Serrano interview, 10:35-10:38.

291 Soler Serrano interview, 11:30-11:38.

292 Moody, 40

293 Ibid.

55). As voiced by the fictional dissident Juan Corrales, one of Herrera Luque's most articulate commenters on political matters, 'a [Gómez] le debes odio y agradecimiento eterno' (313).

Gómez appears frequently throughout Herrera Luque's *œuvre*, representing a near obsession for the writer. He features in all volumes of *La historia fabulada*, and has a significant role in *Los cuatro reyes de la baraja*, by the time of whose production he occupied a central position in Herrera Luque's hereditary conception of political power in Venezuela's history. In each, he functions as a commentator upon Venezuelan society and history. However, by far the most detailed and intricate portrait of the dictator and the wider historical era that he both inhabited and shaped – in the writer's output, and in any text related to the 'Gómez novel' phenomenon – is found in *En la casa del pez que escupe el agua.*[294]

I. Background and Antecedents

En la casa del pez was published in 1975, at which point Herrera Luque had recently weathered a public controversy incited by the Sociedad Bolivariana. The group made a series of ferocious attacks against the portrayal of major pro-independence characters in *Boves, el urogallo*. The writer had also taken up his post as Venezuela's ambassador to Mexico at the request of then-president Carlos Andrés Pérez.[295] *En la casa del pez* is among Herrera Luque's most ambitious works – and is certainly one of his longest and most detailed. It ostensibly acts as a sequel to *Boves*, thereby constituting the second instalment of the 'Blanco-Machado cycle', which would be completed with *Los amos del Valle* in 1979. Nevertheless, the work's character, genre and purpose had originally been quite different.

[294] Hereinafter *En la casa del pez.*
[295] Viera Rojas, 105.

The material that eventually made it into *En la casa del pez* had been intended for a work that 'tenía carácter ensayístico';[296] specifically, a psychoanalytical study of the key political figures of 19th- and 20th-century Venezuela that bore the title *La historia detenida*. However, this never saw the light of day, as Herrera Luque destroyed the incipient volume in a fit of rage at the injustices he had suffered before his resignation from the scientific community. He described the work's development in a letter to Adolfo Starosta not long before his death:

> A punto de salir la edición definitiva de *Los viajeros de Indias*[297] ya había decidido exiliarme de la vida científica y docente, hasta el punto de romper el segundo tomo de la obra señalada y que llevaba por título *La Historia Detenida* […] Hasta diciembre de 1973, y a pesar de mi éxito como novelista aunque con esta actividad me abrí un nuevo frente entre los historiadores de ortodoxia bolivariana y de la legión de novelistas frustrados que pululan por doquier, me dediqué a investigar a Juan Vicente Gómez.[298]

As with *Boves*, the composition of *La historia detenida* was protracted and characteristically painstaking, the fruit of many years of intensive research and a further example of Herrera Luque's favoured 'investigación bibliográfica de campo de radiación oral'.[299] In a 1976 letter to Ramírez Faría, he stated that 'por cinco años consulté en los sectores populares […] he vivido y me he mezclado con mi pueblo, mucho más que lo cree la gente. Por tres largos años recorrí el llano hablando con campesinos y hombres del pueblo recaudando datos'.[300] He would later inform Soler Serrano that 'hablé con más de ochenta personas, grabándoles sus confesiones',[301] and said that his representation of Gómez 'procede […] del interrogatorio bajo promesa de psiquiatra de no publicarlo en veinte años, a ochenta y cinco testigos que lo conocieron directamente (amigos, enemigos, adversarios, prisioneros y esbirros)'.[302] The precise chronology of when the material that would have composed *La historia detenida* was first remodelled into a novel is unclear, but it proved a major undertaking to reformulate the raw data collected into a popular novel. The work was

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296 Viera Rojas, 149.
297 This refers to its second edition, published in 1969, which Herrera Luque regarded as authoritative.
298 Herrera Luque, letter to Starosta, 713.
299 Moody, 45.
300 Francisco Herrera Luque, letter to Carlos Ramírez Faría, dated 2nd May 1976, cited in Lovera, 260.
301 Soler Serrano interview, 39:09-39:15.
302 Pantín, 698.

revised (as were all his novels) seven times, and Herrera Luque spoke of an almost obsessive desire to ensure that the work's historical content was 'rigurosamente cierto, aun en sus más insignificantes detalles' (568).

The result was a complex mosaic depicting some sixty years of Venezuelan history 'mezclando personajes reales y de ficción en una verdadera saga familiar'[303] across two *Libros* (demarcated by Gómez's 1908 seizure of power), seven sections or *Épocas*, one-hundred and thirty-eight chapters, and an enigmatic epilogue set in 1975, the year of its publication. Although Herrera Luque states in the foreword that this work differs from *Boves* because 'me abstuve de diferenciar lo rigurosamente histórico de la recreación imaginativa' (16), the text is followed by several in-depth appendices explaining which storylines are fictitious or factual, is furnished throughout with precise dates, and includes a vast cast of over one hundred and fifty characters.

This rigorous adherence to historical accuracy gives rise to a number of features and problems that did not necessarily characterise *Boves*. One corollary of this was the controversy that the publication of *En la casa del pez* provoked: it divided readers and critics and, in Herrera Luque's own words, 'salió este libro y sí produjo un gran escándalo porque yo no omití nombres propios y eran los padres o los abuelos de personas muy importantes que estaban vivos y me persiguieron muy fuertemente'.[304] The writer described it as 'una obra muy cruel, muy descarnada, pero […] muy verdadera'.[305] Such was the intensity of these attacks – stemming largely from influential figures in academia, politics, and the Caracas oligarchy, for whom Herrera Luque was a vexatious figure – that 'lo llevaron a renunciar a su puesta en la Academia de Medicina'.[306] Partly as a result of this controversy, and despite its complexity (Apolinar Núñez claimed that 'puede considerarse como la novela […] que mejor ha presentado una vision panorámica de las dictaduras entre 1875 y

[303] Aínsa, 92.
[304] Moody, 40.
[305] Ibid.
[306] Verde Arocha, 20.

1935'[307]) and commercial success (it sold well throughout Latin America, being a personal favourite of both Fidel Castro and Rómulo Betancourt), *En la casa del pez* has escaped significant critical focus.[308] Pacheco's 1987 suggestion in his *Narrativa de la dictadura y crítica literaria* that the work's 'planteamientos estéticos originales y renovadores [merecen] ser estudiados con mayor detalle'[309] seems not to have been heeded.

'Ahora bien,' asks Lovera of the novel, '¿qué es *En la casa del pez que escupe el agua*?'.[310] The circumstances of the work's gestation and completion, and its origins as an essayistic sociological study, mean that the answer is not entirely straightforward. Certainly, 'lectores profesionales, acostumbrados a definir bien las obras que comentan en sus trabajos con precisión, se fueron por senderos que no les condujeron a una justa interpretación de la obra'.[311] Herrera Luque, perennially doubtful of his own literary abilities, was himself reluctant to define the work: 'no es ni novela, ni historia, ni ensayo, siendo al mismo tiempo las tres cosas. No sé […] si tal carencia de ubicación es virtud o es defecto'.[312] It seems fitting, given the writer's contradictory relationship with Gómez, that his work on that most difficult of historical subjects should itself present these ambiguities and contradictions. Countless critics have discussed the fundamental hybridity of the novel as a genre, but the manner in which *En la casa del pez* is composed suggests that it is, in some ways, a work ahead of its time, prefiguring the later emergence of many well-known generically indeterminate texts.[313]

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307 Apolinar Núñez, '*En la casa del pez que escupe el agua* de Francisco Herrera Luque', in José Alcántara Almánzar, ed., *El dictador en la novela latinoamericana: ponencias de un seminario realizado los días 2, 3 y 4 de octubre 1980* (Santo Domingo: Voluntariado de la Casas Reales, 1980), pp. 61-80 (80).

308 The critical attention it *has* received has mostly been in the form of short or superficial analyses, including those by Núñez (a 1980 lecture), Lovera (a brief chapter in his 2012 biography), Viera Rojas (a section of a doctoral thesis), Sandra Tonos (a 1999 article), Manuel Caballero (a 2000 essay for Herrera Luque's foundation), and Fernando Aínsa (a short evaluation in *Reescribir el pasado* [2003]).

309 Pacheco, *Narrativa de la dictadura,* 67.

310 Lovera, 253.

311 Lovera, 251.

312 Francisco Herrera Luque, letter to Roberto Lovera, dated 11th March 1976, cited in Lovera, 264.

313 A list of Latin American works of this type might include Ricardo Piglia's *Respiración artificial* (1980) and *Plata quemada* (1997), Diamela Eltit's *Los vigilantes* (1994), and Roberto Bolaño's *2666* (2004).

In some ways, Herrera Luque's novel is itself difficult to classify generically. To borrow from Bakhtin, 'it squeezes out some genres and incorporates others into its own peculiar structure, re-formulating and re-accentuating them'.[314] In its attempt to 'interpretar el país, la evolución de su espíritu, el porqué de [su] camaleonismo, cómo se cambia, en función de quién está el poder',[315] the novel exhibits a complex structure, a continually shifting focus, and multiple interlocking narrative threads that render it more labyrinthine than most of Herrera Luque's other works. Its completion at a point in his career when his theoretical views on Venezuela's history were beginning to shift and concretise means that its precise purpose as an 'historical novel', or at least a novelisation of history, is not straightforward. By the mid-1970s, Herrera Luque had begun making 'attacks against an official history' and speaking of his desire to achieve 'la desacralización del discurso histórico oficial',[316] debunk 'las leyendas que han hecho la historia' and destroy 'las estatuas reales o imaginarias de los héroes que protagonizaron […] un episodio histórico' (*HF 1*, 166). These ambitions, shared by the practitioners of the *nueva novela histórica* that flourished in the 1980s, informed the novelistic principles to which Herrera Luque claimed to have adhered rigidly. Yet despite professing to have applied these principles in the writing of *En la casa del pez*, he only does so partially – and, indeed, the novel occasionally has the opposite effect.

In *En la casa del pez*, Herrera Luque oscillates between three occasionally contradictory undertakings. The first of these is a revisiting of 'official history' – the canonical narrative of Venezuela's development, a 'top-down' historical narrative of objective dates, facts, and figures – while the second is the provision of a coexistent, interwoven, kaleidoscopic set of 'human' stories, those 'tensas pugnas individuales y colectivas' that play out in 'edificios públicos, prostíbulos, cárceles y calles'[317]. These stories occupy far more space and are often significantly more developed than the anecdotal side-stories that feature in *Boves* – for good or for ill. There exists, meanwhile, a third tendency within the novel of its narrator to *reinforce* many of the received and folkloric

[314] Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 5.
[315] Lovera, 82.
[316] Aínsa, 29.
[317] Viera Rojas, 79-80.

histories about Gómez and his regime. Fundamental to this tension is the question of where the novel's very focus – that is to say, 'dónde recae fundamentalmente el acento'[318] – is truly located.

The evolution of *En la casa del pez* from a wide-ranging sociological study aimed at diagnosing the causes of Venezuela's violent history to a moulding of historical data into a novelistic format (no doubt informed by commercial realities) renders the work more problematic than it initially seems. It is certainly more problematic than Herrera Luque himself claimed it to be. Whether the novel serves primarily as an examination of Gómez's life, the circumstances of how his regime came to prosper amid the wider Venezuelan historical backdrop, or of the foibles and corrosive political influence of the oligarchy[319] is open to interpretation. Aínsa labels the work 'la historia de una poderosa familia criolla venezolana que comparte el poder del dictador',[320] identifying an unstable relationship between these institutions which itself constitutes one of the novel's central problems: where precisely is power invested?

In order to explore these tensions and their significance for *En la casa del pez*, and to ascertain how the novel presents the development of political power throughout its long sixty-year timeframe, this chapter will pursue three primary lines of inquiry. Firstly, I intend to analyse the novel's structure and style, with particular attention paid to questions of genre and the modes in which Herrera Luque presents its myriad conflicting histories. The second section examines *En la casa del pez* as both a novelised biography and a *novela del dictador*, focusing on the characterisation and development of the central dictator figure (indeed, figures) and the way in which they are (de)mythified. Finally, the third, most extensive section will investigate how Herrera Luque's

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[318] Moody, 41.

[319] It is a commonly held belief that the traditional *mantuano* aristocracy was almost entirely destroyed during the Federal War (1859-1863), a vicious conflict between Conservatives and Liberals that caused the deaths of almost a tenth of the country's entire population. The events of the war, however, are barely referenced in *En la casa del pez* (and receive only cursory treatment *Los cuatro reyes de la baraja*, set during them) and would arguably negate his key principle of that social class's fixedness and nefarious influence. In a 1976 newspaper article, Herrera Luque asserted that the *mantuanaje*'s destruction during the conflict was a myth; *En la casa del pez* clearly demonstrates his belief that they, and their social and political influence, survived largely unscathed. Although Herrera Luque prefers the term *oligarquía* over *mantuanaje* in the novel, the Machados' descent from Eugenia Blanco clearly establishes them as the continuity of a lineage extending back to Francisco Guerrero 'El Cautivo', one of the conquistadors of Caracas.

[320] Aínsa, 92.

panoramic presentation of Venezuelan society under Gómez informs wider considerations of the theme of power itself. Employing close textual analysis, I explore the dialogue between the symbolic titular *casa*, the Venezuelan oligarchy, and government, identifying how Herrera Luque uses the relationships between them to question the nature of Venezuelan politics, history, and nationhood – in other words, to determine how the writer arrives at his final 'diagnosis' that 'la oligarquía caraqueña es la responsible […] del atraso y barbarie del país, y si hubo un Gómez es porque ella lo permitió'.[321]

II. Genre, Structure and Style

With the one major exception of Juan Vicente González, whose biographies he praised effusively (*BCH,* 85) and whose characteristic stylistic blend of unvarnished historical data and moments of great drama and lyricism he often emulated, Herrera Luque rarely acknowledged the influence of other writers on his works. At the height of his success especially he affirmed the total originality of his approach ('soy un innovador'[322]). Yet there exist palpable similarities between *En la casa del pez* and the works of other Latin American and European writers that betray its literary influences.

Certain critics have compared *En la casa del pez*, and the Machado 'trilogy' more generally, to Balzac's *Comédie humaine*, Lovera stating that 'su visión del conjunto de nuestros aconteceres […] por paralelismo se haya denominado "balzaciano"'.[323] There is undoubtedly some truth to this assertion, since among the effects of Herrera Luque's kaleidoscopic focus and plethora of characters (many of whom, like Juan Palacios, reappear or are referenced frequently) is the comprehensive portrayal of relationships between political power and various subsets of Venezuelan society. This extends beyond the central oligarchy to include political dissidents,

[321] Lovera, 258.
[322] Moody, 45.
[323] Lovera, 11.

idealistic young activists, and working-class and *lumpenproletariat* figures, notably the humorous Conch'e Piña, who comments incisively on socio-political developments. As with Émile Zola's novels, wherein 'the disorder of the family provides the reader with a vision of the disequilibrium of Second Empire society, of which it is seen to be both emblem and performance, both cause and effect',[324] Herrera Luque portrays Venezuela's ills and overall historical trajectory through one Rougon-Macquart-esque dynasty. His fixations on genealogy and heredity, manifest throughout the novel, point to important similarities between the Venezuelan writer and the great French Naturalist. So, too, do his thematic concerns, use of irony, supposed 'metodología científica',[325] and the 'trasfondo fuerte y relativamente evidente del positivismo'[326] that underlies both writers' works.

Closer to home, both geographically and generically, the influences of Sarmiento's *Facundo* (1845), García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (1967), and Vargas Llosa's *Conversación en La Catedral* (1969) are discernible. *En la casa del pez* shares many of the ambitions and generic ambiguities of *Facundo*. Much as Sarmiento 'wishes to study [Quiroga] in order to better understand Rosas and the genesis and exercise of political power in his country [and] to isolate an early stage in the development of dictatorship',[327] Herrera Luque uses his compelling portrait of Gómez for the same purposes. Gómez represents a new, near-total, and immensely disturbing form of dictatorship. Both writers repeatedly liken the central *caudillo*'s style of governance to the running of a cattle ranch, and the Venezuelan writer was familiar with Sarmiento's work, evidenced by references in his earlier psychoanalytical texts and repeated echoes of the phrase *civilización y barbarie* when Gómez is discussed. The Venezuela of the early twentieth century, as it appears in the novel, is implied to be caught somewhere in the middle of this civilisational dilemma. Jitrik's statement that *Facundo* 'ha llamado siempre la atención por las dificultades que presenta desde el punto de vista de una clasificación literaria. Se ha dicho que, por más íntimamente unitario que el libro sea considerado

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[324] Nicholas White, 'Family Histories and Family Plots', in Brian Nelson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Zola* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 19-38 (25).
[325] Moody, 45.
[326] Viera Rojas, 431.
[327] Roberto González Echevarría, *Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 98.

estilísticamente, concurren por igual en sus páginas la historia, la sociología, la novela, el ensayo, el tratado de moral'[328] might just as easily be applied to *En la casa del pez*.[329] Additionally, many of the fundamental tenets of *Cien años de soledad*, which Herrera Luque referenced in his other texts,[330] recur in *En la casa del pez*. Like García Márquez's work, this novel explores broader Venezuelan (and Latin American) social and historical questions through the depiction of multiple generations of one family and their home.

Meanwhile, Herrera Luque openly expressed admiration for Vargas Llosa. Certain themes and episodes in *En la casa del pez* are intensely reminiscent of *Conversación en La Catedral* beyond their shared oscillating narrative focus and pessimistic 'total' visions of a corrupt, transactional society under dictatorship. The coercive homosexual relationship between oligarch Víctor Alberto Machado and his mixed-race servant Santiaguito, the adolescent José Ramón Machado's principled rejection of his wealthy family and involvement with a revolutionary cell, and the Machados' classist disdain for the *andino* Gómez (compare Zoila's race- and class-based contempt for Odría, a *serrano*) all recall Vargas Llosa's work.

Nonetheless, the aesthetic innovations of the latter two novels are not replicated in *En la casa del pez*. Although the alternation between different characters, viewpoints and styles emphasises the novel's 'total' effect, it is formally quite straightforward, in accordance with its writer's own preferences. The work's most obvious antecedent, therefore, is Mario Briceño-Iragorry's dense 1957 petro-novel *Los Riberas*, a 'gran mural de la época'[331] that narrates Venezuela's development from the end of the First World War to the 1945 Revolution through the biography of an unscrupulous businessman, Alfonso Ribera, and his family. Briceño-Iragorry – a major influence on Herrera Luque during their shared exile in Madrid, and himself originally an essayist rather than a novelist – employs realism, irony, a relentless amount of detail, a dizzying array of characters

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328 Noé Jitrik, *Muerte y resurrección de Facundo* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1968), 9.
329 Many critics, Jitrik included, have advocated reading the generically indeterminate *Facundo* as a novel – specifically, an historical novel.
330 The town of Macondo is mentioned repeatedly in *Los amos del Valle*.
331 Elvira Macht de Vera, 'Novela e historia en *Las Riberas*', in *Boletín de la Academia Nacional de la Historia*, vol. 71, no 284 (Oct-Dec 1988), pp. 1067-1113 (1071).

both real and fictional, and popular refrains in this 'historial novelado'.[332] In the work's *Advertencia*, Briceño-Iragorry describes his technique thus:

> Sobre un fondo de realidad histórica, en el cual se abulta a la vez la carga historiográfica que caracteriza mi obra de escritor, he puesto a vivir a la imaginaria familia de los Riberas, a sus amigos y a sus enemigos, como pretexto para desmenuzar hechos pasados y para exponer ideas con vigencia permanente en el orden social. Lejos de pintar intencionalmente figuras personales, he labrado espejos de fino alinde.[333]

This surely informed Herrera Luque's novel. In accordance with *En la casa del pez*'s 'fondo de realidad histórica'[334] and Herrera Luque's desire for linear plots, the work's chapters are invariably ordered chronologically; unlike in *Boves* (and later works), there is no use whatsoever of prolepsis, analepsis or framing narrative. Transitions between historical eras take place alongside major characters' lifespans. The novel opens with the sentence 'A sesenta y un años de Urica, se muere Eugenia' (25), indicating both a bridge to the novelistic past and a break with the epoch of Boves; the fourth *época* begins with a description of how 'la muerte de Víctor Alberto conmovió la ciudad […] todo parecía anunciar el fin de una época' (209); and, in 1889, Cipriano Castro notes that 'es de buen augurio que la estrella de Guzmán se apague en el preciso instante en que la mía despunta en el firmamento de Venezuela' (161-62). This technique hints at the seeds of Herrera Luque's later 'dynastic' conception of Venezuelan history as expounded in *Los cuatro reyes de la baraja*. It also reiterates the disjuncture identified by Doñana in *Boves* between the eternal transcendence of political power and the seeming ephemerality of those who hold (or held) it. However, its primary purpose is to achieve clear delineation of the novel's structure and to underscore its continual temporal progression.

For Herrera Luque, structure was the most important part of a novel, taking precedence over style and formal innovation ('creo que para lo estilístico propiamente dicho debe quedar el ensayo o la poesía, hasta el cuento, pero la novela no. En la novela me parece más importante su estructura'[335]).

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[332] Mario Briceño-Iragorry, *Los Riberas* (Caracas: Independencia, 1957), 8.
[333] Ibid.
[334] Briceño-Iragorry, 7.
[335] Moody, 45.

It is, however, in the *interplay* between the structure and style of *En la casa del pez* that many of the work's main tensions can be identified. Herrera Luque states that the novel's structure was conceived as two converging plotlines (akin to Boves's and Eugenia's in his previous work), beginning with the portrayal of two quite discrete cultural spheres – 'una recreación de los ambientes tanto en los Andes como en el seno de la oligarquía caraqueña'[336] – with the omniscient narrator oscillating between the two. The writer contended that 'van alternando capítulos de Gómez y capítulos de la oligarquía hasta que se unen',[337] reflecting the shifting power balance between them. In practice, however, the structure is far less simple than that. Forty-five chapters – just under a third of the total – are devoted to narrating Gómez's life story from the age of seventeen until his death,[338] while the remainder focus on the main Machado oligarchs and a vast range of secondary characters. Moving between them with no logical order other than a tracking of chronological time, the narrator continually slides between present, imperfect and preterite tenses according to whether individual events or long-term processes are being described.

This is mirrored by shifts between different axes of the storyline. Historical and stylistic distinctions between 'Gómez' and 'oligarchy' chapters are usually well-defined. The biographical chapters that describe Gómez's life are largely linear and historically accurate, furnished with precise dates and numerical figures. Stylistically, they tend to be scaled back and simple, with the narrator – as in *Boves* – adopting a terse, factual style to summarise important historical events, with short sentences employed to convey a sense of immediacy and forward chronological motion. At these moments, there is frequent recourse to the present tense, which conveys a sense of immediacy and draws the reader's attention to the significance of these pivotal moments amid the narrative's frequent accelerations and decelerations and jumps in time period and focus. Consider, for example, this description of the 1902 naval blockade, related in Chapter 53:

[336] Herrera Luque, letter to Ramírez Faría, 257.
[337] Moody, 41.
[338] Specifically, chapters 2, 3, 5, 7, 15, 16, 19, 31, 36, 38, 40, 42, 43, 44, 45, 48, 51, 52, 69, 70, 72, 73, 78, 79, 80, 83, 85, 89, 93, 99, 100, 103, 110, 111, 112, 113, 124, 126, 128, and, crucially, the final six – 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138 – are dedicated to the central 'biography' of Gómez.

> A su lecho de enfermo le van llegando toda clase de noticias. La insurrección se propaga. Bandoleros cometen tropelías contra la población civil. El tren de Caracas a La Guayra es asaltado. La situación financiera es grave. Los banqueros se niegan a conceder préstamos. Matos, con el apoyo de Inglaterra y de «La Bermúdez», sigue incendiando la costa con fusiles de contrabando y marinos ingleses. (239)

A comparably concise style is employed in the climactic Chapter 72, describing plots against Gómez by Castro's functionaries during the latter's illness:

> La situación es apremiante. Hay que liquidar a Gómez lo más pronto possible. Se establece un plan. En una hacienda de Maracay, propiedad de Torres Cárdenas, se organizará una ternera en honor del Vicepresidente. En medio de la fiesta un asesino a sueldo procederá a ultimarlo. (306)

Here, the style again conveys urgency, and suggests a crescendo or acceleration towards a monumental moment – in this case, Gómez's deposition of Castro. Such historical developments are thus rendered highly dramatic. As is inevitable with its action taking place over six decades, the speed at which *En la casa del pez* progresses is inconsistent, and this generates both lulls and breathless moments: to borrow from Barthes, 'the same number of pages (if this can be taken as a crude measure of the history book's own time-scale) covers quite different periods of historical time'.[339] The Gómez chapters provide forward chronological thrust; the chapters that detail the lives of the *oligarquía* and associated minor characters, meanwhile, often degenerate into anecdotes, *costumbrista* scenes, and side plots of almost no relevance to the principal plotline. These bog the reader down, and arguably form – whether intentionally or, perhaps more likely, not – a metafictional reflection of Herrera Luque's concept of the *historia detenida*, with Venezuela's development being impeded by an outmoded and traditionalist oligarchic class. Since 'biography is the crucial organizing principle for time',[340] the central Gómez storyline does indeed constitute the 'eje novelesco alrededor del cual giran los temas'[341] and the 'historia verdadera, el acento

[339] Roland Barthes, 'Historical Discourse', in Michael Lane, ed., *Structuralism: A Reader* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), pp. 145-155 (147).
[340] Bakhtin, 104.
[341] Macht de Vera, 1071.

fundamental de mi tesis'.[342] It is against this axis that secondary events take place; as Lukács puts it, 'the development of a man is still the thread upon which the whole world of the novel is strung and along which it unrolls'.[343]

Herrera Luque's strict adherence to historical detail in these chapters, as in *Boves*, occasionally becomes a fault. Here, his freely admitted status as 'un *dilettante* de la literatura, y en especial de la novela'[344] repeatedly becomes apparent. A challenge inherent in the composition of all historical novels, regardless of how accomplished their author – Vargas Llosa's *El Paraíso en la otra esquina* (2003) and *El sueño del celta* (2010) come to mind – is how an excess of historical research can come to represent 'un peso muerto para su obra'.[345] Herrera Luque's ability to 'reduce the chaos of potential data – the virtually infinite subject matter available – to some sort of order within a narrative',[346] and thereby to *novelise history*, often appears deficient. For Lukács, 'no real narrative would be possible without such summaries of none-too-important events and stretches of time. But the characteristic and decisive thing here is what receives detailed narrative treatment and what a brief report'.[347]

Herrera Luque's difficulties with this become apparent in Chapter 58, for example, which contains decidedly 'un-novelistic' details: 'De aquí en adelante todos los productos de Alemania, Inglaterra, Francia, Holanda y Suecia paguen un 30% más de impuesto por sus mercancías' (260). Insignificant political developments, particularly cabinet appointments, are dealt with in tediously excessive detail, as in Chapter 90: 'El viejo Francisco González Guinán fue nombrado Canciller; Régulo Olivares, Ministro de Guerra y Marina; Rafael María Cabaño, de Fomento; el Tuerto Vargas, Ministro de Obras Públicas y Samuel Darío Maldonado de Instrucción Pública' (343). This is of absolutely no narrative or dramatic consequence, and none of these characters ever appears again.

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342 Herrera Luque, letter to Ramírez Faria, 257.
343 György Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. by Anna Bostock (London: Merlin, 1971), 82.
344 Márquez Rodríguez, *Historia y ficción*, 229.
345 Ibid.
346 Southgate, 19.
347 György Lukács, *The Historical Novel,* trans. by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin, 1962), 315.

The clarity and quality of both chapters is undermined by the ceaseless inclusion of a surplus of raw factual details.

However, there are often narrative shifts between such factual reporting and more dramatic, interesting, fictional side stories within an individual chapter. Herrera Luque opens Chapter 58 by detailing an uprising that Gómez must quell, using terse language and precise dates:

> Juan Vicente Gómez toma a Cumaná y Vidal huye a Caúpano a donde lo persigue el Vicepresidente. El sitio de la ciudad es largo y tedioso. Llueve en goterones. Las tropas andinas se hartan de mejillones y de indias de largas trenzas. Gómez se aburre. La revolución progresa. En Guayana se ha declarado por la revolución el Coronel Farreras. Con esta acción se domina la navegación por el Orinoco y se abre una puerta hacia Colombia. El 15 de mayo desembarca en Güiria Manuel Antonio Matos, con su tropa de mercenarios. La situación es grave. El ministro norteamericano Bower le propone a Castro llamar la flota norteamericana. (238)

Yet the *gravedad* of this situation is short-lived, and only relevant to a very small group of characters. There is no real catharsis or payoff; within a couple of sentences, Herrera Luque abruptly turns to the marriage of Gonzalo Machado to Rosarito, set a couple of weeks later. There is potentially an interesting explanation for this interplay between decisive historical events and the Machado family's life milestones. Their respective importance is inverted: the daily lives of the oligarchy are afforded as much or more attention than major rebellions. A further example of this juxtaposition of different 'strands' of history (and of the inclusion of a history 'from below', a gently subversive rewriting of the past 'con más humanidad, con mayor latido'[348]) is found in the same chapter amid the same ongoing political crisis:

> [Gómez] y Mendoza escaparon por el camino de Cagua, y entre las tantas cosas abandonadas, dejaron miles de papelotes con ascensos militares en blanco y proclamas de triunfo. Por meses, los pulperos de Aragua envolvieron con estos papeles tiesos los chorizos con comino y el papelón moreno. (241)

[348] Soler Serrano interview.

This is perhaps the most concise example of Herrera Luque's stylistic treatment of history within the novel, and of his attempts to produce 'un auténtico tratado de historia nacional'.[349] The juxtaposition of 'official' history and anecdotal oral history places both on the same level of importance; the momentous and the everyday. This episode is humorous in its incongruity and relies heavily on bathos to accentuate the discrepancy between privileged canonical narratives and the way in which historical occurrences are remembered by everyday people. The minutiae of grand military campaigns and political crises were well-documented, but here mean very little, not least since they were so frequent in Venezuelan history – as Smith writes, 'strikes, riots, coups, and assassinations do not always mean the system is breaking down; they can be part of the system itself […] individual governments may tumble while the system as a whole remains intact'.[350] In this novel, however, these events are marginalised and obscured by supposedly trivial scenes from daily life.

Herrera Luque regarded such stories as pivotal to his novels and to the understanding of history. He stated that 'robustecen y se continúan sin solución de continuidad con el relato o narración que escribo',[351] thereby ensuring that 'los hechos hablen por sí mismos, que el lector llegue a sus propias conclusiones'.[352] Nevertheless, their exact purpose, beyond providing a retelling of history from more perspectives (especially those traditionally overlooked) and – allegedly – inviting active readerly interpretation, is at times indistinct, or at least inconsistent. Some, such as the episodes involving 'el pincel de Pierre' and 'el marinerito' do not advance the plot; rather, they actively distract from it, involving very inconsequential characters and raising questions as to why they were included at all. Their frequent focus on sex is likewise curious. Myriad sexual encounters and affairs are depicted amid the entanglement of *microhistorias*, but in most cases they are neither consequential nor even erotic. They are certainly devoid of the thematic and plot interest of Eugenia's trysts in *Boves*, such that the 'sex sells' criticism that might be levied at that novel cannot apply to *En la casa del pez*. Herrera Luque never fully explained this fixation and Viera Rojas, among

[349] Aínsa, 93.
[350] Peter H. Smith, 'The Search for Legitimacy', in Hugh Hamill, ed., *Caudillos: Dictators in Spanish America* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), pp. 87-96 (92).
[351] Herrera Luque, letter to Ramírez Faría, 257.
[352] Ibid.

others, has puzzled over this, noting that 'uno podría pensar que alguna vez Herrera Luque podría haber justificado la inclusión de la sexualidad explícita de sus personajes en sus escritos, como psiquiatra que era, desde el punto de vista del comportamiento humano, pero no lo argumentó nunca así'.[353]

They can, nonetheless, reveal important thematic and stylistic concerns. For Arias Cazorla, for example, their often light-hearted tone (many, additionally, employ irony) belies their condemnatory nature: '[Herrera] ha escrito denunciando con estilo jocoso y desenfadado, aunque no menos cáustico, los pecados de la "familia Machado"'.[354] The understated narration of Víctor Alberto's abuse of Santiaguito, for example, recalls his ancestor Ascanio's minimising the routine sexual misdemeanours carried out by his relatives in *Boves*. Others reveal deeper, pessimistic truths about society: Gloria Corrales's involvement with Doña Concha, and the latter's attempts to pressure her into prostitution, induce her realisation that 'nadie hace nada por nada' (357) in this transactional world. Still other stories allow the writer to 'deambular por la geografía venezolana'[355] and dwell on the natural beauty of places such as Curaçao and Maracay, in passages that are among the novel's most lyrical.

Conversely, many of these stories and anecdotes demonstrate too overbearing a writerly presence and, indeed, lend legitimacy to many of the criticisms levelled at Herrera Luque after the novel's publication. A commonly accepted belief in modern-day historic and cultural studies is that 'far

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353 Viera Rojas, 269. As a student of López Ibor, it is perhaps unsurprising that Herrera Luque wrote at length about so-called sexual perversions in his 'psychoanalytical' texts, with particular focus on homosexuality and incest. This thematic focus is most prevalent in *La huella perenne*, in which he describes various sexual relationships in an objective, scientific manner. The colourless writing of sex scenes in *En la casa del pez* seems more than anything else to betray the work's essayistic origins, perhaps suggesting the writer's intention to use sex scenes as a means of elucidating Venezuela's supposed psychological problems – as with those of the European monarchs depicted in *La huella perenne*. Episodes involving homosexuality are often used for comedic effect, and the absurdity of Goldenfingen's homophobic superstitions during the sea voyage to South America ('a ello muy seguramente se deben nuestros contratiempos' [*LF*, 114]) are ridiculed in *La luna de Fausto*.

354 Sergio Arias Cazorla, 'Parentesco, endogamia, heredabilidad y demopsicopatía: La falsa antinomia herencia entorno', in Dobrudcha González, pp. 53-67 (66).

355 Viera Rojas, 79.

from being marginal, society's outcasts hold the key to understanding the mainstream'.[356] The writer certainly *attempts* to give voice to working class and *lumpenproletariat* figures such as Cuqueta and Zobeido, particularly towards the end of the novel. These storylines are, however, frequently unresolved and rushed, with the characters involved routinely being typecast; Conch'e Piña, a highly sympathetic character, is depicted as the archetypal 'hombre sencillo e inculto'[357] and is instrumentalised as such, providing jocular judgements on political developments from the perspective of the Caracas urban poor at large. This raises questions about the success of Herrera Luque's engagement with class concerns. Undoubtedly, this was a blind spot for him, given his background – the *mantuano* who 'había preferido negar su cuna de oro'[358] – though both Herrera Luque and Lovera robustly defended the work on this matter. The writer said that 'si en *En la casa del pez que escupe el agua* son sólo sirvientes los representantes del pueblo es porque la obra citadina y oligárquica así lo exige',[359] while Lovera's claim that 'muestra el autor […] como el pueblo fue en aquellos años el gran ausente, el que quedó solo, el triste, el empobrecido, el marginal'.[360] Both interpretations are generous. The academic Manuel Caballero asserts that 'supone reprochar a Herrera Luque un exceso de imaginación. Pero es exactamente lo contrario: en sus diálogos, el autor tiene tendencia a hacer hablar a los personajes no en su lengua, sino en la nuestra'.[361] These last words point to a wider problem in the novel. For Herrera Luque, Venezuela's leaders were the incarnations of a supposed national soul or popular will; yet here the voice of the people goes largely unheard.

As in *Boves* – and likely as a result of *La historia detenida*'s original form – there are many moments at which the text shifts into the essayistic mode. This usually occurs when characters begin commenting, either to themselves or aloud, on the nature of Venezuela's political problems. This becomes more frequent as Gómez ages, and particularly after 1928, when the nation's future is discussed at length. The political philosophising of Luis Alfredo in Chapter 129 and, in particular,

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356 Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1996), 122.
357 Senta Essenfeld, *Lo que nunca se dice* (Caracas: Monte Ávila, 1991), 298.
358 Viera Rojas, 173.
359 Herrera Luque, letter to Ramírez Faría, 261.
360 Lovera, 250.
361 Manuel Caballero, *El orgullo de leer* (Caracas: Alfa, 1988), 247.

that of the imprisoned activist Justo Ceballos in Chapter 130, is lucid and polished, replete with rhetorical flourishes and hard to accept as spontaneous. These characters share Herrera Luque's own pessimism, while expressing almost word for word many of the phrases that appeared in his newspaper articles and, later, in *La historia fabulada*. Other anecdotes in which the writer's own hand betrays itself are those that have been perceived, quite rightly, as outright score-settling, with government functionaries ridiculed ('no podía escribir una novela sobre la clase alta de Venezuela porque si les pone a sus personajes cultura, inteligencia y sensibilidad parecen inverosímiles y si los pinta tal cual como son resultan pesados, espesos y fastidiosos' [541]) and doctors and academics – thinly veiled versions of Herrera Luque's ex-colleagues – lampooned as laughably incompetent. Telmo Romero ascribes Sussy's suicide to excessive coffee consumption, and the French psychiatrist Charles is roundly discredited. In Chapter 115, even the writer's own academic discipline is attacked:

> —¡Que no, doctor! —le respondía Cuqueta cuando Flanagan atribuía unos mareos sin causa a los complejos que necesariamente tendrían que producir una madre prostituta y un padre homosexual. —Zobeido ni es nervioso, ni tiene problemas escolares, ni se hace pipí en la cama, ni nada de lo que usted me pregunta.
> El médico, que creía en la ciencia, se calaba con los lentes incrédulo.
> —O esta mujer miente como una bellaca o la psicología es una caca. (466)

Considering the preponderance of these anecdotes, Herrera Luque's attention to alternate histories seems excessive. An uncharitable interpretation would be that he commits the same sin that he long decried: that of contorting history in a self-interested fashion. Unquestionably, there are few *microhistorias* that truly support his claim that 'si algo he querido demostrar en este libro son los móviles y motivos que han llevado a nuestros gobernantes a detentar […] el poder en Venezuela';[362] they are largely tangential to this aim. Instead, these *móviles* and *motivos* are most apparent in the another part of the novel: one of the most extended, difficult, and detailed character studies that Herrera Luque produced.

[362] Herrera Luque, letter to Senta Essenfeld, dated 2nd May 1976, cited in Lovera, 261.

III. Portrait of a Dictator

Herrera Luque gave conflicting answers throughout his life to the question of who, or what, constituted *En la casa del pez*'s primary focus. In one letter to Lovera, he said 'tienes razón cuando dices que no se trata de una biografía de Juan Vicente Gómez, […] sería absurdo pretender entender a Gómez sin comprender su circunstancia'.[363] Attempts to understand a *caudillo*'s context and circumstances were, of course, a fundamental aspect of the Boves novel, even if Herrera Luque's most incisive analysis is saved for depicting colonial Venezuela's social and racial divides rather than Boves himself. Similarly, the writer told Moody that 'en vez de hacer una biografía de Juan Vicente Gómez, donde recae fundamentalmente el acento es sobre esa oligarquía colonial'.[364] Despite these denials, Herrera Luque agreed with Soler's proposition that Gómez is the work's 'figura principal'[365]; Carmen Verde Arocha, who knew the writer well, regards *En la casa del pez* as a study of 'la vida y la personalidad del dictador'.[366] Indeed, the introduction to the 1978 Spanish edition, regarded by Herrera Luque as definitive, notes that 'un personaje fundamental emerge dentro del contexto de la obra: Juan Vicente Gómez […] que, a diferencia de sus predecesores y sucesores, reacciona de manera muy diferente a las tácticas tradicionales que la célebre casa esgrimió con éxito contra todos sus aparentes dominadores' (10). There are even indications in the novel's early chapters that Gómez might originally have been one of its narrators. In Chapter Two, the focaliser appears to drift from the usual omniscient narrator to Gómez himself: the phrase 'dice cuando yo andaba por los cuatro años me vio de lejos' (29) and references to Pedro Cornelio Gómez as 'mi Señor Padre' (29) briefly show Gómez speaking in the first person. In any case, Gómez's primary novelistic function is a unitive one: the 'heterogeneous mass of isolated persons, non-sensuous structures and meaningless events receives a unified articulation by the relating of each separate element to the central character'.[367]

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[363] Lovera, 264.
[364] Moody, 41.
[365] Soler Serrano interview.
[366] Verde Arocha, 20.
[367] Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 81.

Herrera Luque's depiction of Gómez betrays the *ambivalencia* to which he frequently alluded. He talks of a fairness in his portrayal: 'muchas personas afirman que trato a Gómez despiadadamente, en tanto que otros y en idéntica proporción dicen que le hago justicia y que mi trato es benévolo'.[368] The narrator moves between inner monologues that expound Gómez's personal philosophy (a feature absent in *Boves*, as the *caudillo* had none) and an altogether external characterisation based, again, upon conjecture. As González says of his own attempts to portray Gómez in *Mi compadre*, a 1934 series of portraits of Venezuelan leaders, '¡No penetro en la esencia de mi hombre! […] El único método es el de la averiguación'.[369] Herrera Luque routinely presents Gómez as a 'ser enigmático' (*HF 3,* 133), whose motives verge on undecipherable. Early in the novel, the narrator states – perhaps metafictionally – that 'los campesinos de «La Mulera» y sus alrededores trataban de interpretar los modos de Juan Vicente' (71), presaging the *Autor* of *La historia fabulada*'s claims that 'a Juan Vicente Gómez le gustaba […] que los demás interpretaran sus pensamientos' (*HF 3,* 133).

Much of his characterisation is left to the judgement of his acquaintances, who spend a great deal of time commenting on his perpetually changing nature ('Juan Vicente con los años se ha tornado serio' [72]; 'Juan Vicente ha cambiado —se decía Don Antonio—; ahora es una vaina rara; es como si estuviese triste, pero tampoco lo está; es como si estuviese pensando en otra cosa, y no lo está; es como si estuviera distraído, y está pendiente de todo. Es como si de repente a mi amigo de hace tantos años me lo hubiesen cambiado por otro'[370] [375]). Gómez's personality and, importantly, his understanding and use of political power evolve continually throughout the novel ('lentamente aprendió a ordenar y a amenazar' [373]; 'paulatinamente pone de lado su natural campechano y comienza un nuevo juego del poder' [373]), reflecting Herrera Luque's belief in the 'posibilidad redentora' (*BCH,* 56) of nuanced, sensitive reappraisals of Gómez. 'El Gómez del año 18,' he says, 'no es el del 28, como no lo es en los comienzos su mandato ni en sus postrimerías. Negarle a Gómez esa posibilidad evolutiva […] es absurdo y anticientífico' (*BCH*, 56). Gómez is thus

368 Herrera Luque, letter to Ramírez Faría, 257.
369 Fernando González, *Mi compadre* (Medellín: Bolsolibros Bedout, 1975), 117.
370 As will be seen, Antonio Pimentel plays an important role in *Los cuatro reyes de la baraja*, in which Gómez explains his own conception (identical to Herrera Luque's at that time) of Venezuelan political history. This does not, however, explain the sophistication of Pimentel's internal monologue here.

rendered elusive to onlookers and his central importance emphasised: he is the only character to develop significantly, if at all, over the course of the novel.

This development is most apparent in his gradually calcifying life philosophy and changing physical appearance. Núñez's assertion that 'de los personajes no sobresalen sus características físicas, sino aquellas que forjan sus energías sicológicas para sus juegos a favor o en contra de las dictaduras'[371] may well be accurate for members of the *oligarquía colonial*, whose allegorical or symbolic actions take precedence over their appearance, but Gómez's portrayal often relies on the depiction of his physical characteristics. His distinguishing *bigote* becomes a symbol of his power (he adopts the pseudonym 'Bigotes' when secretly conducting extralegal activities and strokes it when making consequential decisions; as Herrera Luque often said, this physical feature likens him to Kaiser Wilhelm II and Stalin[372]). For the oligarchy, 'Juan Vicente es la personificación de la barbarie. Su aspecto lo dice todo, con aquellos bigotazos sin peinar y esa barrigota de sapo harto […] el tenedor es un instrumento que parece ignorar' (264).

Indeed – as with Boves – Gómez is routinely animalised in the novel, often through descriptions of his wild and expressive *ojillos*, and perhaps the most illustrative physical depiction of the dictator comes amid a meeting with Gonzalo Machado shortly after his seizure of power.

> Apareció Juan Vicente Gómez tras el escritorio presidencial, gordo, grande y con bigotes agresivos a lo kayser. De su rostro había desaparecido toda huella de mansedumbre y de atontamiento. Ahora era una mirada verdadera la que miraba. Era una mirada dura, enérgica, impersonal y al mismo tiempo significativa. Algo tenía de sabueso y de confesor, de alquimista y de pesador de carne. Por un tiempo la mirada se le quedó en suspenso. Gonzalo se sintió turbado. (342)

The connotations of *sabueso/confesor/alquimista/pesador de carne* are notable. *Sabueso* and *pesador de carne* convey an animalistic, earthy bloodthirstiness, while *confesor* and *alquimista* instead elevate the

[371] Núñez, 79.

[372] A contemporary parallel also exists here with the moustachioed dictator Nicolás Maduro (1962-). In 2021, state-run channel Venezolana de Televisión began broadcasting an animated series titled *Súper Bigote*, featuring Maduro in the guise of a crusading anti-imperialist superhero.

ever-evolving Gómez to a quasi-spiritual status: the *brujo* of popular anecdote and the rustic, violent cattle-farmer in one. Here, Herrera Luque deliberately aligns his portrayal with historical accounts of Gómez; his version of the despot adheres to simple values, and is far more comfortable around fellow rural men and even animals than members of the oligarchy. In order to understand and govern them, he comes to view Venezuela's citizens as beasts. In one lengthy exposition of the dictator's personal philosophy – of which there are many – his cynical but effective view of governance is described thus:

> Todo es cuestión de quién come más y quién se lleva la mejor hembra.[373] «Los problemas entre los humanos —continuaba el Presidente— no son tan complicados como dicen ustedes «los doctores». Todo es cuestión de forraje y plata y de saber quién es el toro que más mea. Si usted le tiene la boca llena a alguien y le da seguridad de que la seguirá teniendo llena, se queda quieto. […] Así son los hombres, mi doctor. Sí, señor; sí, señor.» (392)

While never explicitly praising it, as did León or Vallenilla Lanz, Herrera Luque does present Gómez's political approach as a valid and successful one. Gómez appears as a wily and perspicacious political operator despite his untutored background ('tenga paciencia, amigo, y sepa esperar' [180]; 'Gómez no erró, como pensaba y deseaba Castro' [298]), bringing about the modernisation of Venezuela through skilful management of the petroleum industry and foreign relations, acknowledging that 'de eso depende la estabilidad de mi gobierno' (350). However, Herrera Luque's presentation of Gómez's ethics depends to a large degree upon the depiction of his immediate predecessor and *compadre* Cipriano Castro. Although Núñez states that 'se evalúa soterradamente el comportamiento de las dictaduras venezolanas, sobre todo, la de Juan Vicente Gómez relegando a un segundo plano […] a Cipriano Castro',[374] the two *caudillos* are continually contrasted, with the negative attributes of Castro – whom Herrera Luque regarded as 'sin duda alguna uno de los peores gobernantes de Venezuela' (*HF 1*, 43) – emphasising Gómez's positive

[373] Gómez, in a manner that unconsciously (on his part) or consciously (on Herrera Luque's) recalls that of Freud, seems to hold a primitivist view of the paternalistic leader of society as a kind of sexually monopolising tyrant.
[374] Núñez, 78.

ones, and providing a handbook of sorts on how not to govern. The asceticism ascribed to Gómez (during his *de facto* rule while vice president, 'una nube de asceticismo cayó sobre la capital, lo que fue celebrado por los moralistas y voceado por las curas' [299]) acts in direct opposition to Castro's hedonism. The two are memorably juxtaposed as 'la figura atormentada de Cipriano Castro y la tranquilidad de paquidermo de Juan Vicente Gómez' (323). Indeed, Castro is shown to be corrupted by the materialism of Caracas high society (the writer's condemnation of this materialism represents a further attack on the *mores* of the oligarchy) as soon as he makes peace with his former enemy Joaquín Crespo, his sudden obsession with the city's women and 'su forma de hacer el amor' (141) arousing Gómez's disgust.

Gradually, Castro reduces society, in a 'giro erótico-política' (276), to an 'orgía bizantina' (267) of alcoholic and sexual excess.[375] As the French consul comments, 'uno de los peores aspectos de los dictadores tropicales […] son los abusos sexuales que promueven los gobernantes' (268) – and this is a cornerstone of Herrera Luque's depiction of Castro. He devotes much attention to Castro's tendency to abduct girls from the streets and sell them into prostitution, particularly the case of one 'muchachita que no ha cumplido los trece años' (277; the future Cuqueta) with 'senos que apenas despuntan' (277). The narrator implicitly condemns the girl's ritualistic presentation to the president at a party that same night, in which she is reduced to the status of a sacrificial victim, a *regalo* and a *muñeca* (an episode which is 'rigurosamente cierto' (567) in its historical accuracy, as Herrera Luque stresses in the appendix):

> A las nueve llegó el Restaurador.[376] Bebió champaña hasta las once. A esa hora Don Tello, con remedos solemnes, llamó la atención de todos:
> —Es la hora del sacrificio —dijo. Doña Concha se puso de pie. Y, más solemne que Don Tello, descorrió el cortinaje donde estaba la muñeca. Don Cipriano se acercó a pasitos cortos como niño mimoso ante un regalo. Vio a la muchachita y dio un silbido de

[375] Castro is blamed for adopting and legitimising Caracas's moral dissolution rather than engendering it; the famous episode of the national anthem being played in Concha's brothel actually takes place under Raimundo Andueza Palacios's regime.

[376] This was the title Castro used as leader of the *invasión andina*, termed the Restoring Revolution – 'it was never clear what was being restored' (Robert J. Alexander, *Rómulo Betancourt and the Transformation of Venezuela* [New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1982], 9) – and it is frequently used ironically in this novel.

> aprobación. Con delicadeza rompió la cinta roja que la envolvía. Volviéndose a todos dijo con voz quebrada por la emoción:
> —Sumamente agradecido, señores. —Y se llevó su muñeca a la habitación vecina. (278)

Castro's wild excesses almost make Gómez appear morally upstanding in comparison. In this, Herrera Luque's presentation of Gómez diverges from historical evidence and most literary depictions of the tyrant, which have almost all focused on his well-documented promiscuity, notably García Márquez's Patriarch ('the eighty children [Gómez] was said to have sired become 5,000 in the novel'[377]). Yet Herrera Luque consciously avoids this aspect of Gómez's life for unidentified reasons; he focuses instead on Gómez's aversion to women, whom he regards, like Boves, as an impediment to maintaining political power, and on his two stable relationships with Dionisia and Dolores.

Accounts of Gómez's promiscuity *are* included, and he even is described as a 'preñador' and 'gran señor de la conquista' (75), but these are usually offhanded and quite understated. Gómez's treatment of young Dolores Amelia – he abducts her and jealously imprisons Florían, a potential suitor – is not dissimilar from Castro's treatment of La Muñeca. This story is related to the reader by the unlikeable Maricusa de las Casas, a member of the oligarchy:

> —Ha sido raptada por el General-Presidente […] y, como muchas princesas cautivas, terminó por enamorarse de su raptor, con quien vivía plácida y feliz en una gran casona acastillada. ¿No te parece bello el cuento? ¿Se concibe algo más romántico en nuestros tiempos?
> Una semana más tarde, salió el joven Florián con un cargo diplomático. (365)

Rather than on Gómez, the condemnation here appears to fall on Maricusa for her frivolous retelling and trivialising of the story. Indeed, in a 1976 letter to Senta Essenfeld, Herrera Luque stated that 'Cervantes mató a los caballeros andantes. Yo guardando las distancias quisiera matar a los Gonzalos Machados, a las Miricusas [sic] y a las Doña Concha que todavía en nuestros días

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377 Stephen Boldy, '*The Autumn of the Patriarch*', in Philip Swanson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Gabriel García Márquez* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 78-93 (84).

siguen conduciéndose como [en] los tiempos de Castro y de Juan Vicente Gómez'[378] – *not* the dictator himself. Florián's fate likewise absolves Gómez of guilt in a rather ironic manner, negating his serious abuses of power by turning them into amusing anecdotes. Many of his misdeeds and excesses are rendered comedic in this way. In Chapter 43, for example, he has perennial troublemaker Justo Ceballos placed in a cell with a group of *afeminados* ('Justo fue arrastrado hasta la celda donde veinte manos y labios pintados cayeron sobre él y se lo tragaron entre carcajadas' [196]) – a story of sexual harassment similarly brushed aside. Even in scenes depicting the most extreme acts of torture, particularly those set in the infamous San Carlos prison, the blame is attributed to their direct perpetrators, Jorge Bello, Isaías Nieto and Eustoquio Gómez, rather than to the dictator who orders them.

The form of persecution portrayed at greatest length in *En la casa del pez* is the torture method of which *El Bagre* was most fond: hanging his enemies by their testicles. First referenced in Chapter Ten as a form of gruesome vigilantism carried out by Pedro Cornelio in 'los tiempos del terremoto' (144) that horrifies the young Juan Vicente, he himself later replicates it on an unfortunate spy ('el cuerpo, finalmente, cae con un alarido más profundo. Abajo el hombre sangrante y moribundo. Arriba, las bolsas grandes de su virilidad [144]), and the practice becomes commonplace in a demonstration of Gómez's hardening personality and unchecked abuses of power. Castration is an important notion here, saying much about the *machismo* of Gómez's regime and his position as a patriarchal figure – the 'buen abuelo'[379] that Herrera Luque terms him – and, crucially, about power. For the dictator, this form of torture becomes a mere representation of his power and ability to subjugate and emasculate, literally and figuratively to neuter, his opponents: 'después que se cuelga a un hombre por las pelotas, ya no es inocente […] déjelos por un tiempo largo que los presos, después de varios años, bendicen la mano que les da la libertad, aunque sea la misma que se la quitó' (378). Additionally, it has a clear symbolic value for Herrera Luque: in his view, 'Gómez tuvo una ventaja, igual que Betancourt: han sido los únicos gobernantes venezolanos a quién la oligarquía caraqueña no ha logrado castrar'.[380]

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[378] Herrera Luque, letter to Senta Essenfeld, 262.
[379] Soler Serrano interview, 10:35-10:38.
[380] Moody, 40.

One can even discern a sense of admiration on Herrera Luque's part for Gómez's independent and dominant spirit here, even amid such graphic scenes of the cruelty carried out on his behalf. Contrary to Aínsa's affirmation that *En la casa del pez* 'elimina la "distancia histórica" gracias a recursos literarios como […] diálogos coloquiales en el contexto familiar del dictador venezolano Juan Vicente Gómez […] En las descripciones de la intimidad de los héroes se los desciende de sus "pedestales"'[381], and his own claims towards the de-mythification of historical figures, Herrera Luque's approach here is neither consistent nor clear-cut. He had always been drawn towards popular lore, a major source of myth – for the *Autor* of *La historia fabulada*, 'la fabulación y el mito son tan importantes a la vida de un pueblo como las historias bien sedimentadas' (*HF 1*, 166) – while also claiming that 'no soporto las leyendas que han hecho la historia'.[382] This contradiction is central to the depiction of the central dictator figure here. Writers of the most well-known dictator novels sought to undo such legends – Asturias's titular President, like Gómez a fatherless character, appears as a pathetic drunk, while *El otoño del patriarca* and *La fiesta del Chivo* (2000) dedicate long passages to describing the tormented thought processes and physical degradation of their respective dictator figures. While Herrera Luque certainly presents 'human' dimensions to Gómez's character, there are equally numerous incidences where explanations for his actions are not provided – and where the writer appears to leave historical myths surrounding the dictator intact.

Gómez's inner monologues and conversations, more prevalent in the second half of the novel, supposedly have their roots in historical and psychoanalytical extrapolation, or what one might term *mentir con conocimiento de causa*: as Herrera Luque points out in the appendices, 'Gómez, psicológicamente hablando (obsesivo, ritual), tiene la caracterología del sádico' (562) and he claims that 'los soliloquios tienen un fundamento racional tanto en los datos recaudados como en el tipo psicológico y su evolución' (562). These monologues detail Gómez's fallibility and anxieties. The first substantial exposition comes at the start of Book II, shortly after the novel's midpoint. Here

[381] Aínsa, 86.
[382] Soler Serrano interview, 17:42-17:50.

Gómez, aged fifty-one, surveys his appearance in the mirror, ruminating on his ageing reflection as the narration shifts to his point of view:

> Cuando llegó a las manos las vio largamente con sus ojillos oblicuos. Le habían salido unas pecas negras en el dorso que lo contrariaban más que una mala pregunta. De niño había visto unas manos así y le sacaron un vómito de asco, porque Doña Hermenegilda lo obligó a besarlas. Eran las del cura de San Antonio. ¿Me estaré poniendo viejo? (338)[383]

This perspectival shift is notable for various reasons: it is the first time in the novel that an extended passage is focalised from the dictator's point of view, providing a closer focus on Gómez in his ascendancy, rather than fleeting glimpses amid a morass of anecdotes detailing the wrongdoings of the oligarchic class. Similarly, whereas characters must often deduce the dictator's reasoning and decision-making process from an external perspective (a process made more difficult by his depiction as a series of animals or metonyms: a moustache, a wicker chair, a toad, a distended stomach, a pair of shifty eyes), these internal monologues serve to make sense of Gómez's perception of the world. The above passage is also notable in that it introduces Gómez's physical decline, hinting from its outset at the transience of his ostensibly eternal regime. Bodily ailments are a common theme in the novel of dictatorship, representing a useful springboard into explorations of the dictator-figure's psyche. Gómez's physical indispositions are discussed at length in the latter stages of the novel, in keeping with Herrera Luque's depiction of the *caudillo*'s continual evolution:

> —Yo no necesito apoyo ni para bajar una escalera. Yo me sé valer solo. Yo soy el apoyo de todos.
> Pero eso era antes. En los últimos tres meses las piernas le flaquean y a duras penas lo sostienen. Es un anciano de 78 años. Las ideas ya se le confunden. El rostro está demacrado y una sensación indefinida de flaqueza y malestar lo envuelve todo el día. (534)

[383] This episode recalls the 1947 Acapulco scene in Fuentes's *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962), with which Herrera Luque was familiar, and which appears to have been a significant influence on some of his later works.

This episode has an ironic effect, underlining the gulf between Gómez's self-perception (this comes not long after he discusses his own immortality) and the reality of his situation; whether it engenders sympathy for the strongman is debatable. Certainly, Gómez's uraemia and worsening prostate issues, painful, unglamorous and (ironically) emasculating by their very nature, render him an increasingly pitiable and ridiculous 'figura vencida' (543) as the novel progresses:

> Porque ya toda Venezuela sabe que el mal del General es la próstata y que tiene que orinar a cada instante. El General es muy púdico o lo era hasta hace poco. Ahora orina en cualquier parte. A la orilla de una carretera. A la entrada de un pueblo. En un colegio de señoritas. Cuando alguien, sea institución o persona, tiene el honor de recibir una meadita del General, es motivo de envidia y de consternación. (535)

This latter detail is particularly notable, given its somewhat bizarre and amusing nature – instead of engendering disgust, Gómez's urine is elevated almost to the status of a holy relic. This near-devotional apotheosising of the dictator points to the pervasive mythology that surrounded him, and which Herrera Luque never explicitly dismantles.[384] As Boldy states, Gómez 'was thought to have almost supernatural powers of intuition'[385] thanks to his regime's seeming invulnerability; to the people, he was 'the Andean *brujo* who seemed completely invulnerable to any human efforts directed against him',[386] with many of his deeds and apparent powers attributed to otherworldly sources. Herrera Luque includes many of these dramatically compelling myths, frequently calling Gómez a 'brujo'. Early on, the narrator notes that 'el hijo de Hermenegilda era brujo y advinidador para él y para los suyos' (71), while one of Castro's positivist functionaries later states that 'realmente es brujo, como dice la gente' (307). Gómez is afforded a supernatural level of presentiment: in 1901, after defeating a renegade *caudillo*, he says 'yo he vencido a Luciano Mendoza, el hombre que venció a Páez. Yo, Juan Vicente Gómez, un pobre muchacho de La

[384] One myth that Herrera Luque does actively attack is the stubborn belief that Gómez was the reincarnation of Bolívar (actively propagated by *El Benemérito*, who shared the Liberator's birthday and, later, supposedly his date of death), by deriding Requena, the only character to promote it seriously. Bolívar does, however, seemingly commune with Carlos Delgado Chalbaud, predicting his prominent role in a future government.

[385] Boldy, '*The Autumn of the Patriarch*', 84.

[386] Rourke, 212.

Mulera.— Y esa noche tuvo el mal sueño de que era Presidente' (232).[387] Similarly, he nearly foretells the murder of his brother Juancho, saying 'tengo miedo de esta noche, Eloy. Algo muy malo está pasando. Una nube roja me envuelve' (449). These abilities are never afforded a rational explanation. Amid plots against Gómez's life in the dying days of Castro's regime, the narrator notes that:

> Como en todos los momentos en que ha peligrado su vida, siente una desazón creciente a medida que se acerca al hombre. De un vistazo lo sabe todo. Las manos largas y frágiles no son de peón, ni la agilidad es de campesino, ni la mirada vivaz es de cuidador de vacas. (306)

As with his perpetually shifting nature and indeterminate status somewhere between a *sabueso* and a *confesor*, Gómez's physical and psychological attributes defy unequivocal interpretation; he is almost rendered *more* elusive – not more human or psychologically comprehensible – by this fact. Neither Herrera Luque nor his narrator(s) ever actively *subscribe* to the myths surrounding Gómez, but nor are they fully debunked. What, then, is the purpose of reiterating them? In a 1978 article, Herrera Luque noted that his extensive preparatory research for *En la casa del pez* led him 'a la conclusión que muy poco se sabe o se ha publicado sobre el mundo interior de Gómez. Creo que está envuelto por una estereotipia de ocasión que merece una revisión más profunda' (*BCH*, 60). By contrasting Gómez's inner psyche, presented as 'objectively' and 'scientifically' as was possible, with the way that others see him – and by detailing the most human of his vulnerabilities alongside accounts of his super-human nature – Herrera Luque leaves much to the judgement and imagination of the reader.

[387] This wording is interesting, and is indicative of Herrera Luque's underlying views about power and legitimacy in Venezuela. At this point, Gómez believes himself to be uninterested in, or even frightened of, power, but this power is depicted as being his destiny. This suggests limitations to his own agency (as is the case with Boves), in line with the writer's conception of him as an epiphenomenon of broader historical processes; like Artemio Cruz in Boldy's reading, he 'is not so much an individual as the incarnation of a the new [historical] cycle' ('Fathers and Sons', 33).

IV. The Form and Location of Power

In the same year *En la casa del pez* appeared, Domingo Alberto Rangel published *Gómez, el amo del Poder*, a generically indistinct and 'uneven'[388] study of the dictator that demonstrates many of the hallmarks of the 'Gómez novel', as well as many similarities with Herrera Luque's bestseller. Rangel attempts to 'combine a psychohistory of […] Gómez with an account of the origin of Venezuela's petroleum-based international dependency'.[389] The very title of Rangel's work underscores the key idea raised therein and in many other works classified under the 'fenómeno Gómez' umbrella: that Gómez not only wielded power, but *was* power itself. He was 'la expresión esencial del despotismo y la opresión',[390] as well as both leader and incarnation of the Venezuelan state. More than a mere *brujo*, writers discussed the perception of Gómez as a near-divine figure. In Uslar Pietri's *Oficio de difuntos*, of which Herrera Luque was fiercely critical,[391] the framing figure, Padre Solana (a fictionalised Carlos Borges), regards the dictator, here renamed Aparicio Peláez, as a consubstantiated figure with an 'aura de omnipotencia y de perennidad'.[392] Like Asturias's President, Peláez 'sentía casi físicamente las ataduras que lo unían a todas las formas de vida del vasto país'.[393] To Solana and the rest of the population, his demise seems impossible, since 'pasaban los años y se le veía envejecer, pero todos los que en una especie de asociación vegetal, de ecosistema biológico, vivían en torno a su poder, parecían haber llegado a eliminar esa posibilidad'.[394] Gómez and Venezuela itself are depicted as intertwined. For Rangel, 'el lecho de Maracay es el centro de Venezuela'.[395] A related 'conexión entre un cuerpo mortal y un cuerpo

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388 Judith Ewell, *Gómez: El amo del Poder'*, in *Hispanic American Historical Review*, vol. 57, no. 1 (1977), pp. 137-8 (137).

389 Ibid. This latter theme is explored at length in *En la casa del pez*, but unlike in Rangel's and Briceño-Iragorry's novels, it is not an overriding consideration.

390 Benjamín Carrión, *García Moreno: El santo del patíbulo* (Quito: El Conejo, 1984), 7.

391 Herrera Luque disparaged Uslar Pietri's decision to cipher his fictionalised characters, noting that 'La sustición de nombres reales por nombres ficticios quita al lector la sensación de veracidad' (*HF 3*, 161). Herrera Luque's preference for *veracidad* over *verosimilitud* engendered the major stylistic shortcoming of his works.

392 A. Uslar Pietri, 28.

393 A. Uslar Pietri, 266.

394 A. Uslar Pietri, 11.

395 Rangel, 400.

político'[396] figures prominently in Herrera Luque's novel, in which Gómez's final illness mirrors the nation's own decay (or vice versa, since, as Hobbes has it, the 'infirmities of a commonwealth […] resemble the diseases of a natural body'[397]):

> Cuando en el 23 se le trancó al General la orina y todos esperaban su muerte el doctor Adolfo Bueno se atrevió a pasarle una sonda y en vez del chorro de orina —como comenta con sorna Rafael Hernández Rodríguez— saltó petróleo. La importancia de los médicos en la historia contemporánea de Venezuela ha sido creciente. —O los gobernantes son hipocondríacos o tienen una gran vocación terapéutica hacia ese gran cuerpo enfermo que se llama Venezuela— señaló una vez Núñez de Cáceres, que odiaba a los médicos, y murió de mengua. (551-52)

Political developments in the novel are frequently compared to the bodies of the nation's leaders, underscoring the relationship between body and state. Chapter 75, for example, is called 'La Patria y el riñón', in which Venezuela's fate hangs in the balance amid Castro's own nephrological problems; Chapter 126 draws an equivalence between 'Próstatas y revoluciones'; and, in the words of Juan Otáñez's father, another character who often seems to ventriloquise many of Herrera Luque's own sociopolitical viewpoints, 'los Andes y Oriente son el Alfa y el Omega de la nacionalidad. La tesis y la antítesis de un cuerpo nuevo que se llama Venezuela' (237) – a *cuerpo nuevo* fashioned in the image of its creator Gómez, whose 'soul […] gives life and motion to the whole body'.[398]

Novelas del gomecismo routinely use natural or biological imagery to underscore the dictator's supposed omnipotence. Rangel states that upon his death 'los árboles susurran la noticia. El viento la pone en los chaparros del Guárico y el barinés la lleva hasta las bocas del Orinoco';[399] to Uslar Pietri's narrator, Gómez (Peláez) 'estaba como en la roca de una confluencia sintiendo pasar a su lado las turbias aguas'.[400] This simile also appears in *En la casa del pez*, and variations upon it appear

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396 Olivia Vázquez-Medina, *Cuerpo, historia y textualidad en Augusto Roa Bastos, Fernando del Paso y Gabriel García Márquez* (Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert Verlagsgesellschaft, 2013; ebook), ch. 3.1.
397 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1994 [1668]), 210.
398 Hobbes, 3.
399 Rangel, 400.
400 A. Uslar Pietri, 35.

often during Gómez's old age. He likens himself to a saman tree, first stating that 'el padre, es como un samán, sí señor. Un samán que da sombra a todos' (44). Upon reaching the auspicious, biblically significant age of seventy – when he talks at length about his crude philosophy on life's milestones – Gómez proclaims that '¡Ya soy el gran árbol! Ya sí soy el Viejo de los Samanes' (455), and appears momentarily convinced both of his inviolable status as the metaphorical 'segundo padre de la Patria' (457) and of his own immortality:

> ¡Ya uno es tan grande y tan viejo que parece que está ahí desde que nació el tiempo! ¡Árbol y hombre que hagan diez veces siete ya no se mueren! ¡Hoy me visto de árbol grande donde cantarán los pájaros y dormirán los hombres! (433)

Gómez's fixation on the symbolic tree has a historical basis – the Samán de Güere sheltered Bolívar (and was designated a national monument under Gómez); another grew at the *hacienda* where he spent his later years, and this 'samán de Las Delicias fue un punto esencial de referencia en la historia anecdótica de la Dictadura, pues, bajo su ramaje se decidió el destino adverso o venturoso de miles de venezolanos'.[401] However, there is also a degree of dramatic irony here. Saman trees grow to prodigious sizes but rarely live for over a century, and by now the reader has already been made aware of a broadening and worsening range of serious physical indispositions afflicting the ageing dictator. This points, therefore, to Herrera Luque's more nuanced consideration of the extent of Gómez's authority, to the permanence or transience of power, and the question of precisely *where* power is located and wielded in his vision of Venezuela.

Superficially, Gómez's authority seems absolute, as evidenced by quotations such as 'el poder es él y nadie más que él' (433) and 'aquí no habrá más voluntad que la mía, que es la de Venezuela' (427). Solana's horror at Peláez's death in *Oficio de difuntos* ('No se podía morir, todo giraba en torno de él, todo dependía de él, todo estaba en él. Pasaban los años, pasaban los hombres, cambiaban las cosas, pero la única permanencia era la suya'[402]) could just as easily apply to Herrera Luque's novel. Metafictionally and structurally, it is perhaps true that everything revolves around

[401] Velásquez, 38.
[402] A. Uslar Pietri, 269.

Gómez in *En la casa del pez*: his biography constitutes its primary framework, providing the entry point into the writer's fictionalised history of his wider era and ensuring the foreword progression of the plot. But while Uslar Pietri, alongside so many others, presents Gómez as genuinely all-powerful, capable even of transcending and suspending time, the same is not true in Herrera Luque's work. He frequently asserted that it was not Gómez, not any other Venezuelan leader, who represented power in its truest form, but rather an altogether different institution.

González affirms that Herrera Luque's novels show how 'Gómez y Castro, Crespo y Guzmán Blanco son los mascarones de proa de una sociedad cuyos hábitos políticos y la relación entre sociedad y poder, no cambian'.[403] The *Autor* of *La historia fabulada*, unambiguously a version of Herrera Luque, states that 'el paecismo, guzmancismo, crespismo, gomecismo y todos los ismos habidos y por haber desaparecen con la muerte física de sus ductores' (*HF 1*, 60). Despite appearances, there is virtually no point at which Gómez truly wields power of his own accord in this novel; rather, he is forced to share it in an unsteady relationship located within and around the novel's titular location, 'ya que sólo [comparte] con "La Casa del Pez"[404] el poder en Venezuela'.[405] This mansion, the ancestral home of the Blanco-Machado family, symbolises the *oligarquía colonial* and its position at the heart of Venezuelan cultural, social and political life.

V. The Question of Domestic Space

Herrera Luque talked at length about the inspiration behind the *casa del pez*, which features as a central location in all three Blanco-Machado novels. This 'inmensa y bellísima mansión'[406] is based on his own childhood house, a 'casa de tres patios'[407] situated close to Caracas Cathedral. For the writer, the house was imbued with remembered tales (particularly those passed to him – as with

[403] Dobrudcha González., xv-xvi.
[404] In his articles and correspondence, Herrera Luque's use of capitalisation in reference to the titles of his works was often quite haphazard.
[405] Herrera Luque, letter to Ramírez Faría, 261.
[406] Moody, 35.
[407] Lovera, 35.

García Márquez – by his maternal grandmother) and ghost stories, many of which were reworked into subplots in his novels.[408] In his own words, 'cuatro de mis novelas históricas tienen algo, o mucho, que ver con aquella casa de mi abuelo Luque y en especial con la fuente que existía en medio del patio',[409] from which both the house and the novel take their name.

This piscine statue is an exemplar of 'los peces que estaban sobre las pilas de agua que había en las casas de la oligarquía caraqueña en el siglo pasado',[410] and represents the 'inspiración y leit motiv de mis tres novelas'.[411] Herrera Luque explicitly stated that the fish symbolises, in some way, the oligarchy's power, remaining constant (lo único que no cambia desde los tiempos en que los negros tenían amo' [41]) amid the myriad political changes experienced by Venezuela. They were 'testigos silenciosos de los cambios y mutaciones de los hombres que han ayudado a encumbrar en el poder a los caudillos'.[412] In *En la casa del pez*, the titular fish not only acts as a witness to history, but rather than remaining silent, as Lovera asserts, it gives voice to the oligarchy's prevailing opinions of Venezuela's leadership ('como si fuera gente' [41]) in a ludic fashion: 'borbotea presuntuoso el chorro, que alarga y encoge, saludante o protestario' (199). The fish is often accompanied in these judgements by an equally symbolic painting of a frowning Don Feliciano, the Machados' ancestor.

This fish is a symbol to which Herrera Luque continually returns. But it is the house at large that functions as the clearest embodiment and location of the oligarchy and, by extension, of power itself. The relationship, both literal and metaphorical, between domestic space and power is a recurrent focus in dictatorship literature, and modern Latin American fiction more broadly. In Asturias's *El Señor Presidente*, for example, the increasingly blurred divisions between 'el mundo de la casa y el mundo de la calle'[413] emphasise the omnipresence of the tyrant's power; the presidential

[408] The story of El Cautivo and Acarantair in *Los amos del Valle*, Santiaguito Blanco's murder of the unfortunate gardener Sempronio in this novel, and the ghostly apparition of Catalina de Miranda from *La luna de Fausto* are all adaptations of real-life stories from Herrera Luque's family past.
[409] Lovera, 36.
[410] Lovera, 250.
[411] Lovera, 35.
[412] Lovera, 250.
[413] Miguel Ángel Asturias, *El Señor Presidente*, ed. Alejandro Lanoël d'Aussenac, 10th edn., (Madrid: Cátedra, 2014), 237.

palace of *El otoño del patriarca*, in which time itself is *estancado*, mirrors the decay and corruption of the patriarch himself; while in José Donoso's *Casa de campo* (1978) the titular estate of the wealthy Ventura clan can be read as an allegory for Chile's collapsing political order. The house as a stand-in for wider political questions, and as a metaphor for the nation itself, was also a commonly deployed rhetorical device within Venezuelan public life. Gómez was reported to have said (perhaps imitating the emperor Augustus) 'I found this country as a house in ruins and built a solid house';[414] a later dictator, Marcos Pérez Jiménez, stated that 'My house is the image of the country I wanted to build'.[415]

In this novel, the *casa del pez* symbolises the nerve centre of socio-political power in Venezuela. Its doors welcome 'todos los gobernadores y presidentes que ha tenido Venezuela' (204), suggesting from early on its persistence and their fleetingness. Before and during Castro's regime, the only route to meaningful political and social power in Venezuela for those outside narrow *mantuano* circles was, literally and metaphorically, through the houses of the upper classes, from which the likes of Castro, the uncouth Gómez, their fellow *andinos* – and, fatefully, Boves – had traditionally been excluded:

> La alta sociedad de Caracas abre sus salones para que el Restaurador colme con su presencia viejas casas patricias, hasta entonces cerradas, como un lamasterio. La Casa del Pez que Escupe el Agua abre, una y otra vez, sus anchos portales e invita a fundirse a los vencedores con los jamás vencidos. (273)

Politicians' presence and conduct within the *casa del pez* helps illustrate the balance of power between Venezuela's leaders and the oligarchy. Castro, initially viewed with bafflement and distrust by the Caracas upper classes, comes close to undoing their centuries-old authority.[416] His late arrival to a party held in his honour threatens the Machados' disgrace: 'en el aire ya está la duda de que el Restaurador acuda a la recepción. Sería una forma cruel y expedita de señalar que Víctor

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414 Coronil, 166. This is Coronil's translation of 'Yo encontré una casa en ruinas y construí una casa sólida'.
415 Ibid. 'Mi casa es la imagen del país que quise construir'.
416 Despite his roughness in the eyes of the *caraqueños* and in his portrayal in the novel, Castro was in reality an educated man.

Alberto está caído' (201). Herrera Luque again uses the present tense either to convey urgency or to extend the duration of this stressful scene, only for this to end up being a false alarm. Instead, Castro integrates almost seamlessly into the *mantuanos*' world, appointing the same wealthy socialites to his cabinet as his liberal predecessors and basking in their sycophancy. They, in turn, condone and then adopt his immoral excesses ('la ciudad […] sonrió tolerante y terminó aplaudiendo las aventuras galantes' [269]) in a mutually corruptive cycle. In perhaps his most caustic lampooning of the oligarchic *adulantes*, Herrera Luque shows that their exalting of Castro sows the seeds for his moral fall, best represented by his first contact with the powerful procuress Concha:

> Cada una de sus palabras era seguida con atención idolátrica. Los que lo escuchaban hacían con la cabeza automáticas señales de aprobación que a veces no correspondían a la intención del Caudillo. En otras ocasiones se reían a carcajadas cuando el Conquistador comenzaba a contar un chiste y reían antes de tiempo. Doña Concha, con su escote y opulencia acaparó la atención del Caudillo. (204)

Gómez's attitude differs starkly. As Rourke writes of his uncomfortable relationship with the capital:

> There was something about [Caracas] that evaded him, annoyed him. He couldn't grasp it, make it his, as he could with everything else […] Individually, yes, he could conquer them; but collectively, these men, with their clothes and manners and their fine, educated women, seemed to be mocking him. They seemed, collectively, to shut him out, as he shut them out, individually.[417]

This is replicated at length in the novel, particularly in two scenes in which Gómez enters the house and interacts with its inhabitants. On both occasions, he appears uncharacteristically vulnerable: 'deambula tímido y barrigón por la vieja casona. La casi totalidad de la gente allí presente le es desconocida' (235); 'se siente incómodo. Permanece solitario en medio del patio' (235). The dismissive and frightened reaction of the Caracas oligarchy to Gómez ('they despised

[417] Rourke, 141.

him. Helpless, they resorted to ridicule'[418]) is conveyed through the unwelcoming and inquisitive glare of Don Feliciano, who 'lo examina curioso y hostil' (349), and through the condescending comments to which Gómez is subjected, through which 'percibe el sutil rechazo' (236). His exclusion from this sphere, as well as his recognising it as the location of power and desire to obtain that power, is evinced during his tour of the house with Víctor Alberto:

> —¿Como cuánto costará una fuente como ésta?
> El banquero emerge del sueño.
> —¿Cómo dice… mi general?
> Gómez repite la pregunta. Víctor Alberto, con el pensamiento fijo en la historia, responde con rabia.
> —Esta fuente se compra, pero no se vende… (201)

The balance of power is most effectively represented not in Herrera Luque's detailed descriptions of political developments, nor in Gómez's inner monologues, but rather in a thematic area of the novel that undermines somewhat its writer's claims to historical realism: that of haunting. Like the Buendía house in *Cien años de soledad*, the Machados' mansion, 'llena de fantasmas y leyendas',[419] is a location where time is not always linear, but one where it is possible to 'recoger los pasos perdidos' (53). As in *Boves,* Herrera Luque uses the figure of *Ella* to underscore the weight of history and to create continuity between the three Machado novels. *Ella*'s appearances represent Gómez's relationship with entrenched social power in Venezuela. Gómez's first appearances in *En la casa del pez* detail his encounter with a mysterious *brujo* – soon revealed to be none other than Juan Palacios – amid portentous natural events in Táchira (the May 1875 earthquake, floods and thunderstorms). The *brujo* predicts his political ascendancy, casting him as the heir of Boves, in what might be read as another symbolic anointment:

> Tú, como él, harás temblar la tierra, los hombres sentirán frío a tu paso y juntarás esta tierra para siempre con la mía, con la que está detrás de esta rimera de cerros. Pero tendrás que tener cojones de bronce y no hacer como él, que por una mujer malogró su destino. Los

[418] Ibid.
[419] Lovera, 35.

> hombres como tú no deben tener mujer, sino cueros que se ponen de lado, porque la mujer le hace mal al guerrero. (34)

The structure of the first chapters is important here. They alternate between Gómez's meeting with Palacios and Eugenia Blanco's (historically 'seismic') death, which both take place exactly simultaneously. As Palacios foretells Gómez's future, he also appears in a vision to Eugenia, saying 'vine a buscarte mi niña. Qué terremoto viene/ Qué terremoto va/ Corramos a las estrellas/ Cuaj, Cuaj, Cuaj' (33). This *terremoto* has a symbolic meaning: Palacios informs Gómez that he, too, will create great tremors throughout the land, and the structural damage caused to the *casa del pez* by this same earthquake points to his destabilising the Venezuelan political system that it represents[420]. As Eugenia approaches the moment of her death, *Ella* appears to her in the guise of none other than Gómez himself (as with Boves before):

> Viene la mujer del manto, la que predice a los de su familia la muerte que se aproxima […] Nunca le ha visto la cara. Pero esta vez seguro que se la va a ver. El fantasma entre lazos y mantos comienza a monstrar el rostro. Ya lo ve claro y sin dudas. Es un hombre gordo de largos bigotes lacios con la mirada oblicua de Nicasa la andina. Cuando Eugenia intenta gritar, el hombre levanta una mano enguantada, se la lleva a los labios y le ordena silencio. (33)

As Palacios himself dies, mortally wounded in the earthquake, *Ella* appears to him in the guise of Eugenia and the spectre is witnessed by Gómez as 'una mujer de batola blanca' (34) by whom he is entranced. Bemused by the spectre's disappearance, he resolves to discover its identity, eventually doing so upon seeing a portrait of Eugenia upon his second visit to the *casa del pez* in 1902. Gómez also appears as the Machado family's spectre later in the novel when Víctor Alberto dies of a heart attack after a heated conversation with the *caudillo*, the possibility being left open that Gómez himself somehow *causes* this fatal infarction:

[420] The last major earthquake that had taken place was that of 26th March 1812, during the First War of Independence, which is referenced repeatedly in *Boves* – this was the last time that the authority (indeed, the very existence) of the *mantuanos* had been seriously threatened.

> Una visión lo sobrecogió. Frente a él y de espaldas estaba la matrona que se les aparece a los Blanco. La misma matrona que vio de niño cuando se moría y que llevó a su madre a suplicarle al cielo. Extendió la mano derecha, como queriendo rechazar o palpar el espanto. Pero el fantasma no desapareció, sino que tomó cuerpo. Ya se ve claramente el vestido a pesar de las tinieblas. Es de amarillo oro, de oro viejo y pesado. El dolor es ya insoportable. La vida se le escapa. La mujer se da vueltas muy lentamente: Víctor Alberto da un alarido: la mujer del manto tiene la cara del jefe andino,[421] que dejó abajo, frente a la pileta del Pez que escupe el agua. (206)

As with the novel's alternating structure, Herrera Luque uses the Machados' ancestral home and their family legends to present an intermingling of the two sources of power in Venezuela: the *oligarquía colonial*, and the national government, which are by turns opposed to one another, engaged in rivalry, or in cahoots. During Gómez's ascendancy, he intrudes on their authority, inserting himself, with varying degrees of success, into their house and their family myths. Yet just as Gómez never allowed himself to be dominated by the Venezuelan oligarchy, nor does he come fully to dominate them in Herrera Luque's novel. This is perhaps best demonstrated on the night of Gómez's death, when 'José Ramón Machado, desde las cuatro de la mañana, trajeado para salir, daba grandes zancadas de un extremo a otro del patio, sin que el Pez perturbase su habitual caudal de agua' (554) – the statue of the fish, emblem of the Machados' power, again tranquil in the knowledge of Gómez's demise and the oligarchy's continuing authority. The final line of the main body of the novel poses the rather pessimistic question '¿se dan cuenta de que la Casa del pez que escupe el agua continuará pariendo ministros?' (554), providing a sense of cyclicality in accordance with Herrera Luque's conception of the *historia detenida*. Whether Gómez ever represented anything more than a mere spectre for Venezuela's entrenched ruling class thus constitutes the novel's final question, and one that is ultimately left unresolved.

[421] In *la mujer del manto*'s third appearance to Gonzalo Machado in Chapter 119, it is implied – though not definitively stated – that she has taken on the appearance of Rómulo Betancourt, who is at that point having animated discussions in an adjoining room.

VI. History Detained?

If the novel concluded at this point, that alone would have made for an aesthetically satisfactory ending. *En la casa del pez* would then have constituted a lengthy novelistic demonstration of the fact that Venezuela's is 'a history marked more by continuities than by ruptures',[422] with the underlying system, the true source of power, surviving unscathed: an *historia detenida* in the truest sense. Recalling Lampedusa's famous line from *The Leopard* (1958) – 'se vogliamo che tutto rimanga como è, bisogna che tutto cambi'[423] – next to no meaningful change occurs. Deriving legitimacy only from his being an avatar of early twentieth century Venezuela's *alma* and thus an epiphenomenal manifestation of the country at that point in its historical trajectory, Gómez did not disrupt the fundamental building blocks of the Venezuelan state, even as its economy, geopolitical situation, and the urban fabric of its capital began to transform at a glacial, though gradually quickening, pace. The novel is replete with subtle details that point to a modest evolution: Gómez's rather repetitive military campaigns in the first *Libro* put an end to the 'mosaico anárquico de señores feudales' (*BCH*, 55).[424] Meanwhile, amid Gómez's economic dealings in the second *Libro*, the presence of the United States (referred to as *imperialismo yanqui*) slowly becomes more apparent, dominating political discussions among students in 1928 and culminating in José Ramón Machado's absorption into the American cultural sphere by the novel's epilogue. The increasing influence of the United States is mirrored by the gradual physical decline of the *Casa del pez*: Gonzalo Machado, increasingly out of step with popular sentiment, insists on remaining there despite its being overrun by rats and flies, and, in the epilogue, Herrera Luque reveals that the fish, symbol of the Machado's authority, has been moved to a new property in Valle Arriba, and the house itself demolished.[425] The epilogue ends with the death of the Americanised José Ramón, last member of the dynasty.

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[422] Alejandro Velasco, *Barrio Rising: Urban Popular Politics and the Making of Modern Venezuela* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), xiii.

[423] Tomasi di Lampedusa, *Il Gattopardo*, (Universale Economica, 2019 [1958]), 50

[424] The conflict between regionalism and centralism, as in much of Latin America, has been a key political debate in Venezuela since before Independence. It was the cause of the Federal War, and forms one of the bases of Vallenilla Lanz's essay.

[425] In 1985, Herrera Luque published a satirical story titled 'Los peces de Miraflores' in *Momento* magazine. It relates how Víctor Gonzalo Machado, a sycophant of Carlos Andrés Pérez, grew tired of being embarrassed by

This epilogue, however, further problematises the conclusions that Herrera Luque draws. It is set in 1975, the year of the novel's publication, and depicts a scene in which José Ramón Machado is travelling to Houston by aeroplane, accompanied by the mysterious Jimmy – a wealthy American businessman with unspecified financial interests in Venezuela and an unusually thorough knowledge of the nation's history – while complaining about domestic problems caused by oil prices and by Carlos Andrés Pérez (who, at this point, was beginning to earn Herrera Luque's enmity). Jimmy pranks José Ramón by dressing in a white *manta* and claiming to be *Ella*, at which point the aeroplane explodes mid-air, leaving only traces in the sea.

The exact meaning and purpose of this epilogue is rather enigmatic. Its tone is jocular, even sarcastic at points – almost inappropriately so, given the abrupt explosion at the end. The cause of this is unspecified, though Jimmy's rumoured CIA ties perhaps point to sabotage. Targeted assassination attempts on Latin American political figures were by no means unheard of during this period,[426] though quite why José Ramón would be a target is uncertain. What is apparent is that this event ends the Blanco-Machado dynasty's existence in dramatic fashion, thereby ensuring a break with the repetitions and cycles of Venezuela's *historia detenida* – but whether Herrera Luque, at this point still a reasonably loyal centre-left *adeco*, would truly have called for violent action to overthrow Venezuela's oligarchic system is an unlikely prospect. Núñez regards the novel's ending as cautiously optimistic, claiming that it invites the reader to 'considerar que sean posibles las esperanzas en un nuevo orden antidictatorial',[427] while also pointing out that it proves that 'la situación política no acumula los rigores del pasado'.[428] The epilogue undoubtedly anticipates

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the fish's jets of water, and gave it as a gift to the president. The statue is moved to Miraflores and remodelled into the four fish that adorn the fountain in the presidential palace's courtyard. The writer was, it seems, tired of visitors to Miraflores erroneously assuming that the inspiration for *En la casa del pez* emerged from that building (Lovera, 573).

[426] Coincidentally, during the production of the present thesis the disappearance of an aeroplane involving a Chavista general triggered a frenzy of interest on Venezuelan social media, with all manner of conspiracy theories involving drug trafficking and intragovernmental grudges being aired (Cristóbal Picón Ball, 'A Jet Crashes into the Sea and Sparks a Venezuelan Narco-Intrigue', in *Caracas Chronicles,* 13th June 2025, https://www.caracaschronicles.com/2025/06/13/a-jet-crashes-into-the-sea-and-sparks-a-venezuelan-narco-intrigue/ [accessed 14th June 2025].

[427] Núnez, 69.

[428] Ibid.

Herrera Luque's later anxiety and pessimism about the viability of the *puntofijista* state – an anxiety central to his next (and final) biographical novel – and serves as a neat, if implausible, end to the atemporal, self-mythifying stagnation of modern Venezuelan history. We also detect within it the final conciliation of the oligarchy, legitimate governmental authority, and national and global economic interests into one monolith of power; a synthesis, of sorts. This amalgamation might attempt to resolve the central rivalry between the *mantuanos* and Gómez, but it leaves a fundamental question unanswered.

In *La fábrica de la memoria*, a 1997 study on modern Latin American historical novels, the critic Peter Elmore identifies an essential question at the heart of these works.

> Que el centro de gravedad del texto recaiga en una figura histórica capital o en un personaje menor y transitivo se debe, fundamentalmente, a cómo se conteste esta pregunta crucial: ¿Qué tipo humano representa mejor a una época?[429]

This and similar questions posed significant problems for Herrera Luque before, during and after the composition and publication of *En la casa del pez*. Was Gómez the man – around whose biography the mosaic of *microhistorias* revolve – to be the primary subject of his analysis, or the very institution of the oligarchy? Did the Andean dictator or the Machado family more accurately represent and more actively shape the decades that Herrera Luque wished to depict? Most pertinently, how might his depiction of this period reflect and develop his literary concerns around Venezuelan history and nationhood?

Herrera Luque seems always to have sought neat, succinct answers to these questions – and to have understated the complexity of the literary processes by which he did so. Indeed, the novel is beset by internal structural, stylistic and generic incongruities. Herrera Luque's characterisation of the work's structure as a simple converging or intertwining of two plotlines downplays the remarkable stylistic distinctions between the biographical, 'historical' axis and the manifold

[429] Elmore, 29.

Machado family dramas, side plots, anecdotes, popular songs and internal monologues. These, as well as Herrera Luque's inclusion of lucid, digressive, essayistic passages that ruminate on the challenges of government in Venezuela, and his repetitive detailing of political developments – which may be regarded as shortcomings – ensure that *En la casa del pez* remains 'un libro mixto, pese a que su carácter de novela histórica está por encima de todo y nunca se pierde'.[430] There remains a sense of generic indeterminacy within this novelistic framework, and *En la casa del pez* is, consequently, more problematic and perhaps innovative than many critics[431] – and perhaps even its writer – have regarded it to be.

Likewise, many of the work's internal tensions are left unresolved, or open to the judgement of the reader. As is perhaps indicative of the writer's ambivalence towards its dictator protagonist, *En la casa del pez* contains a large number of problematic dualities: the conflict between Gómez the man and his very human internal characterisation and the pervasive myths that surround him is never reconciled, for example. The question of whether Gómez or the oligarchy constitute the focal point for Herrera Luque's scrutiny of the nature of power in Venezuela (a question to which the writer gave inconsistent answers) is left open to interpretation. The fact that these questions are left unresolved is demonstrative of what Gómez *is*: the incarnation of a people 'a mitad de camino entre la barbarie y la civilización' (433), midway between an 'horda' and a 'pueblo culto' (*4RB*, 76). Whether – and how – Venezuela would realise a synthesis of civilisation and barbarism, or elect to pursue one of the two over the other is never specified. Unanswered, too, are the questions of who is the ultimate victor in their decades-long struggle for absolute power and, at the end, what might succeed the system over which they fought for supremacy.

[430] Lovera, 253.

[431] Seymour Menton, for example, sees it as a run-of-the-mill historical novel, despite its not obeying his own 'restriction that all the events of the novel must take place before the author's birth' (Seymour Menton, *Latin America's New Historical Novel* [Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2021], 95).

Chapter Three

Los cuatro reyes de la baraja

> *Un Gladiador, Un Patricio, Un Centurión.* Los nombres se perdieron. En su caso se dirá: "Busto, estatua, de *Un Dictador.*" Fueron tantos y serán tantos todavía, en este hemisferio, que el nombre será de menos.
>
> —Alejo Carpentier[432]

I. Literary Landmarks, Political Developments and Missing Novels

After the publication of *En la casa del pez que escupe el agua* and the furore it provoked, it would be over fifteen years before Herrera Luque again produced a novel about the exercise of power in modern Venezuela. This final novel cannot be understood without a survey of the intervening period, which was a prolific and extremely tumultuous one for the writer – and one in which his political outlook and literary style would evolve dramatically and in tandem.

The first in a series of complicated dramas that assailed Herrera Luque during this period was his ill-fated stint as Venezuela's ambassador to Mexico between 1974 and 1977. He was offered the ambassadorship by Carlos Andrés Pérez, with whom 'había cultivado […] con asiduidad la amistad'.[433] Despite his initial optimism on his appointment (and towards Pérez's government at

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[432] Alejo Carpentier, *El recurso del método*, 3rd edn. (Madrid: Cátedra, 2006 [1974]), 376

[433] Viera Rojas, 107. According to Colomina-Garrigós, Herrera Luque 'mantuvo una estrecha relación con […] Carlos Andrés Pérez, con quien incluso se reunió para comentar *Los cuatro reyes* antes de su publicación, y quien decretó tres días de luto oficial tras el fallecimiento del autor' (María Dolores Colomina-Garrigós, 'La novela

large), the unhappy *trienio* was characterised by an utterly dysfunctional relationship with his foreign ministry colleagues. After his arrival in Mexico City, the new ambassador was astonished to discover brazen acts of criminality carried out within the embassy. In a series of increasingly dismayed letters back to Caracas, he accused his colleagues of such misdemeanours as embezzlement, the theft of state documents, and even the smuggling of narcotics and contraband goods.[434] Though these activities 'eran conocidas por el gobierno',[435] no action was taken, and Herrera Luque's relationship with the foreign ministry deteriorated so precipitously that he found himself unable to discharge his ambassadorial duties. He resigned in late 1976 and returned to Venezuela in December that year, having gone unpaid for three months. Upon the official expiry of his term on 29th January 1977, Pérez – then overseeing the delirious economic boom of the 'Venezuela saudita' period – refused to meet with Herrera Luque, as should have been 'habitual con todo Embajador que culmina su misión'.[436]

That year brought many more troubles for Herrera Luque. Criticism by his former medical colleagues, some incandescent at their being lampooned in *En la casa del pez*, intensified to the point that 'lo llevaron a renunciar a su puesta en la Academia de Medicina'.[437] This was a severe personal and professional blow. In October 1976, Herrera Luque had appeared on the Caracas radio station *Radio Aeropuerto*, run by his future collaborator Napoleón Bravo, to reveal his extraordinary accusations about the foreign ministry's corrupt activities.[438] A press frenzy ensued, and Herrera Luque was eventually compelled to detail these accusations in an extremely uncomfortable appearance before Congress. While these events finalised his transition from well-known scientist and popular author to bona fide public figure and political commentator, he apparently feared serious political reprisals – even assassination – as a result. This was a turning point for Herrera Luque politically; he had always been rather pessimistic by nature, and his heart condition had

latinoamericana del dictador: Un estudio de la autoridad discursiva' [Doctoral thesis, University of Michigan, 2003], 91). However, the relationship was evidently a complex and volatile one, at least from the writer's end – the reasons for which will be elucidated over the course of the present chapter.

[434] Viera Rojas, 118.

[435] Lovera, 276.

[436] Ibid.

[437] Verde Arocha, 20.

[438] Lovera, 370.

afforded him a keen sense of his own mortality, but one detects here a decisive disillusionment with the Venezuelan democratic project. This was 'uno de los períodos más difíciles de la vida de […] Herrera Luque'.[439] In one letter, he said:

> A finales de 1977, me encontré sin cargo, ni dinero, ni prestigio. Era perseguido por las huestes del más grande autócrata que haya conocido Venezuela en cincuenta años.[440] Ser mi amigo era lo mismo que declararse enemigo del gobierno. La gente rehuía mi trato. Invitaciones a matrimonios de mis allegados no se producían. Estaba en la inopia y desorientado. No tenía reservas económicas, ni confianza en mi destino profesional para abrir por mi cuenta un consultorio.[441]

The emotional toll was worse than this, however, as the following diary entry reveals:

> El Presidente Pérez me ha humillado y cubierto de oprobrio como nadie hasta ahora lo había hecho ni me pude imaginar por un momento. Hasta la fecha se ha negado a recibirme como Embajador que regresa. El golpe ha sido duro. Estoy cansado de sufrir. Cada vez más pienso en suicidarme.[442]

This despondent period proved fleeting, however, and Herrera Luque eventually returned to writing, but his subsequent works display a palpably fatalistic attitude[443] towards the problems inherent in Venezuelan history and society. His focus turned more sharply to elucidating the country's supposed congenital defects that his psychiatric work (and *Boves*) had sought to identify. During the late 1970s and 1980s, Herrera Luque's style matured significantly, and he at last began to attain the critical appreciation that had for so long eluded him. It seems that as his political cynicism increased, so did his skill as a novelist. In 1979, he completed *Los amos del Valle* (on which he had been working since his Mexican stint), a two-volume epic that takes the form of a dream-like, hallucinated journey through Venezuelan history on which *mantuano* Don Juan Manuel Blanco is taken immediately prior to his death. The framing narrative employs a multitude of shapeshifting narrators and disembodied voices from across the highly stratified society of pre-independence

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439 Lovera, 293.

440 Herrera Luque had a flair for hyperbole. Here he is referring to Carlos Andrés Pérez.

441 Herrera Luque, letter to Starosta, 714.

442 Lovera, 456.

443 This outlook might have been in part informed by the death of his brother in 1983.

Venezuela.[444] This is the final instalment of the Blanco-Machado 'trilogy', and in it Herrera Luque increasingly eschews the lengthy passages of dry historical data that hinder parts of *Boves* and *En la casa del pez*.

In 1983, he turned to an even earlier period – the Welser-backed exploration and colonisation of Klein-Venedig in the early 1500s – with *La luna de Fausto*. Critics have generally believed this to bear many hallmarks of the 'new historical novel'[445] and to be Herrera Luque's magnum opus, with Márquez Rodríguez effusively terming it 'sin duda su obra más lograda, y una de las más importantes novelas de carácter histórico que se han escrito en Venezuela, y en general en lengua castellana'.[446] This novel coincided, moreover, with Herrera Luque's break with the '*best-sellerismo* al que el autor, si bien no en forma intencional, ha estado vinculado'.[447] Jiménez notes that 'todas las novelas que precedieron a *La luna de Fausto* fueron virtuales *best-sellers* locales […] pero la crítica académica siempre le negó el reconocimiento, al considerarlo casi un autor comercial',[448] while Márquez Rodríguez states that 'en esta novela Herrera Luque asumió su rol de novelista con una conciencia profesional mucho más acendrada que en las demás'.[449] Herrera Luque himself stated that this work 'es la que ha merecido la mayor crítica literaria en todo el mundo pero no ha sido tan popular como los otros'.[450] Though formally rather orthodox and formulaically structured in the same way as Herrera Luque's earlier works, its success is found in its multi-layered thematic interplay between reason and madness, rationality and the occult, and the respective folkloric mythologies of Europe and the Americas which 'mix to give shape to the New World'[451] – though

[444] There has been a smattering of recent interest in this work. Perhaps more than any other of Herrera Luque's novels, it adheres to his oft-repeated desire to provide alternative perspectives on dominant historical narratives, subverting canonical *mantuano* perspectives by affording narrative authority to characters belonging to Venezuela's underrepresented racial and social groups.
[445] José Antonio Rodríguez, 'New Visions of the Past: Reinterpretations of History in the Novel and Cinema of Contemporary Venezuela' (Doctoral thesis, State University of New York, 2017), 17.
[446] Márquez Rodríguez, *Historia y ficción*…, 229.
[447] Márquez Rodríguez, *Acción y pasión*…, 140
[448] Gonzalo Jiménez, 'Una obsesión llamada Felipe de Hutten', in Jesús Sanoja Hernández, *50 imprescindibles* (Caracas: Fundación para la cultura urbana, 2002), 25-30 (26).
[449] Márquez Rodríguez, *Historia y ficción*…, 235.
[450] Moody, 43.
[451] Rodríguez, 106.

the focus on insanity again betrays his 'fundamento pesimista'[452] at the circumstances of Venezuela's birth. A comparable pessimism was found in his next novel, *Manuel Piar, caudillo de dos colores* (1987), which takes as its subject a grim moment in Venezuelan history: one 'no solo […] conocido y debatido por los historiadores y miembros de las distintas academias e instituciones educativas, sino también por la gente común, y ello sin un especial conocimiento de los hechos'.[453] This work is meticulously researched and is, to a degree, generically indeterminate; it is an investigative study aimed at deciding '¿quién fue realmente Manuel Piar? ¿Hasta dónde llegaban sus ansias de poder? ¿Planeaba efectivamente una insurrección del grupo de color contra los blancos?'[454] and ascertaining whether Piar was related to Simón Bolívar, who infamously ordered his execution. One notes in *Manuel Piar* a departure from the strict temporal lineality that characterises Herrera Luque's earlier works; it begins with its protagonist's sentencing and death, and moves forwards and backwards in time, while alternating between a rounded character-driven plot and the scrutiny of historical data. The overriding impression created by this novel, however, is that of 'the tragedy inherent in the foundering young nation'.[455] This tragedy is the same one explored in *Boves*: that the racial tensions of colonial Venezuela (the doomed Piar's proposition is that 'no es posible que cien mil blancos continúen tiranizado a un millón de pardos y negros' [*MP*, 99]) were left unresolved from the outset, allowed to fester and to corrode the framework of the modern state centuries later.

These novels are perhaps Herrera Luque's most accomplished in aesthetic terms. All are deserving of further critical attention, and will, I hope, be the subject of future studies. What is palpable within them for our purposes, however, is the way in which Venezuela's problems and contradictions are increasingly presented as indelible and irresoluble, the point of failure established as occurring right at the outset. They mirror the writer's own growing pessimism at the trajectory of his nation.

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[452] Márquez Rodríguez, *Historia y ficción…,* 240

[453] Machuca, 77.

[454] Alicia Chibán, 'De genealogías y revelaciones: la novela como indagación histórica en Francisco Herrera Luque', in Patrick Collard and Rita de Maeseneer, eds., *Murales, figuras, fronteras: Narrativa e historia en el Caribe y Centroamérica* (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2003), pp. 111-122 (113).

[455] Wilson, 121.

There were other works begun during this period that were not completed during his lifetime. *Bolívar en vivo*[456] came to light in 1997, but work on it had started in 1983; in 1985, his work of speculative fiction, *1998*, predicted a second term for Carlos Andrés Pérez that would ultimately bring the Venezuelan nation to ruin;[457] and *El vuelo del alcatraz,* an account of Bolívar's struggle to maintain the unity of Gran Colombia, was completed in 1986, though went unpublished until the 2000s.[458] Still other works were never completed: in Mexico, Herrera Luque had begun a research project on piracy in the Caribbean[459] with a view to writing a novel, which did not materialise; in the early 1980s he had planned a biographical work on Gonzalo Barrios, Miguel Otero Silva and Arturo Uslar Pietri, of which he only completed the introduction;[460] and, importantly, a novel on Rómulo Betancourt.

Betancourt was a figure of particular interest to Herrera Luque – 'fue mucho lo que dialogaron y un domingo fueron juntos a Guatire, el lar nativo del expresidente [y] fue constante la correspondencia que cruzaron'[461] – and this work seemed to have reached a more developed stage than the other unfinished pieces did. It might even have been published posthumously were it not for a peculiar crime, since 'durante las horas del velorio de Herrera Luque alguien entró en su biblioteca y hurtó aquellas valiosas cartas'.[462] Herrera Luque's fixation with Betancourt and incomplete novel demonstrate – crucially – an increasing interest with the more recent, rather than remote, past, and with the problems of Venezuela's post-1958 democratic system. He expended much effort across many essays analysing whether Betancourt was a true *caudillo*, and talked glowingly about how he was – as Boves had been – 'tan sólo el brazo ejecutor de una voluntad

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456 This is cast as an imaginary interview between Bolívar and Herrera Luque and Otero Silva, who are out for dinner with their wives in the Amadeo restaurant in Caracas in 1956 when an old man of implausibly advanced age metamorphoses into the Liberator. Much of the work is written in rather tongue-in-cheek fashion (the two writers burst into applause whenever he expresses support for their favoured political causes), but the characterisation and appearance of Bolívar in this novel presage some of the narratological questions of *Los cuatro reyes de la baraja*, as will be discussed.

457 In what should count as a lesson to all prognosticators, Herrera Luque optimistically predicts that the Venezuelan currency will devalue to just five hundred bolívares to the dollar (*1998*, 42).

458 Viera Rojas, 131.

459 Viera Rojas, 122.

460 Lovera, 577.

461 Lovera, 572.

462 Lovera, 573.

colectiva, subyacente y viva que buscaba su forma' (*BCH*, 63), the very manifestation of contemporary Venezuela ('expresa y conduce con acierto el sentir y la necesidad del país, porque todo el país está contenido en él' [*BCH*, 78]). Betancourt's death in 1981, however, intensified Herrera Luque's pessimism at democratic Venezuela's direction.

Finally, a novel on Bolívar had always been Herrera Luque's ambition ('siempre tuvo la idea de escribir una novela sobre el Libertador'[463]), but again never came to light. This would evidently have taken the form of a novelised biography depicting in particular the uncertain or insufficiently discussed aspects of Bolívar's life: the awakening of his political consciousness, his meeting with San Martín in Guayaquil in 1822, his relationship with Manuela Sáenz, the fracturing of Gran Colombia, and above all his final weeks and months (later recreated, of course, in García Márquez's *El general en su laberinto* [1989]).

Elements of this incomplete work did, however, make it into *La historia fabulada*, which proved to be a crucial antecedent to Herrera Luque's final novel. This was a series of short radio plays produced by Napoleón Bravo and broadcast twice daily on the Caracas station *Radio Rumbos*.[464] These dramas, collated into print versions published between 1981 and 1983, focus on episodes from Venezuelan history and daily life – and on encounters between historical figures. They aim to identify the ways that 'el pueblo venezolano ha expresado su peculiar forma de ser'.[465] There are musings on varied topics such as the origins of popular refrains, flora and fauna, philosophical questions, and, tellingly, on the lack of historical knowledge among the general Venezuela population. The first volume contains three chapters entitled 'De mantuano a Libertador', detailing Bolívar's early travels; the second, a series of mediations on political power titled 'Bolívar en Guayaquil'; and the third, a run of thirteen chapters called 'El Bolívar inédito' that detail the final nine years of his life, and in which Herrera Luque attacks those 'viejos historiadores' who believe that 'El Libertador es infalible' (*HF 3*, 12).

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[463] Lovera, 521.

[464] Napoleón Bravo, '*LA HISTORIA FABULADA de Fco HERRERA LUQUE ("SIN CENSURA, ENTRE GALLINAS")*', online video recording, YouTube, 17th April 2022 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ytck8t2bhm0 [accessed 5th March 2024].

[465] Lovera, 484.

The form of these episodes is illuminating. They are almost all polyphonic, with historical figures' voices intermingling with those of a *Narrador*, who provides running commentary, and an omniscient *Autor*. A given exchange generally begins with an observation or question from this *Autor* ('Para los historiadores adscritos a una determinada corriente filosófica la historia no se repite' [*HF 1*, 71]; 'Nos han reclamado la escasa presencia que tiene en estas *Historias fabuladas* la mujer venezolana. ¿Es que acaso somos unos *machistas* empedernidos, que como buenos criollos, subestimamos al bello sexo?' [*HF 2*, 37]; '¿Sabe usted quién fue la negra Matea?' [*HF 2*, 54], etc.), who also frequently provides closing remarks. This *Autor* figure is depicted as unable or unwilling to provide definitive judgement on the problems discussed by characters and narrators ('Lamentablemente, no te puedo responder' [*HF 1*, 351]) and is explicitly identified with Herrera Luque himself:

> *NARRADOR:* Interesante historia la que cuenta su personaje, doctor Herrera Luque. ¿Hasta qué punto es verdad o ficción su versión sobre el nombre de Caracas?
> *AUTOR:* Yo me lavo las manos. Como dijese hace poco en este programa, los autores no se hacen responsables de lo que digan sus personajes. (*HF 1*, 370)

The formal and thematic properties of the above texts show the emergence of a string of new literary techniques. Aside from their pessimistic standpoint, we see within them the appearance of framing narratives with characters interacting across separate time periods (*Los amos del valle*, *Bolívar en vivo*), a growing interest in the post-1958 Venezuelan state and how its popular will or soul manifests itself (the Betancourt novel), and the presentation of exchanges, often set in classrooms or *tertulias*, in which many characters holding differing opinions are presided over by an authoritative author-figure. All of these would become defining features of his final novel.

Herrera Luque's fatalism deepened throughout the 1980s. His younger son Juan Manuel, a promising medical student, was diagnosed with cancer in 1983 and died four years later – a loss from which the writer 'nunca llegó a recuperarse'[466] and which, his family believed, hastened his

[466] Lovera, 568.

own demise. By the late 1980s, the writer was not only 'infeccionado del abominable virus del descontento',[467] as he told a friend, but had become seriously ill and sensed that he had little time remaining.[468] Simultaneously, the post-1958 *Punto Fijo* consensus had begun sleepwalking toward total collapse. Although Manuel Caballero states that 'se comienzan a sentir los primeros síntomas del agotamiento del modelo económico y social'[469] as early as 1977, the devaluation of the bolívar in 1983 and the ensuing economic crises accelerated this decline. As Tarver and Frederick put it:

> Throughout the 1980s, the Venezuelan government allowed domestic social and economic problems to fester without taking effective corrective steps. This inaction gave rise to greater political instability, a radicalization of certain groups, and the fragmentation of political parties and political participation. As a result, social and economic marginalization, extreme poverty, increased unemployment, and social injustice also increased.[470]

Amid this 'worsening spiral of poverty […] civilian leaders began to look increasingly incompetent and vulnerable',[471] and a 'profunda decepción'[472] at economic woes and rocketing foreign debt spread throughout the country. This eventually necessitated the disastrous implementation of an IMF-backed economic package that precipitated the eruption of the *Caracazo* of 1989 – 'the most massive as well as the most violently suppressed urban protest in Venezuelan history'.[473] These events represented a point of no return for the disintegrating post-1958 two-party system: indeed, 'nothing has been the same in Venezuela since February 1989. The populist version of Venezuelan democracy, which had been controlled by *Acción Democrática* and *COPEI* since 1958, was near extinction'.[474] As Tinker Salas notes, 'assumptions about the nature of an ordered society that had

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467 Lovera, 483.
468 Viera Rojas, 131.
469 Manuel Caballero, *La gestación de Hugo Chávez: 40 años de luces y sombras en la democracia venezolana* (Madrid: Catarata, 2000), 166.
470 H. Micheal Tarver and Julia C. Frederick, *The History of Venezuela* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 142.
471 Richard Gott, *In the Shadow of the Liberator: Hugo Chávez and the Transformation of Venezuela* (London: Verso, 2001), 39.
472 Caballero, *La gestación de Hugo Chávez*, 83.
473 Fernando Coronil and Julie Skurski, 'Dismembering and Remembering the Nation: The Semantics of Political Violence in Venezuela', in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 22, no. 2 (1991), pp. 288-337 (311).
474 Tarver and Frederick, 141.

ameliorated class and racial difference and the viability of its democracy had been shaken. Amid the soul-searching that ensued, Venezuelans faced a new national reality'.[475]

Herrera Luque's longstanding despair at Venezuela's trajectory was proven right amid this explosion of popular unrest. In his final interview, conducted by Andrés Miliani just twenty-six days before his death (and while he was still in the process of finishing *Los cuatro reyes*), he expressed at length his pessimism and anger. He blamed the evil of corruption – a vice, he believed, innate to Venezuelans and to Latin Americans more generally – for the government's breakdown, stating that 'si el Ministro roba, el chofer roba, roba el policía y roba todo el mundo, ya que nos estamos rigiendo por la Ley del menor esfuerzo, con el mayor resultado en el menor tiempo posible. Esta es la ruptura de todas las reglas del juego'.[476] He asserted, too, that 'la corrupción ha acabado con el país, no que está acabando',[477] and that 'si aquí no existe la ley del respeto del derecho ajeno sino la ley más fuerte, el "yo soy más macho que tú". Entonces, no puede funcionar una democracia'.[478] In these statements, an echo of Vallenilla Lanz's desire for a *gendarme necesario* can almost be glimpsed. Herrera Luque had, by this point, repudiated many of his earlier *adeco* principles, supporting the reintroduction of the death penalty and telling Pantín 'soy un hombre de centro izquierda que ha progresado hacia la izquierda'.[479] Astonishingly, having agitated for democracy in Venezuela under the dictatorship of the 1950s and having been exiled to Spain for his troubles, before serving as one of the democratic system's high-ranking functionaries, Herrera Luque stated that 'luché contra Pérez Jiménez y estoy arrepentido. Te lo digo sinceramente, en vista del caos que significa esta democracia nuestra'.[480] In yet another pessimistic interview, he clarified his views somewhat: 'he sido un feroz defensor de la democracia,', he said, 'pero en realidad no creo en la

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[475] Miguel Tinker Salas, *Venezuela: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 120.
[476] Lovera, 734.
[477] Lovera, 735.
[478] Lovera, 729.
[479] Pantín, 699.
[480] Andres Miliani, 'Herrera Luque acusa', in *Diario de los Andes*, 19th March 1991, cited in Lovera, pp. 732-739 (734). This viewpoint is perhaps not as contradictory as it might at first seem, since Hugo Chávez's left-wing government later attempted to rehabilitate Pérez Jiménez somewhat, lauding his populist infrastructure projects while vilifying the rampant capitalist excesses of Punto Fijo system.

nuestra. Está podrida.'[481] Herrera Luque, in failing health and just three weeks from death, could not see a solution to the all-consuming crisis, telling Eskenazi:

> Toma lo que voy a decirte como una profecía de un hombre que posee quinientos años de historia venezolana: estamos en el mes de diciembre de 1990 y estoy convencido de que las cosas no pueden continuar así. La democracia en Venezuela funcionó durante quince años, luego se ha degradado y nos encontramos en un fangal del cual, estoy convencido, es imposible salir por vía eleccionaria.[482]

The novel that was the product of this intense anxiety and pessimism was Herrera Luque's last: he died only one day after completing it.

Los cuatro reyes de la baraja[483] is a curious and prescient novel – perhaps the novel that best defines the concerns of the *Caracazo* period – but has failed to attract even a modicum of critical attention, save for María Dolores Colomina-Garrigós's PhD thesis, a superficial examination by Menton, and brief mentions by Lovera and Viera Rojas. It was stylistically so unlike Herrera Luque that, upon its posthumous publication, many journalists and critics refused to believe that he had even written it.[484] Certainly, its overall aims and intentions are quite distinct from those of his previous works, and *Los cuatro reyes* represents the final attempt of this chronicler of Venezuelan popular history to (re)codify it according to his own views. The depiction of the novel's supposed protagonist, and even the era he inhabited, is consciously limited in scope. The novel's true importance extends far beyond its biographical subject; it is not a character study, or a recreation of a particular period, and is more complex than Lovera's simplistic characterisation of it as 'un examen psicológico de la forma como se ha manejado el poder en Venezuela'.[485] Herrera Luque's conception of Venezuela's political trajectory had, by this point, become calcified. His comparison of four messianic *caudillos* of the post-Independence state to the four 'reyes de la baraja' had

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[481] Margarita Eskenazi, 'A lo mejor alguien me escucha', in *El Diario de Caracas*, 15th April 1992, cited in Lovera, pp. 719-721 (719).
[482] Eskenazi, 720.
[483] Hereinafter *Los cuatro reyes*.
[484] Lovera, 623.
[485] Lovera, 626.

apparently begun to develop before the publication of *En la casa del pez*, but by the late 1980s it dominated his historical outlook. He described this theory to Miliani thus:

> Puedo decir que hay cuatro hombres llamados "Providenciales" alrededor de los cuales ha girado la vida venezolana desde 1830 hasta la fecha. El primero es José Antonio Páez, el segundo es Antonio Guzmán Blanco, el tercero Juan Vicente Gómez y el cuarto Rómulo Betancourt. Ahora, yo centro mi atención particularmente sobre Guzmán Blanco, siempre en referencia a los otros tres.[486]

Herrera Luque himself regarded this novel as the culmination of his readings of Venezuelan history: when asked when he had begun to write *Los cuatro reyes*, he replied 'Yo creo que desde que empecé a leer historia de Venezuela',[487] and that he had 'conocimientos que arrastro desde tiempos immemoriales sobre Guzmán Blanco'.[488] This, his final public comment, significantly underplays the complexity of the novel. For despite its focus on Guzmán Blanco, the novel is really not about him at all: the Illustrious American is (far more so than are Boves and Gómez) merely an entry point into profound and explicit discussions of an idiosyncratic historical and political theory about which Herrera Luque had not previously written at any great length. Instead of relying on an omniscient narrator, as previously, these discussions take place within the novel in the form of a *tertulia*, or social gathering for the purpose of intellectual conversation, presided over by a mysterious narrator-figure known as El Viejito or El Poeta.

The present chapter identifies the manifold problems raised by Herrera Luque's enigmatic final novel through four avenues of investigation. The first section will dissect the novel's framing narrative and focus on questions of structure and narration, chief among them the identity of the novel's narrator, El Viejito, and the function and effectiveness of the *tertulia* conceit. The second section analyses at length the novel's central *eje biográfico*. The positioning of Guzmán Blanco as the work's key focus is problematic, not least given Herrera Luque's well-documented hatred of his legacy and disdain for the values that characterised the period of his political ascendancy. Why, for

[486] Miliani, 732.
[487] Lovera, 734.
[488] Ibid.

example, was a biographical novel of the by then largely irrelevant Guzmán regarded as timely in the fraught sociopolitical atmosphere of 1991 Venezuela? How, and how compellingly, does Herrera Luque characterise him – and why? What, if anything, does he represent in the broader course of Venezuelan history? The chapter's third section then casts *Los cuatro reyes* as a codifying novel: one that attempts to re-cast and revise Venezuelan history according to Herrera Luque's own views. The final section analyses the novel as an *abecedario de buen gobierno* – what Lovera terms 'una especie de *Manual*, una suerte de anti-Maquiavelo criollo'[489] – and an inadvertently prophetic piece of writing, aiming to identify how Herrera Luque conceives of an 'end to history' in Venezuela.[490]

II. Structure, Narrative and Framing

The structure of *Los cuatro reyes* sets it strikingly apart from Herrera Luque's earlier works. Only the rudimentary framing narratives of *Boves* and *Los amos del Valle*, and the chronology of *Manuel Piar*, diverged slightly from their essential narrative linearity. He had always preferred, moreover, the use of a single, omniscient narrator, while a fastidiously accurate narrative chronology always foregrounded his meticulous historical research. Only narrative *perspective* ever tended to vary. *Los cuatro reyes*, however, is significantly more complex, containing a plurality of time frames and ambiguously demarcated diegetic levels. The biography of Guzmán Blanco is *ostensibly* its 'parábola vital'[491] and, like that of Gómez in *En la casa del pez*, this allows Herrera Luque to link together otherwise largely disparate ideas and themes. The novel is divided into three books: 'Remembranzas de agonía' (five chapters, comprised of episodes from Guzmán's youth), 'Vuela, vuela, Gavilán' (six chapters, relating his increasing political involvement), and 'El Ilustre Americano' (six chapters on Guzmán's attaining, discharging, and loss of power). The novel's 'present', meanwhile, is set in the decisive final months of Pérez Jiménez's dictatorship in 1957.

[489] Lovera, 624.
[490] I use this (perhaps rather over-used) term deliberately. Unlike in the works of Fuentes, his major influence, the notion of Apocalypse does not feature in Herrera Luque's later novels.
[491] Lovera, 629.

The presentation of Guzmán's biography, which Herrera Luque intended to be 'una visión de la totalidad, una vision del conjunto, un desarollo coherente'[492] is likewise metadiegetic. It is narrated by the enigmatic figure of El Viejito to a motley *tertulia* of middle-aged men, Ticoté and Chucho, two university students studying for upcoming exams, and, occasionally, a threatening member of the secret police, on a series of evenings in the Plaza del Panteón in central Caracas – a location laden with historical and political significance.

The framing narrative is more developed and nuanced than those of the earlier work. The two narrative threads continually interrupt each other without warning, as *tertulieros* express opinions on the events El Viejito recounts in 1957 or begin political debates that are often left unresolved as the narrator plunges back into his storytelling. Naturally, this enables the drawing of comparisons between the two time periods and for spontaneous evaluations of the self-styled *Ilustre Americano*'s life, as well as for reflections on how individual events illuminate greater questions within the context of Venezuelan history, as well as in more broadly Latin American and universal terms.

The novel's structure, the identity of its narrators, and even its temporal and geographical setting are not immediately made apparent. Herrera Luque opens his novel in a consciously disorientating fashion: the opening scene comes neither from the framing *tertulia* nor from the lifetime of the supposed protagonist, Guzmán Blanco. Rather, it starts *in medias res* with a somewhat clichéd 1928 encounter between Juan Vicente Gómez and Rómulo Betancourt during the student protests of that year. The men recognise each other across a small plaza on a misty night:

> Sus ojos de cuchillo horadaron la niebla. Un joven con la misma edad de su dictadura, se detuvo, manos esposadas, en el umbral del cuartel El Cuño. (9)

The identity of this young figure is at first only hinted at, before the perspective abruptly shifts to that of Betancourt:

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[492] Miliani, 732.

> Sus gafas redondas, de miope, no entontecían aquella mirada, que dirigía a la borrosa silueta sentada al otro lado de la calle, en el único banco de la plazuela triangular. (9)

The two are identified only upon recognising each other. The opening uncertainty of the novel is accentuated by impediments to their sight: the darkness, the fog, and Betancourt's short-sightedness. They are introduced via exposition:

> —Ese hombre que está allí —dijo a sus camaradas— es Juan Vicente Gómez, el sátrapa del Caribe, el más grande y carnicero déspota nacido jamás en la patria de Bolívar.
> —¡Es Rómulo, el hijo de Luis Betancourt, el isleño!—afirmó, a un lado del General, Don Antonio, su mayor amigo y confidente.— ¿Quién me hubiese podido decir, luego de haber sido tan buen estudiante y fundamentoso, que terminara de mala manera?
> —No ha terminado —sentenció grave el tirano—, apenas comienza. (9)

Subsequently, the framing narrative is very rudimentarily introduced, before we return to Gómez – this time telling Don Antonio of a comparable encounter he had as a young man with Guzmán Blanco, whom he also did not initially recognise, in 1872. Shortly after, there follows an account of a dying Guzmán learning of the success of Castro and Gómez's coup in 1899.

Herrera Luque's disclosure of where, how, and to whom these accounts are related is gradual. All of the above encounters are revealed to be related by 'El Viejo del Panteón a los tertulieros' (249) – that is, 'los cuatro hombres de mediana edad que conformaban el corro que todas las tardes se reunía en la Plaza del Panteón' (9-10). This is redolent from the outset of the literary gatherings, arguments and classroom discussions that occur between the various *voces* and characters of *La historia fabulada*, with El Viejito taking on the same role of the *Autor* in those plays, furnishing *Los cuatro reyes* with a didactic undertone. Herrera Luque is careful to introduce a stark disparity in knowledge and intellect between the speaker and his listeners: the *tertulieros* are often unable to grasp much of what their companion is saying, and 'dieron señales de asentimiento, como lo hacían cuando el Poeta, como decidieron llamarlo, desglosaba opiniones ininteligibles' (10).

Initially, Herrera Luque only hints at *when* this *tertulia* is taking place. The conversations occur in the evenings, in the shadow of the Panteón at an unspecified point in 1957 – only disclosed by El Viejito's account of Guzmán's learning of the *invasión andina* 'cincuenta y ocho años atrás' (13). Its participants are minimally characterised. Herrera Luque provides barely any details about them, other than their approximate age, habits, and basic viewpoints. They are not friends, but merely 'aquellos cuatro individuos sin más cosa en común que sus años y un tiempo sobrancero' (10), and are little more than types, differentiated only by their contrasting opinions on democracy and dictatorship in Venezuela – though these are not always internally consistent. El Quincallero is a 'cripto adeco' (56) and 'secreto admirador de Betancourt' (79) and thus 'temoroso de ocurrencias peligrosas' (17). 'El de la Nariz Roja', with whom El Quincallero occasionally appears interchangeable (undoubtedly a result of the circumstances of the novel's completion – both enjoy drinking too much *chicha*), is described as 'sospechoso de veleidades democráticas' (27) at one point, and prone to 'apuntalando […] su fama de demócrata' (36) later. Other *tertulieros* are more pro-Gómez and his immediate successors. El Diplomático exhibits 'un rictus de contrariedad por el mal glosar que se hacía de El Benemérito' (10), praising López Contreras and Medina Angarita as they allegedly 'hicieron nacer en Venezuela al siglo XX. Con ellos se acabaron los presidios politicos y las torturas. Cesó la arbitrariedad y el abuso de poder' (79). Meanwhile, 'un hombre cetrino de grandes bigotes al que llamaban el Señor de las Sillas' (10) and 'admirador de Gómez y del dictador' (252), states:

> Cuando el General Gómez se podía trabajar; la gente dormía con la puerta de la calle abierta. Yo prefiero la seguridad del Benémerito [sic] y del General Pérez Jiménez, al bochinche de democracia que tuvimos cuando el gobierno de Betancourt. (79)

All of these viewpoints are quite simple ones (the latter being *the* classic argument in favour of authoritarianism). The *tertulieros* are accompanied – at a distance – by Ticoté and Chucho, two 'estudiantes que a cuatro pasos del banco simulaban estudiar en dos silletas de lona' (79) who are initially observers, but who 'rodaban sus silletas a la vera del corro para escuchar sus digresiones' (14). There is an immediate distinction drawn between these characters and the *tertulieros*, largely due to their educated status and age; Chucho and Ticoté mature amid the 'brecha histórica' (77)

of Pérez Jiménez's fall and Betancourt's return, while the others' outlooks were forged during the later Gómez period. The two are far less credulous than the *tertulieros* and have a vastly more comprehensive understanding of Venezuelan history, often distrusting El Viejito as he makes claims 'para confusión de los tertulieros, y burla de los estudiantes' (13-14). Chucho views them 'despectivamente' (254) and the idealist Ticoté brands the group 'más fastidioso que un sólo de tamborón. ¡Qué gente más pedestre, que falta de sentido épico, de vuelo imaginativo, de trascendencia en la evocación!' (254). Indeed, they come across as rather cynical and disrespectful. Chucho speaks with a 'tono irrespetuoso' (95), attacking El Viejito as 'un viejo mendaz, que abusa de nuestra ignorancia' (42). Both make impetuous interjections and notably pessimistic evaluations of Venezuelan politics.

Despite their dismissive attitude, Herrera Luque – implicitly for the greater part of the novel, then openly at its conclusion – invites the reader to identify with the two students. This is indicated by the fact that, El Viejito aside, all the *tertulieros*' nicknames are bestowed by Chucho and Ticoté themselves, affording them a level of narratorial authority. This is not altogether surprising, since some aspects of their characterisation suggest, for Colomina-Garrigós, 'el carácter semi-autobiográfico de la novela'.[493] Indeed, as Herrera Luque stated (and as Colomina-Garrigós, Verde Arocha, and Lovera have all noted in their analyses of the novel), Herrera Luque 'era estudiante a mediados de los cincuenta [y] solía acudir a la Plaza del Panteón y participó en manifestaciones estudiantiles contra el regimen de Jiménez'.[494] With respect to Ticoté (and it should not escape our notice that Herrera Luque dedicated the novel to his recently born grandson of the same name), whose pithy observation on Venezuela's uncertain future closes the novel, Lovera quite unambiguously states that 'el autor […] es Ticoté, que tiene la misma edad que Herrera Luque tenía en el momento de sucederse los diálogos que sostienen el libro'.[495] One wonders, then, if there is a sense of self-criticism here that transcends crabby complaints from older generations about the disrespect of the young. Herrera Luque's claim to have regretted his opposition to

[493] Colomina-Garrigós, 90.
[494] Ibid.
[495] Lovera, 630.

perezjimenismo casts Ticoté in a quite different light; contemporary readers would have judged his youthful optimism against the dissolution of the system whose arrival he hails.

Around the group floats the symbolic embodiment of the dictator's 'intricate network of espionage'[496] in the form of the malevolent (but, until the last chapter, ineffectual) presence of El Gavilán, 'un tipo flaco, mal encarado y larguirucho, del que se decía era esbirro de la Seguridad Nacional, la temida policía política del dictador' (257).[497] El Gavilán does not surveil each meeting of the *tertulia* – indeed, which fragments of the novel correspond to each individual reunion of the group is ambiguous – and appears as a background figure, intervening only sporadically and thus acting as a latent but ever-present warning of the dangers of candid political expression under Pérez Jiménez. Though he keeps the others in a state of 'temor' (70), he is limited to disapproving looks and admonitory comments. La Nariz Roja's praise of Betancourt only engenders 'filosos odios en El Gavilán' (36), and the not-so-secret policeman's apparent menace is nonchalantly disregarded on many occasions ('Cuide su lengua, mi don; si quiere evitarse problemas —observó acre El Gavilán, luego de esgarrar y escupir en el suelo. El Anciano, despues de mirarlo largamente, prosiguió' [70]; '¿Qué quiere decir con eso, mi don? —preguntó cejijunto El Gavilán. El Señor de las Sillas desvió la interpelación' [79]). El Gavilán's apparent ineffectiveness seems to be a deliberate choice by Herrera Luque, a means of emphasising the regime's crumbling authority in 1957. El Viejito muses on Pérez Jiménez's ephemerality even before his removal from power, noting that 'Pérez Jiménez, a excepción del terror que ha impuesto con el esbirro de Pedro Estrada, no ha podido echar marcha atrás los logros sociales y politicos que impusiera Betancourt tras su fugaz mandato' (252). In a more recent text, the journalist and politician Simón Alberto Consalvi referred to 1957 as *El año en que los venezolanos perdieron el miedo* (2007) and, as Alexander puts it:

> Dictators can afford to be deeply feared and widely hated, if they have an efficient apparatus of coercion and terror. But they cannot afford to be regarded as ridiculous, to

496 Robert J. Alexander, *Rómulo Betancourt and the Transformation of Venezuela* (Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1982), 387.

497 This detail is repeated almost word-for-word several times throughout the novel, which might either be Herrera Luque labouring the point or a mistake that would have been redacted had the book been edited properly.

> be universally laughed at by the victims of their tyranny. This was the situation Pérez Jiménez faced [in] December 1957.[498]

A key aspect of the framing narrative is how Herrera Luque depicts the growing political crisis that consumes Pérez Jiménez's regime. Signs that something is afoot build throughout the novel as the dictator's grasp on power slips. After the novel's haphazard opening, El Viejito's account of Guzmán's childhood only just gets underway before it is cut off by the following interruption (one of many such devices used to ground the story in the novelistic present):

> Un ulular de sirena policial cortó la atención de los concurrentes a la Plaza del Panteón y silenció al Poeta.
> —¿Qué será lo que está pasando esta tarde? —preguntó el Señor de las Sillas.
> —Cuando el río suena… —acotó El Diplomático, cortando abruptamente al verle el rostro adusto de El Gavilán. (17)

Following this, 'el anciano [retoma] la palabra' (17), continuing largely uninterrupted until another near-identical episode cuts him off, drawing the action back to 1957 with 'un estruendo de sirenas y de motos' (27) that leads El de la Nariz Roja to comment that 'las cosas como que están revueltas' (27) and El Gavilán to curtail the conversation, again alerting the reader to the backdrop of rising political turmoil. It is worth noting that Pérez Jiménez's government is associated throughout the novel with sound: the *ulular* mentioned here, the radio broadcasts at the end, and the 'silencioso ominoso' (56) that follows Chucho's comments on the fall of Rómulo Gallegos in 1948. The framing narrative is imbued with many more subtle indications of Pérez Jiménez's own imminent ouster,[499] including persistent references to the onset of winter. In Chapter Four, we see that the evenings are drawing in and 'está haciendo frío' (56):

> El sol del atardecer sacó a la cúpula del Panteón sus postreros brillos, en el momento en que la banda marcial del San Carlos presentaba sus honores a la bandera.
> —¡Las seis de la tarde! —exclamó con un dejo de nostalgia El Quincallero, mientras se encendían las luces del alumbrado que circundaban la plaza. (56)

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[498] Alexander, 387.

[499] This eventually occurred on 23rd January 1958.

This suggests that the *tertulia* takes place around the time of Pérez Jiménez's disastrous plebiscite in December 1957; the sun only begins to set before 6pm in Caracas in early November. The opening of Chapter Twelve, which itself relates the downfall of Guzmán's regime (creating parallels with the twilight of that of his 20th-century successor) is atmospheric and evocative, underlining the onset of winter.

> Un frescor húmedo bajaba del Ávila. El Señor de las Sillas fue a su casa en busca de una bufanda. El quincallero [sic] se subió las solapas hasta el cuello. Los estudiantes bebieron las últimas gotas de café caliente del termo de cinco reales, y el de La Nariz Roja de bebedor se echó un trago de su mulita de ron. Tan solo El Diplomático y El Poeta, con su delgada indumentaria de lino blanco, permanecieron imperturbables. (165)

From this point onwards, all meetings occur at twilight. The novel's action accelerates: El Viejito's narration of the final part of Guzmán's biography is related rapidly and without much detail, as are the events that eventually toppled Pérez Jiménez. The seismic collapse of the latter autocrat's regime is confined entirely to the novel's climactic final chapter, and is tellingly prefaced by a comment from Timoleón – a working-class patient of Ticoté's and 'un venezolano digno, honrado y trabajador' (255) – who notes that 'nunca está más oscuro que cuando está a punto de despuntar el sol' (255).[500] After El Viejito's disappearance midway through this chapter, a stylistic shift occurs: immediate, pressing circumstances in 1957 supersede the abruptly concluded life story of Guzmán Blanco in their resonance. The short, pithy sentences with which Herrera Luque usually describes matters of historical importance are (mercifully) almost entirely absent from the framing narrative itself, which is mainly character-driven and typified predominantly by direct speech. Here, however, that style begins to intrude. Herrera Luque shifts from the preterite to the present tense, and includes reams of factual historical writing that is barely novelised. The precise moment at which the characters learn of the fall of Pérez Jiménez, for example, is described thus:

> La BBC de Londres informa que la situación es grave para el gobierno de Venezuela.

[500] This phrasing could represent an uncharacteristically hopeful comment from Herrera Luque if applied to the political climate of the early 1990s, otherwise filled with gloom.

> A la medianoche arrecian los disparos y los cohetes con luces de bengala. Caracas parece festejar nuevamente el Año Nuevo.
> Tiros de fusil y de metralletas se escuchan en todas las direcciones. En medio del estruendo que hace de Caracas una solitaria verbena, los rugidos de un potente avión que cruza el cielo llena el aire de preguntas.
> Arrecian los disparos, cesan la música sacra. Hay presurosas llamadas a la atención por las radios y televisoras del país, seguidas de angustiosas pausas.
> Luego de quince minutos, una voz juvenil, atropellada de entusiasmo, suelta la gran noticia:
> —¡El Dictador ha huido en La Vaca Sagrada, el avión presidencial! La libertad ha retornado a Venezuela. Una junta cívico-militar se ha encargado del gobierno.
> Los estudiantes, gozosos, corren hacia la plaza. Los vecinos, en pijama, se aglomeran frente a sus casas. Jubilosos y entre ellos el señor de las sillas se abrazan entusiastas [sic]. Las radios a todo volumen disparan noticias. Luego de largas palabrerías de ocasión, se escucha el himno nacional. (258-59)

Even disregarding the final question asked by Herrera Luque, which closes the novel and to which I shall return presently, the novel's ending – rather like that of *El otoño patriarca* – is ambivalent. It is imbued with a sense of irony, and that these celebrations will be short-lived. Some *tertulieros*, having previously been rounded up by El Gavilán, reappear, and Herrera Luque's account of the 1958 revolution (no doubt much of it replicated from his memory) accords with Uslar Pietri's view that 'No fue este un movimiento de un partido, ni de un grupo, ni de una clase, ni tuvo ni siquiera un comando central reconocido'[501].

It is at this point that El Viejito, presumed imprisoned or worse, makes a reappearance, looking down on the crowds from the Panteón 'a un lado del gran portal de bronce' (259) before closing the door behind him and lighting 'la lámpara votiva al pie del sarcófago del Libertador' (259), towards which he walks and disappears into the shadows with an 'ademán de despedida' (260). It is worth taking some time to analyse the novel's mysterious narrator here. El Viejito is the most enigmatic figure in any of Herrera Luque's novels, and 'se han tejido numerosas controversias'[502] around whom, or what, he represents.

[501] Cited in Caballero, *La gestación de Hugo Chávez*, 20.
[502] Lovera, 629.

El Viejito is afforded complete authority over Guzmán Blanco's biography. Within his recounting of it, he is an omniscient narrator, his listeners even noting that he speaks 'como si fuese depositario de grandes confidencias del Ilustre Americano' (107). As Colomina-Garrigós notes, however, his contributions extend beyond the fact that he narrates Guzmán's life. More importantly, he is responsible for making the comparisons between separate historical eras:

> El Viejito es el que proporciona la mayor cantidad de información en la novela: no sólo es el narrador de los dos metarrelatos sobre Guzmán Blanco y Gómez, donde ofrece su versión histórica de éstos y otros personajes históricos, sino que también es el que principalmente emite juicios sobre la situación política actual, bajo la dictadura de Pérez Jiménez, y quien establece paralelismos entre el régimen político presente y otros anteriores.[503]

Herrera Luque casts El Viejito as an authoritative and self-professedly impartial narrator. He describes himself as keen to avoid any value judgements, stating that 'yo no estoy juzgando […] qué fue mejor; si el gobierno dictatorial o la democracia' (79). He is, furthermore, a skilled storyteller with seemingly boundless historical knowledge: the fact that 'habla con la emoción del que cuenta a un ciego lo que está viendo y viviendo' (90) again underscores the discrepancy between his knowledge and that of his *contertulieros*. His storytelling abilities provide comfort to his companions, offering them 'mutuo calor en sus frías soledades' (254) and even a form of protection from the dictatorship: perturbed by the sirens and threatened by El Gavilán in Chapter One, El Quincallero urges him to 'siga con su cuento, mi don' (17), while after another menacing action from the policeman in Chapter Two he '[ataja] un promisor altercado' (27). There is a metafictional point to be made here. Herrera Luque demonstrates to the reader that literature – in this case, the novelising of history by El Viejito – can itself prove to be a tonic, however momentary, for Venezuela's ills.

El Gavilán shows a particularly intense interest in El Viejito, 'mirando con atención' (76) his movements and, near the novel's conclusion, attempts to detain him on orders from Pedro Estrada as 'un peligroso enemigo del General' (257). The reasons for this interest in an unremarkable old

[503] Colomina-Garrigós, 103.

man with no obvious connections to subversive activity is not explained beyond his having made vaguely positive comments about Betancourt. But little about El Viejito is explained at all, and his very identity is a matter of conjecture. None of the *tertulieros* ever learn his true name, telling El Gavilán:

> —Nunca nos dijo su nombre ni se lo preguntamos, como es propio de gente bien educada. Es un hombre de edad indefinida, que lo mismo podía tener cincuenta años mal vividos que la edad de Matusalén. (257)

Herrera Luque raises doubts about his identity from the outset, and these are emphasised in sometimes excessive fashion. Two of El Viejito's overriding characteristics are his liking for making predictions about the future (he rightly prophesies Betancourt's return 'tal como volvió de nuevo José Antonio Páez, tras diez años de exilio' [54]) and his claims to have been present at historical events in the distant past – far outside the realms of credibility, notwithstanding his advanced age. His companions readily accept El Viejito's claim to have witnessed Gómez's 1928 encounter with Betancourt. His subsequent assertion that he was present in Paris with Guzmán Blanco in 1899, however, causes amazement:

> Yo estaba allí cuando llegó el cable procedente de Curazao, donde González Guinán le daba cuentas del triunfo de la revolución andina.
> La afirmación del Viejito de haber estado allí, en París, cincuenta y ocho años atrás, produjo general suspicacia.
> —De haber tenido veinte años para aquel entonces, no podía bajar de setenta y siete —opinó El Diplomático tan pronto se marchó El Poeta.
> —Que aunque los pudiese tener —agregó El Quincallero—, tan solo pudo haberlo hecho de dos formas: como sirviente, que no parece haberlo sido nunca, o como familiar de Guzmán, lo que tampoco, tal es su pobreza digna, pero pobreza, que como la sarna y el amor nunca se puede ocultar. (13)

He later claims to have been a contemporary not only of Guzmán Blanco, but of his father Antonio Leocadio Guzmán, instigating a long description of his timeless appearance and air:

> Era un caso extraño de acentuada senectud física y extremo vigor juvenil. […] Tenía el rostro color de higadillo, la piel se adosaba a su calavera, las mejillas eran enjutas y su

> aspecto frágil y quebradizo. No obstante su aparente debilidad, poseía una voz metálica y resonante, algo chillona y destemplada, con la dicción y acento de los caraqueños de vieja cepa. Tres rasgos destacaban en su cara emaciada: la nariz recta y cortada a cancel, ojos negros vivísimos y fulgurantes, y una dentadura blanca y bien formada que El Diplomático lo atribuyó erróneamente a milagrosos portentos de la odontología. Vestía siempre un traje de dril blanco, que aunque se le ajustaba al cuerpo con elegancia, ya amarilleaba de tanto uso. Cubría su cabeza con una gorra de marino, de corta visera. Su aire adusto, atento y erguido, imperioso al hablar, era a su vez condescendiente con los del corro, sin dejos de altivez. (16-17)

In his absences, the *tertulieros* openly discuss competing theories as to El Viejito's age – which is, for them, 'convertido en un enigma' (42) – and identity, particularly when he claims to have been present in the run-up to the 1859-1863 Federal War ('como si hubiese estado presente en un acontecimiento sucedido hacía ciento diez años' [41]). Chucho simply sees him as a liar; Ticoté talks of 'aldeas donde la gente llega con facilidad a dicha edad, por alimentarse tan sólo de yougurt y de miel' (42); and El Quincallero's hypothesis that 'el anciano podía ser el celebérrimo Conde de San Germain, con mil años de existencia' (42) is met with derision, as is el Señor de las Sillas's tentative belief that he is an 'espectro salido del Panteón Nacional' (42). Their many discussions and Herrera Luque's repeatedly noting their amazement labours the point somewhat. Far more interesting are the subtle indications of El Viejito's fallibility as a narrator and playful, even mendacious, attitude. In Chapter One, he claims to have been present at a meeting between Guzmán and José Antonio Páez in 1843, before instantly withdrawing this assertion:

> —Yo también estaba allí —afirmó una vez más El Poeta, para confusión de todos los tertulieros, y burla de los dos estudiantes, que al arribo de El Viejito rodaban sus silletas a la vera del corro para escuchar sus digresiones.
> —Por supuesto que estaba allí —agregó con suave ironía—, con los ojos del entendimiento y la luz de mi fantasía. (14)

When confronted by Chucho over a discrepancy in his argument, he calmly asks '¿Y qué puede saber por qué no tengo derecho a contradecirme?' (253), and later replies to a question about *how* he has such a range of knowledge with the line 'Yo sé muchas cosas, quizás demasiadas; pero no puedo decir cómo ni cuándo las he sabido' (95). A number of possible interpretations are left open as to how serious and plausible the narrator's claims are – and, consequently, the degree of his

reliability. His extremely advanced age is lent some credence at the end of the novel after the regime and the *tertulia*'s collapse, when Timoleón nervously imparts additional information about El Viejito to Ticoté, despite knowing how outlandish his claims must seem:

> —El caso fue que hace dos jueves, al pasar por aquí, lo vi de lejos hablando con un grupo de señores.
> —Es cierto —repuso picado de curiosidad.
> —En medio del grupo y hablando como un mismo guaro estaba un señor de edad, vestido de blanco y con una gorrita, de las que usaban los marineros viejos.
> —Así es —asintió Ticoté ya impaciente.
> —El caso es —prosiguió valiente Timoleón— que cuando los andinos entraron a Caracas en 1899, y yo tenía trece años, vi a ese mismo viejito, con igual edad que ahora, vestido Tambien de blanco y con idéntica gorrita.
> —¿Cómo está la glucemia, Timoleón? ¿Desde cuando no se hace un examen de sangre? (255)

Ticoté dismisses Timeoleón's account as 'pendejadas de viejo arteriosclerótico' (256) and ascribes it to his diabetic retinopathy, but Timoleón is otherwise cast as a reliable witness, an impoverished though upstanding citizen of Caracas, with no apparent reason to lie.

Certain critics, among them Lovera, have stated unambiguously their belief that El Viejito is an avatar of Bolívar. This is not impossible, given how Bolívar appears in *Bolívar en vivo*: a character called Don Arnulfo talks at length about knowing Antonio Leocadio Guzmán personally ('yo tenía veinticuatro años para aquel entonces. […] Sí, nací en 1864, y estamos en 1956, tengo necesariamente noventa y dos años' [*BV*, 48]). This technique is replicated to a degree in *Los cuatro reyes*. Lovera states that El Viejito is indeed 'el propio Libertador, hijo de su hora y de todas [sic] los minutos republicanos',[504] and the old man's timeless appearance recalls Engel's analysis of the iconographic nature of most artistic depictions of Bolívar within Venezuela, in which he was portrayed 'without the trappings of time and place'.[505] As has been seen, El Viejito is described in

[504] Lovera, 629.
[505] Emily A. Engel, 'Simón Bolívar's Itinerant Portraits: Visual Conquest and the Production of an Icon', in Maureen G. Shanahan and Ana M. Reyes, eds., *Simón Bolívar: Travels and Transformations of a Cultural Icon* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2016), pp. 27-47 (30).

far more physical detail than most of Herrera Luque's characters, and certain similarities are visible between Herrera Luque's physical portrayal of the old man and contemporary descriptions of Bolívar. Consider the following account from the Liberator's confidant and comrade Daniel O'Leary:

> Bolivar had a high forehead, but not very wide and lined with wrinkles from an early age—the sign of a thinker. His eyebrows were thick and well-formed, his eyes black, lively, and penetrating. His nose was long and perfect; he had a small wen on it that greatly bothered him until it disappeared in 1820 leaving an almost imperceptible mark. His cheek bones were prominent; his cheeks were sunken, from the time I first knew him in 1818. His mouth was ugly and his lips somewhat thick. The distance from his nose to his mouth was notable. His teeth were white, uniform, and very handsome; he took excellent care of them. His ears were large but well placed. His hair was black, fine, and curly; he wore it long in the years from 1818 to 1821, when it began to turn gray; and after that he wore it short. His sideburns and moustache were reddish; he shaved them off for the first time in Potosi in 1825. His stature was five feet, six inches. He had a narrow chest; his body was slender, his legs especially. His skin was dark and somewhat rough. His hands and feet were small and well formed, such as a woman would have envied. His appearance was serene when he was in good humor but terrifying when he was irritated; the change was incredible.[506]

O'Leary likewise casts Bolívar as a skilled raconteur, stating that:

> He spoke much and well; he possessed the rare gift of conversation, and he liked to tell anecdotes of his past life. His style was flowery and correct; his speeches and his writings are full of daring and original images.[507]

El Viejito's persistent and apparently serious cough – his storytelling is repeatedly interrupted or delayed by such descriptions as 'luego de toser' (51) or 'luego de superar un ataque de tos' (75) – makes for another similarity with Bolívar. Masur notes that, in his final, consumptive months, the Liberator's 'cough was continuous'.[508] Menton, meanwhile, states that both García Márquez's *El general en su laberinto* (a book Herrera Luque loathed[509]) and Fernando Cruz Kronfly's *La ceniza del*

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[506] Daniel F. O'Leary, 'Portrait of Bolívar', in David Bushnell, *The Liberator, Simón Bolívar: Man and Image* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), pp. 89-92 (89-90).
[507] O'Leary, 91.
[508] Gerhard Masur, *Simon Bolivar* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1969), 484.
[509] Pantín, 698.

Libertador (1987), both released immediately before or during the composition of *Los cuatro reyes*, 'emphasize Bolívar's digestive and pulmonary problems'.[510] Lovera's hypothesis that El Viejito is Bolívar is weakened by the fact that he explicitly mentions Bolívar on a handful of occasions, often in less than complimentary terms. Colomina-Garrigós (despite noting that 'se sugiere que el Viejito no es más que el bedel del Panteón'[511]) states that 'la figura del Viejito ha sido interpretada como una especial de ente colectivo representador del pueblo venezolano y su historia',[512] subsequently likening him to the collective narrator of Elena Garro's *Los recuerdos del porvenir* (1963):

> Si el personaje de Ixtepec actúa como la memoria del pueblo mexicano, un pueblo desgarrado por los efectos de la revolución, el personaje del Viejito actuaría como la memoria del pueblo venezolano, desgarrado a su vez por los efectos de regímenes totalitarios, aunque un tanto condescendiente con estos personajes históricos.[513]

Indeed, as Menton says of 'definitely historical'[514] novels such as *Los cuatro reyes*, 'novelists tend to look upon themselves as the consciences of their countries, responsible for denouncing abuses and formulating a new social order. Therefore, in many Latin American novels, the protagonist is not an individual but rather a town […] or a nation'.[515] Bruzual, meanwhile, compares El Viejito to other narrator-figures in Venezuelan literature, such as Fray Dionisio in Núñez's *Cubagua* (1931) and Doña Inés in Torres's *Doña Inés contra el olvido* (1992), each of whom is 'capaz de recorrer los siglos como testigo transbiográfico de la historia'.[516] Lovera states that 'varios expertos lectores de Herrera Luque consideraron que [El Viejito] era el autor',[517] and this theory is, again, quite credible, particularly given the similarities between El Viejito and the *Autor* of *La historia fabulada.* These similarities are most notable in El Viejito's judgements on women (19, 213), the city of Caracas (89), and on politicians in general ('los políticos profesionales son la peor fauna que existe sobre la tierra, y en especial en nuestro amado país' [54]). In moments when El Viejito philosophises at

[510] Menton, 97.
[511] Colomina-Garrigós, 106.
[512] Colomina-Garrigós, 112.
[513] Colomina-Garrigós, 111.
[514] Menton, 17.
[515] Menton, 99.
[516] Alejandro Bruzual, Cubagua *ante la crítica* (Caracas: Monte Ávila, 2021) 311.
[517] Lovera, 629.

length on the state of Venezuela, his role begins to recall that of Francisco Espejo in *Boves* or Juan Otáñez in *En la casa del pez* – both mouthpieces for the author. Yet Ticoté, as has been seen, or even Guzmán's Parisian physician, Dr Dubois, seem to be more likely candidates for surrogates of Herrera Luque himself. Regardless of his uncertain identity and the potential unreliability of his narration, El Viejito is the novel's most important figure: he controls the portrayal of Guzmán Blanco, and issues judgements on the patterns followed by Venezuela's history. The most persuasive explanation for who, or what, El Viejito represents can be found in a point discussed earlier. His storytelling provides his companions warmth in their cold solitude, and respite from the cacophonous oppression of dictatorship. As implied by his alternative nickname, El Poeta, he can be seen as a kind of *hablador*, or a Homeric stand-in for the creative writer – indeed, for the act of storytelling itself, which proves therapeutic for the *contertulieros*. The story El Viejito tells is that of Venezuela's history, in response to which his listeners recognise its cycles and the nation's repeated failures – as Herrera Luque himself had wanted his readers to do.

III. The Illustrious American

At various points in his career, Herrera Luque had denied writing biographical novels. After the publication of *En la casa del pez*, he told Moody that 'en vez de hacer una biografía de Juan Vicente Gómez',[518] he had written an account of the development of the Caracas oligarchy. In the 1980s, he denied even being a novelist. However, as his final novel neared completion, he characterised it as an unambiguously biographical one, telling Miliani that 'la figura central es la biografía de Guzmán Blanco'[519] with this biography itself representing 'la concatenación de la historia'.[520] All the (very few) critical evaluations of *Los cuatro reyes* reflect the writer's own stance: for Colomina-Garrigós, 'el tercer relato, aquel que ocupa la mayor parte de la novela, reconstruye las vivencias

[518] Moody, 41.
[519] Miliani, 733.
[520] Ibid.

de Guzmán Blanco'[521] and constitutes the 'eje de todos los relatos',[522] while Menton claims that 'despite the title, Guzmán Blanco is the sole protagonist' and that the work's 'principal theme is the recreation of Guzmán's life and times'.[523]

The analyses of both these critics, but Menton's especially, are insufficiently nuanced.[524] The notion that the novel is a re-telling of Guzmán's life *and times* is erroneous from the outset: this is what distinguishes it from *Boves* and *En la casa del pez*. While those novels – particularly the latter – attempted to produce a kaleidoscopic re-visiting of the War of Independence or the development of Venezuela political life over many decades, the *eje biográfico* of Guzmán Blanco is much narrower in its focus. Though it is intended to instigate comparisons between different historical processes, Herrera Luque makes almost no attempt to produce a detailed account of late-nineteenth-century life in Venezuela.

El Viejito's account of Guzmán's life, divided into three 'partes', is related piecemeal over several meetings and continually interrupted, progressing at an inconsistent pace. Most remarkably, the eighteen-year period of his rule and his handling of political power receive comparatively little attention. Chapter Fifteen, for example, is titled 'Las glorias locas del quinquenio' and might reasonably be expected to portray the considerable social changes and the extreme, novel-worthy excesses of the dictator's second term – but is light on detail, largely uninteresting, and very brief. At other points, however, the 'relato, que es narrado con cierta linealidad, se detiene especialmente en aquellos episodios que marcaron la vida del dictador decimonónico',[525] dwelling on personal realisations and interior monologues that aim to explain the dictator's conduct throughout his life. That these latter events are generally related in far greater depth and with much greater lucidity demonstrates that Herrera Luque's biography of Guzmán is more an act of portraiture than an

[521] Colomina-Garrigós, 79.
[522] Colomina-Garrigós, 81.
[523] Menton, 17.
[524] The superficiality of Menton's reading is further suggested by his describing El Viejito and his companions as 'a group of intellectuals who in 1957 gather […] to discuss politics' (17); this is not, strictly speaking, correct, as there is no evidence to suggest their supposed intellectual background.
[525] Colomina-Garrigós, 79.

attempt to re-create wholesale the historical epoch in which he lived. Herrera Luque thus '[manipulates] the assembled facts, with some brightened, others shaded. The true life [is] the inner life'.[526] In this sense, the novel is more straightforwardly psychoanalytical than the works previously discussed, Lovera terming it 'el mejor retrato psicológico que poseamos'[527] of the dictator. The writer dedicates far more time and energy to providing the reader with comprehensive explanations (either historically founded with extensive research or conjectural) for the complexities of Guzmán's personality than he does for the monstrous Boves – an archetype – or the enigmatic Gómez.

Boves and Gómez fascinated Herrera Luque for many reasons. Their legacy was still felt in the latter part of the twentieth century, and the novelisation of their lives also enabled him to scrutinise and reconfigure dominant narratives of Venezuelan history. Yet why write about Antonio Guzmán Blanco, and why at the start of the 1990s? A far-off nineteenth-century dictator with comparatively little resonance or even relevance to the present day[528] seems an unlikely choice of subject for a novel born out of such anxiety about Venezuela's future. Until that point, he did not elicit much interest for Herrera Luque – he does not appear, for example, in *Bolívar en carne y hueso*, in which Bolívar, Boves, Gómez and Betancourt (alongside Faust, Juan Vicente González, Freud and Gonzalo Machado) are analysed at length. When Herrera Luque *did* talk of Guzmán, it was in critical terms, expressing displeasure at Carlos Andrés Pérez's transferral of his remains to the Panteón Nacional.[529] Guzmán appears in both *En la casa del pez* and *La historia fabulada*, but in both cases the portrayals are unflattering. In the former, Guzmán is lampooned as a coward (during an earthquake, 'fue el primero en salir y no paró de correr hasta que llegó a la Plaza Mayor' [*CDP*, 37]) and a decadent, incestuous minor aristocrat:

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[526] Salwak, 109.

[527] Lovera, 623.

[528] The same questions could be (and were) asked of Augusto Roa Bastos's *Yo el Supremo* (1975); there is no evidence that Herrera Luque had read this novel, but the fact that Dr Francia himself is less the subject than the discourse or writing of History itself is especially significant for *Los cuatro reyes*.

[529] Lovera, 522.

> Guzmán, además de ser pariente pobre del Libertador, era primo de Eugenia y de Carolina su mujer, a quien amó en secreto, hasta que los melindres de su cuñada Anastasia le hicieron cambiar los rumbos de la endogamia por los del incesto. (*CDP,* 36)

The zenith of his regime – the centenary celebrations of Bolívar's birth coincided with Guzmán's policies of modernisation and industrialisation – receive scant attention, with an offhanded note that his ambitions have only been partially realised ('Se intenta cumplir la promesa de Guzmán Blanco de hacer de Venezuela la Francia de América del Sur' [*CDP*, 47]). The depiction of the dictator in *La historia fabulada*, however, is more scornful. Here, he appears as a corrupt, cynical narcissist, surrounded by flatterers and compared with Cipriano Castro; both men, it is said, succumbed to 'la tentación caligulesca de creerse dioses' (*HF 1*, 41). The *Autor* directly attacks him as a hypocritical social climber devoid of any loyalty to Venezuela ('Todo su ideario revolucionario se vino abajo apenas le sonrió la fortuna y a diferencia de lo que preconizaba César prefirió ser el último en los círculos de la nobleza francesa que el primero en este país hermosamente desolado' [*HF 1*, 55]). Most importantly, the *Autor* regards him as transient.

This is not without historical basis. Indeed, 'many of the achievements of the Guzmán Blanco regime did not survive the test of time',[530] and he is indubitably one of the less well-remembered Latin American tyrants. Even within a specifically Venezuelan context, his long rule never spawned the same literary interest as did the lives of Bolívar or Gómez, or even the short tenure of Pérez Jiménez. Though immensely corrupt and certainly highly authoritarian, Guzmán's regime did not commit outrageous acts of violence or political repression. The inherent personalism of his regime notwithstanding, Guzmán was not remembered for acts of extreme bravery or cruelty, and nor did he cast himself, as so many others did, as a hypermasculine strongman. Lynch calls him a 'dictator in the positivist 'order and progress' style',[531] an uninspiring technocrat closer to Mexico's Porfirio Díaz than, say, Rosas or Trujillo. For Uslar Pietri, Guzmán was a man 'in whom a variety of the features of the *caudillo* phenomenon [were] combined in a kind of reflexive moderation'[532] – and

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530 Tarver and Frederick, 71.

531 John Lynch, *Simón Bolívar: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 301.

532 Arturo Uslar Pietri, 'Preface', in George S. Wise, *Caudillo: A Portrait of Antonio Guzmán Blanco* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1951), pp. v-vii (v).

thus a reflection of Venezuela itself. The nation is 'medium in area, population, and economic development. In turn, Guzmán Blanco was not so extreme a tyrant or so benevolent a president as could be found'[533] and 'showed the characteristics of the *caudillo* to approximately an average degree'.[534]

What does stand out is Guzmán's political opportunism and extreme Francophilia. Wise defines him as 'a politician without principles and a master of political scheming'[535] prone to unprincipled behaviour in order to maintain power. He was 'pathetically addicted to French culture, the French language, French perfume, everything French. Always a little bit ridiculous and always in bad taste and always serenely unaware of it out of his sublime egotism'[536], and spent much of his time many thousands of miles away as a socialite in Paris. He is therefore quite obviously a model for the *Primer magistrado* of Carpentier's *El recurso del método* (1974): their conduct and characterisation are remarkably similar (though Guzmán *is* named directly as a discrete dictator in that novel), such that the Cuban writer's claim that his novel contains 'un 10% de Guzmán Blanco'[537] seems to be a low estimate.

There thus exist two major questions surrounding this biographical novel. The first of these is *why* write a novel about Guzmán Blanco. Superficially, there is an educative aspect to the biography. Wise notes that 'rather little attention has been given to [Guzmán's] historical significance'[538], and in his own interview with Miliani, Herrera Luque stated that:

> Creo que va a ser la primera biografía que se hace sobre Guzmán Blanco, porque una serie de documentos no hacen biografía; se necesita una visión de la totalidad, una visión del conjunto, un desarrollo coherente y eso no lo he encontrado. Hay innumerables libros que

533 Wise, xii.
534 Wise, 176.
535 Wise, 112.
536 Rourke, 35.
537 Mario Benedetti, 'El recurso del supremo patriarca', in *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana*, vol. 1, no. 3 (January 1976), pp. 55-67 (55).
538 Wise, x.

> me han servido de fuente de información, pero como tantas veces yo he dicho a los biógrafos en Venezuela les sobran documentos y les falta hombre.[539]

This only goes some way as to answering why such a novel was timely. The second question is *how* to go about creating it. A reader might expect Herrera Luque to write about Guzmán with the same *ambivalencia* and fascination as in the cases of Boves and Gómez, or to reimagine him entirely, given the limited portrayals of the autocrat in canonical historical accounts and even in Herrera Luque's earlier works – but neither expectation is fulfilled. The present section therefore aims to analyse how plausible Guzmán's biography is, what ends it serves, and what it reveals about the late development of Herrera Luque's stylistic and thematic concerns, with the ultimate intention of identifying what (if anything) Guzmán represents for the evolving concept of power throughout Venezuelan history.

Throughout the novel's three books, each corresponding to a separate era of Guzmán's life, the central biography is narrated in a mostly linear fashion, save for the returns to the novelistic present of 1957-58. The introduction of Guzmán, however, does not fit into this neat chronology. We first see him from Gómez's perspective when the two men meet in 1872, and then again when Guzmán learns of Gómez's occupation of Mérida in 1899. At this point he recalls his earlier meeting with El Benemérito, and then his own meeting with Páez in 1843, establishing himself as a link between the two other autocrats. Guzmán's memory concludes with Páez telling him 'siempre supe que serías tú quien habría de sustituirme' (21), at which point 'El Ilustre Americano dejó de recordar, mal de los viejos cuando no pueden soñar, y se dirigió a su habitación' (21) in preparation for an opulent Parisian feast held in his honour.

Chapter One, which brings together various narrators, listeners, historical figures, and time periods in a confused and disordered manner, is brought to a close by the end of Guzmán's reminiscences. Chapter Two, 'Marcha de tiempo atrás', begins on the same day ('faltaban cinco meses y dos días para 1900' [22]) – the day, it turns out, of Antonio Guzmán Blanco's death. Despite his 'elegante

[539] Miliani, 732.

figura de atleta longuilíneo' (22) and 'su noble presencia y sus grandes caudales' (22), the former dictator is horrified by the sight of himself in a full-length mirror. This act of self-recognition is a common device in Herrera Luque's *œuvre*, and invites a comparison to the opening of the second *Libro* of *En la casa del pez*, where Gómez ponders his own mortality through his reflection:

> Azuladas ojeras orlan sus ojos encapotados y sin brillo. Hace pocos horas lo sopló un vahido. Aquel intenso trepidar que siempre bulló en su ser, el «elan vital» de que viene hablando Bergson,[540] se le escapa gota a gota, a ritmo de tinajero. (22)

Simultaneously, Herrera Luque notes that 'ya comienza a caer la tarde. Consulta su reloj de leontina' (23) – a description that provides this scene with a sense that time is running out.[541] Before the reception begins, however, Guzmán falls unconscious, and awakens to a priest preparing to administer the last rites:

> Me estoy muriendo, en efecto. Me veo muy claro de niño. Aquí está mamá con su bondad. Está de rodillas suplicándole a Monagas la vida de mi padre… Ahora estoy en el Alto Apure peleando contra el Chingo Olivo… Una imagen sucede a la otra. Son tan nítidas que parecen fotografías. ¿No es eso lo que llaman recoger los pasos perdidos? […] En Venezuela dicen que eso le pasa a todo el que se va a morir. (23)

Subsequently, 'en un sueño crepuscular, Guzmán Blanco piensa, recuerda y vive' (24). Herrera Luque produces a pathetic, ironic scene in which the moribund dictator revisits his past glories ('los vivas y los aplausos resonando en el recuerdo' [25]). These are promptly replaced by recollections of the most traumatic moments from his childhood, and the great dictator's life appears cyclical as he is forced to recall the exile of his father. The chapter closes with anguished cries from Guzmán:

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[540] This is an unusual and somewhat unnatural reference. The term was coined in Bergson's 1907 *L'évolution créatrice* and could not have been known to Guzmán Blanco, so is presumably added by the narrator in 1957. *Los cuatro reyes* does, however, contain a number of anachronisms that could either be mistakes or conscious choices on Herrera Luque's part to problematise El Viejito's narration. In a scene set in 1863, for example, a character quotes Wilde's *The Canterville Ghost* (1887).

[541] This notion of the elapsing of time is central to the novel. Here, it draws a parallel between Guzmán's life and Pérez Jiménez's regime, both entering their dying moments; more widely, the same was true, in a sense, for both Herrera Luque and, as he saw it, the *Punto Fijo* system.

> —¡Papá, papá! —exclama Guzmán Blanco en su lecho de muerte. Fue el mismo grito que profirió cuando su madre, Doña Carlota, la sosegada, le espetó enloquecida:
> —¡Tu padre ha sido condenado a muerte!
> […]
> Un torrente de lágrimas saltó de sus ojos mortecinos.
> —¡Papá, papá! —exclamó otra vez, con acento aún más dolorido. (29)

There are tangible influences from Fuentes's *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* here, both structurally (a powerful, unscrupulous man in his death throes recalling the events of his life) and in terms of the storyline (collapsing at an important meeting, dying in opulent surroundings, the presence of doctors carrying out undignified procedures). Despite his conflicted portrayal of Guzmán, Herrera Luque creates a strong sense of pathos for him, underscoring his humanity by juxtaposing his greatest vulnerability with moments of his greatest successes.

From this point, the biography resumes its linearity. As with *Boves*, the first section is a clear-cut example of an attempt at psychological portraiture: Herrera Luque depicts how Guzmán's experiences as a child and adolescent influenced his psychological makeup. His parents hail from different worlds, his mother being a *mantuana* relative of Bolívar and his father a widely reviled political outsider. The young Antonio demonstrates clear favouritism between them:

> El joven Guzmán Blanco, por más que su padre fuese el apóstol de los desposeídos, el gran catalizador del descontento popular contra la oligarquía, se identificaba con el mundo aristocrático de su madre, la Buena de Doña Carlota, tan buena, veraz y rectilínea, como malo, embustero y torcido era su marido. Al joven Guzmán le parecían hasta dignos de admiración los incendiarios artículos de su progenitor contra la aristocracia, de la que se creía o sentía parte. (27)

El Viejito criticises Antonio Leocadio, Guzmán's father and the founder of Venezuela's liberal party, repeatedly, calling him 'un portento de seducción y engaño' (15) with a 'fama de abyecto por su mudabilidad descarada de pasar de la oposición al gobierno' (14). He also notes, however, that Guzmán 'admiraba a su padre por su talento y por el poder de fuego de su lengua y su pluma, lo amaba con tierna y complaciente ternura. Si Antonio Leocadio había sido malo para todos y bueno

para nadie, con él hizo extraño y caluroso aparte' (17). Nevertheless, Antoñito is shown to be psychologically marked by his father's abuse of his mother, Carlota, and during one such incident he pulls a dagger on his father (15). Carlota is depicted in almost saintly terms:

> —Antonio Guzmán Blanco —prosiguió El Viejito— amaba profundamente a su madre, Doña Carlota, paradigma de bondad, paciencia y abnegación para con sus hijos y con su marido, que como era público, no solo la azotaba: la sometía a la humillante tortura de guardar su larga cabellera en el escaparate, al que echaba llave, dejándola en aquel cepo doméstico hasta por tres y cuatro horas. Guzmán Blanco, aunque se indignaba contra aquel trato, para su propio misterio y el de los enterados no le perdía por ello el amor a su padre. (15)

Herrera Luque depicts the many upheavals that assailed Guzmán in his early life as inflicting lasting damage on his self-image. Already suffering social rejection after his father's disgrace ('oculta a su vez la vergüenza y la rabia que le acomete por las afrentas que le hacen a Antonio Leocadio. Muchos no le responden al saludo ampliamente cordial que prodiga, mientras baja en dirección a la casa del Jefe Supremo' [15]), another formative experience for Guzmán is his rupture with his own supposed aristocratic background, as he learns of his having been born out of wedlock:

> —De haber sabido que andaba más que de amoríos contigo —prosiguió— lo hubiese mandado a matar para evitar que se emparentase con nosotros. Pero como tenías cuatro meses en estado, no me quedó más camino que callar para evitar murmuraciones. Lo que no sirvió para nada: no nacen niños de cinco meses. ¡Qué vergüenza tan grande, Dios mío, la que me hiciste pasar y los chismes que se corrieron por el asunto! […] ¿Y cómo te ha tratado, el muy desgraciado? ¿Cómo ha respondido a tus bondades y espíritu de sacrificio? ¿Es que tú crees que la gente no sabe que te cae a golpes? ¿Tú crees que eso es propio, no digo yo de caballeros, porque nunca lo ha sido, sino de hombres de bien, por humildes que sean? (32)

This rejection is followed by a sequence of scenes, strongly reminiscent of José Tomás Boves's ostracisation by the same social class, in which Guzmán learns that his childhood friends have been mocking him, aware of his illegitimacy the whole time. This deepens his despondency and sense of inadequacy.

> Ahora comprendía las veladas alusiones sardónicas de sus compañeros […] Hasta ese mismo momento no terminaba de entender el significado de aquellas banderillas, ni el asordinado rechazo que sintió en los padres de sus amigos. Como terminó de entender de una vez por todas por qué sus presuntos primos y parientes, como insistentemente señalaba su madre, no le confirmaban el vínculo con proporcional entusiasmo.
> Con la cara entre las manos sollozó largamente. Él no era lo que creía ser. No era parte de un mundo al que amaba: era tan solo su excrecencia. Si él no era él, ¿quién era entonces?; si de antemano estaba excluido, por el traspiés de su madre y la bastardía de su padre, del único mundo que conocía, ¿dónde estaba su lugar? ¿Quiénes habrían de ser sus camaradas? Aunque le faltaban años para andar de noviazgo con las muchachas de Caracas, ¿quién de ellas accedería a sus requiebros, si ya había dificultades para amistarse con sus hermanos? La desolación fue la respuesta. […] El saldo fue la soledad.
> Intentó cambiar de grupo, de hacer amistad con gente modesta, como lo eran la casi totalidad de los hijos de los conmilitones sin poder: pequeños comerciantes, médicos y sangradores, boticarios o empleados subalternos; pero fue inútil; los encontraba sosos y vulgares, sin eco ni resonancia en su persona. No eran gente de su mundo, y él había sido configurado por su madre y por su tía como el último retoño de una gran familia, que dio al país sus mejores frutos. (32-33)

The gulf between his self-perception and reality, and his lack of belonging, caught somewhere in between two opposing social groups, closely recalls that of Boves (who is nevertheless *mostly* able to find belonging and acceptance among the *llaneros* of Calabozo) and Andrés Machado in that earlier novel. It again hints at the perennial undercurrent in Herrera Luque's works of the fundamentally divided nature of Venezuelan society. This dual rejection does not lead Guzmán to violence, as it does Boves, but rather informs his obsessive attempts to prove his value to himself, which explains his acts of obscene egotism once in power. Likewise, it explains his attempts to gain acceptance in the aristocratic world of Paris, a world far more moneyed and exclusive than Caracas. El Viejito notes that adolescence 'es el momento en que se adoptan, generalmente para siempre, las actitudes que se han de tener en las relaciones interpersonales, esencia del ideario politico de cada quien' (36-37). As with Boves, once again, his psychological makeup is 'diagnosed' early on. Indeed, the first two chapters already establish Guzmán's life's trajectory by depicting his death, the pinnacle of his glory, and his childhood.

Nevertheless, for the remainder of 'Remembranzas de agonía', Guzmán Blanco fades from view. Herrera Luque falls into the same trap for which he criticised historians. *Documentos* take

precedence over *hombre*; the reader (and the *tertulieros*) learn little of Guzmán's early adulthood.[542] Between Chapters Three and Four there is a jump of at least thirteen years, the latter chapter beginning with 'A los veintiocho años, Antonio Guzmán Blanco era un hombre apuesto, con un título de abogado que poco le servía. La gente pudiente lo rechazaba, dada la desconfianza que tenían por Antonio Leocadio, apóstol del liberalismo y defensor de los desposeídos' (42). From this line alone, many developments have already taken place, but none of them is described. A period spent at West Point, the only explanation for his future military tact, is glossed over, as are his attempts to court Elizabeth Kirkpatrick and Luisa Giuseppi Monagas, niece of then-president José Tadeo Monagas. It appears in these chapters that Herrera Luque's narrative abilities (or, if we are being generous, El Viejito's) fail him, with the energy of the narrative dying away and the once clear portrait of Guzmán becoming grainier. There is a heavy reliance on the abrupt introduction of historical occurrences to pick up impetus or open new phases in Guzmán's life ('El 10 de diciembre de 1863 se reúne en Caracas la Asamblea Constituyente. Falcón es elegido por unanimidad Presidente Provisional; Guzmán Blanco lo es como Vicepresidente, y Antonio Leocadio, su padre, es proclamado Presidente de la Asamblea' [105] being one example). A sequence of uprisings, massacres, changes of government, and returns to and flights from Venezuela by Guzmán – in which he is not only passive but at times scarcely visible – passes rapidly and culminates abruptly in the outbreak of the Federal Wars, the longest and most devastating of [the] civil conflicts'[543] that assailed 19th-century Venezuela, and Guzmán's landing at Coro under the command of Juan Crisóstomo Falcón.

The second section is comparably mixed in nature and quality. The focus here shifts to Guzmán's growing political consciousness and, crucially, the way in which he conceives of the key problems of the Venezuelan state. His maturation (hinted at in the first chapter of this section's title, 'De escribano a caudillo') is the main narrative focus, and consequently Herrera Luque uses lengthy and often quite lucid passages of introspection on Guzmán's part. He is portrayed as gradually developing a conception of his own place within the broader historical context. It is important to

[542] The same is seen in *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, in which nothing is related of Cruz's life between 1903 and 1913.
[543] Alexander, 8.

note that El Viejito's narration heavily influences this, perhaps manipulating Guzmán's thoughts to accord with the 'reyes de la baraja' theory of Venezuelan history. Unlike in *Boves* and *En la casa del pez*, in which Herrera Luque generally presents the specific motivations of the two protagonists, *Los cuatro reyes* contains many passages of contemplative philosophical musings about the impulses that govern everyday people – from whom Guzmán is mostly depicted as being very far removed. Consider, for example, the opening of Chapter Six:

> Tan pronto desembarca Falcón en los arenales de Coro, Guzmán Blanco contempla con asombro cómo en su seguimiento acuden mozos en sazón y hombres curtidos, tramoleando azadas y machetes. Siempre lo ha tenido como un hombre sabio y honesto, con más de plácido obispo que de caudillo de montoneras. ¿Cuál es, entonces, su secreto? ¿Qué significa para aquellos pastores de cabras, ásperos y duros como su tierra, ese hombre suave, magnánimo, mejor hecho para rey en la retaguardia que para adalid de guerrilleros? ¿Por qué estos hombres abandonan sus mujeres y rebaños para ir tras lo incierto? Las arcas de los ricos están vacías. ¿Qué los impulsa a cambiar un desierto por otro desierto, un rancho de bahareque por un techo al descampado? Nada saben de doctrinas políticas ni de justicia social, «unos nacen para leña y otros para hacer carbón». Es ley natural. Consenso tácito. ¿Qué los impulsa a escoger la guerra con su trágico deambular, andando y desandando la geografía? (75)

Amid formulaic and often dry accounts of the Federal War and of Falcón's military strategising, as well as commentary from El Viejito's *contertulieros*, Herrera Luque details Guzmán's development of his own (usually cynical) answers to the above questions. Guzmán's revolutionary fervour, pretensions towards support for Venezuela's lower classes,[544] and liberal principles (as well as his wonderment at the country's natural beauty, witnessed during the Federal War) are replaced by 'cálculos' (87) and incisive comments, often made in the form of asides to his protégé Joaquín Crespo, about the nature of power. In Chapter Six, Guzmán notes that 'los hombres orgullosos son dignos […] sólo en ellos se puede confiar' (86) and that 'más fuerte que la dignidad es el miedo, y tan poderosa como él, la oportunidad' (86-87). His recognition that future president Francisco Linares Alcántara 'es un idealista, un hombre que cree en el poder de las ideas. Ellas son más

[544] Herrera Luque shows, as in *Boves*, that these groups were mainly made up of non-white Venezuelans. Fears of a racial conflict are referenced in *Los cuatro reyes* (Chapter 5, for example, is titled '¡Mueran los blancos y los que sepan leer y escribir!' after a refrain commonly heard during the Federal War), but these anxieties do not receive a large amount of attention and ultimately do not materialise.

poderosas que la fuerza física' (87) further demonstrates his growing capacity to recognise and take advantage of the morals of allies and rivals alike. One long internal monologue in this same chapter might be seen as the moment when Guzmán's views crystallise. Prior to this point, he has talked almost exclusively in reported speech, with El Viejito narrating his life story, but here Guzmán speaks at length in the first person, reflecting on his life thus far ('Cuanto ha cambiado mi suerte […] La fortuna me ha sonreído' [91]). This monologue reveals an unprincipled, extremely transactional view of political power, and culminates in his recalling an incident in which he had sex with a loyal foot soldier's daughter (when the man complains, Guzmán tells him 'Sepa usted que sólo por su hija no lo he fusilado' [91]) for which he feels 'ningún remordimiento' (91). The development of Guzmán's political consciousness, repellent as it is, reflects the wider development of Venezuela during this period, as the country moved from a chaotic arrangement of warring provinces into a more coherent whole, with its nascent political system gradually solidifying.

This is nonetheless one of the novel's most condemnatory passages and is certainly its most successful, since the condemnation does not take the form of the repetitive, explicit judgements of the *tertulieros*, but rather issues straight from Guzmán. It underlines his fundamental selfishness and view of every relationship as a potential vehicle for self-advancement – and, as with Boves and Castro in *En la casa del pez,* closely links hunger for power with sexual excess. Notably, it is at the end of this chapter that Guzmán resolves to take power for himself, a decision engendered by his anxieties over how history will view him. As El Viejito says, 'tenía treinta y tres años, la misma edad del Redentor, la que tenía El Libertador cuando volvió sobre sus pasos en 1816, año en que consolidó su poder, en el momento en que nadie daba un centavo por su destino. Los treinta y tres años son el ecuador de la vida' (94). Guzmán shares the same fixation on auspicious ages as Gómez, and Ticoté comments that thirty-three is 'la edad de la matanoia [sic], según Jung' (94)[545]. Guzmán Blanco desires power only for its own sake, and for historical recognition; he is spurred into action by a refusal to accept his 'muerte histórica' (95).

[545] The reference to Jung is further evidence of Ticoté's identification with the author himself, but the wider discussion of age refers back to Herrera Luque's interest in historical coincidences. Gómez discusses age at length in *En la casa del pez,* while José Tomás Boves died at thirty-two: Boves's final monologue might itself suggest an incipient, unrealised *metanoia.*

The third and longest *Parte*, which shares its name with Guzmán's own nickname of 'El Ilustre Americano', is rather less straightforward than the other two. It stretches from his seizure of power in 1870 to his death in Paris, and depicts the apogee, decline and aftermath of his rule. In terms of its pacing, style, focus and even genre, all of which are inconsistent, the final third of the novelised biography unintentionally mirrors the bumpy trajectory of high excesses and political and personal nadirs of its subject's final years. El Viejito begins his story anew in Chapter Twelve with Guzmán's 'marcha hacia el centro' (166) and triumphant entry into Caracas as a 'Mesías' (166). In accordance with Herrera Luque's cyclical or dynastic conception of Venezuelan history, a parallel exists here between Guzmán, an 'hombre providencial', and the foretold return of Rómulo Betancourt in the 1957 narrative. Again, Herrera Luque conveys the fast-moving nature of events in the form of flat reportage:

> El 26 de abril, Guzmán Blanco inicia la batalla. Matías Salazar ataca por el norte; Luciano Mendoza por el este y por el sur. Salazar derriba los parapetos. Los caraqueños se refugian en las trincheras, una cuadra más abajo. El ímpetu de Salazar los desaloja a punta de machete del último refugio. Haciendo suyas las órdenes de Vegas, los defensores hacen reducto en la torre de Catedral. Luego de incesante combatir, con un saldo de más de mil quinientos muertos y heridos, los gobernistas se rinden. El populacho se entrega al saqueo. Guzmán Blanco, sable en mano, impone el orden. Las cárceles se abarrotan. Por primera vez Guzmán Blanco se trajea de implacable. (167-68)

This chapter portrays Guzmán's succumbing to the trappings of power in some detail; we see that 'tentación caligulesca' (*HF 1,* 41) in full flower with his assumption of increasingly ridiculous titles. The narrator states that Guzmán 'asumió su papel de Gran Arquitecto de Venezuela, aceptando con natural regocijo las loas, apologias y ditirambos que llovían sobre él, convencido plenamente de merecerlas' (173) – Guzmán seems to believe that his rule is preordained, though the narrator's words are ironic, even sarcastic – and describes his internalising of the words of 'un frenólogo en Nueva York' (173), a practitioner of a discredited pseudoscience, as a personal credo that emphasises his ambition and narcissism:

> Si usted quiere llegar a supremo conductor de pueblos, debe poner a un lado ese manual de buenas costumbres que carga consigo, y hacer exactamente lo contrario. Ha de ser Jehová: poderoso, desconsiderado y temible. Nunca olvidar lo que impuso como primera ley: amarlo a él sobre todas las cosas. (173)

The remainder of this chapter is dedicated in large part to underscoring how his now near-unchecked power has adulterated Guzmán's personality. One example is as follows:

> Su tendencia natural al envaramiento aristocrático la exageró hasta el hieratismo, su carácter autoritario se hizo despótico e insolente, sin excepción de amigos, familiares o colaboradores.
> —.¡Antoñito, no! —le ripostó a un viejo compañero de su padre—. General Guzmán Blanco o Presidente. (174)

This chapter ends with renewed focus on Guzmán's contradictory qualities. Guzmán is first re-humanised by his provision of a house and pension to Doña Rosa, now 'una anciana, casi una mendiga' (174), but previously a woman of high standing who had helped the young Antonio and his mother during Guzmán *padre*'s disgrace and exile, only for him then to abuse a congressman from Barquisimeto. His mother learns of the incident and attempts to intercede, but to no avail:

> —Antoñito, hijo —protestó doña Carlota, al enterarse del incidente—, así no se trata a los seres humanos. ¿Qué tienes en el corazón?
> —Leones, mamá… (175)

Herrera Luque makes heavy use of interior monologues. Chapter Thirteen, tellingly titled 'Abecedario del buen gobierno', opens with a long *apologia* from Guzmán as he identifies the obstacles to the consolidation of his rule, among which are the difficulties involved in 'hacer un país que no existe' (177). This imagined explanation of his intentions and principles says much about the basis of political power, and the degree to which Venezuela's leaders do, or should, embody the will of its people:

> El verdadero estadista no debe hacer lo que el pueblo quiera, sino lo que al pueblo convenga. En los países civilizados la brecha existente entre dirigentes y dirigidos es una

> zanja, en nuestros países es un abismo. ¿Qué es lo que desea el puebo? ¿Cuál es su voluntad? Lo que desean todos los pueblos del mundo: casa, comida y justicia. (176)

Guzmán adopts the time-honoured *panem et circenses* view of government; indeed, he is welcomed as a 'panadero' (203) upon his return as President in 1879.[546] Shortly after, the narrator summarises Guzmán's approach to governance thus:

> Para ejercer la autocracia o la dictadura, que insurge como reacción frente al caos, además del ejército y la legitimidad, hay que dar algunos pasos para asumir el poder absoluto, como crearse una imagen de ser providencial. Ha de ser bizarro y glorioso, sobrehumano e incansable. Lo demás vendrá por añadidura. (180)

Though these words are originally spoken by the Duc de Morny and only internalised by Guzmán, they reflect Herrera Luque's key contentions around the nature of power and its legitimacy. Guzmán is seen to believe in sheer force of personality – again, akin to Weber's conception of charisma – as a means of guaranteeing power. Shortly afterwards, Guzmán (interpreted, of course, by El Viejito) states that 'Él es Venezuela, Venezuela habla por su verbo, llora por sus ojos, ordena con sus manos' (185-86). This is a return to the Hobbesian metaphor of Venezuela as a *cuerpo*, previously expressed in *En la casa del pez*. Guzmán's conception of what power *is* is simple, being no more sophisticated than 'Le place el poder, disfruta y ama el poder' (185). It is also depicted as being similar to Vallenilla Lanz's positivist view, with the dictator rhetorically asking '¿Qué prefieren, la espada de Guzmán o el machete de los bárbaros?' (203). Guzmán even sees extreme personalism as a means of achieving a form of national synthesis, stating that Venezuela's 'híbrido de oligaquía y oclocracia es lo que ha conducido el país al desastre. Si quiero mandar y gobernar, hacer algo por Venezuela y por mi gloria, tengo que echarle un parado a esta vaina' (177). Throughout, Guzmán voices his nation-building, modernising intentions, stressing the importance of 'hacer un país que no existe' (177), albeit in his own image. This is an accurate interpretation of the historical Guzmán's principles, though in reality he sought to fashion the modernised state according to a rather reductive, liberal image of Bolívar, which Herrera Luque does not discuss in

[546] This perhaps draws comparisons with 1991 Venezuela, where the government was increasingly unable to provide its citizens with basic necessities, let alone luxuries.

detail. Guzmán thus exhibits coherent political principles in a way that Boves and, to an extent, Gómez do not, identifying a grandiose and narcissistic solution to Venezuela's divisions. However, this hubris proves to be his downfall.

After these evocative and illuminating high points, the final stage of Guzmán's biography is digressive and muddled. Once again, the lack of focus on the supposed protagonist compromises the fluency of this third section. Amid a rather tedious focus on financial figures, cabinet appointments, and accounts of ceaseless trips abroad, the reader again loses sight of Guzmán himself. Instead, Herrera Luque affords much space to political commentary (not all of it relevant or interesting) from various sources, including the Duc de Morny, future presidents Linares Alcántara, Crespo and Rojas Paúl, and El Viejito. Many chapters diverge into tangents with little bearing on the main plot. Chapter Fourteen, for example, discusses tendencies in French literature in the years after the fall of Napoléon III. Elsewhere, Guzmán begins to provide interesting commentary on Venezuela's racial dynamics, but Herrera Luque moves on reasonably abruptly. This points to a missed opportunity within the novel, since Herrera Luque devotes almost no attention to how the dictator sought to ameliorate or exploit the divides that he had earlier characterised as among Venezuela's most serious congenital defects.

Other observations seem suspiciously close to the writer's own favoured talking points and psychoanalytical hypotheses – for example, El Viejito's rant about how 'los godos son los causantes de la desgracia en Venezuela' (170) and a passage on the negative consequences of 'la heterogeneidad fraternal generada por padres irresponsables' (208), explored at length in *Los viajeros de Indias* and elsewhere. These usually appear in the text in a desultory and even jarring fashion. The absurd zenith of Guzmán's personalism is scarcely depicted and – curiously – the events of Bolívar's centenary in 1883, an event that was pivotal to the codifying of Venezuela's canonical history, are related only very offhandedly. El Viejito instead focuses on Guzmán's erection of statues of himself, which he casts as 'su punto flaco, su talón de Aquiles […] la vanidad, la más fútil y pueril' (213).[547]

[547] Herrera Luque comments on the symbolic value of these statues repeatedly in *La historia fabulada.*

The biography again loses impetus here, remaining in a lull until Chapter Sixteen. Here, after having lost much popularity and gained the unflattering nickname 'el Indispensable Ausente' due to his lengthy periods in Paris, Guzmán receives news that his statues have been 'derribadas definitivamente'[548] (235), causing a period of mental instability. Though the precise circumstances of his removal from power are not elucidated effectively, this event sparks the beginning of his final decline, and the return of more lucid storytelling by Herrera Luque. The destruction of his statues is symbolic, representing the end of his power (effectively a neutering) and his final break with Venezuela:

> —¡Me han asesinado en vida, Monsieur le Docteur! ¡Me han mancillado y condenado al olvido! Han destruido mis estatuas. Ya no seré nadie. Venezuela no me quiere, yo tampoco la querré. No quiero saber nada de ella ni de su gente. De ahora en adelante quedan prohibidos en esta casa las arepas y el chocolate, el casabe y las hallacas. Boten el tinajero. Fuera los cuadros del Libertador. A la negra Isolina me la embarcan para Venezuela. Fuera cuatros y maracas, las pinturas de Michelena y Herrera Toro. Boten aquel cuadro de papá. Rompan toda carta que venga de mi país. De aquí en adelante queda prohibida en esta casa la entrada a cada venezolano. (236-37)

Prescribed laudanum for 'pertinez y progresivo insomnio' (236) Guzmán enters a steady physical and mental decline, during which Herrera Luque again attempts to elicit some qualified sympathy for the dictator, cast as a pathetic, ruined figure – 'quien alguna vez fue el Ilustre Americano' (236). At this point, the figure of Dr Dubois, whom Lovera identifies as a mouthpiece for the author ('¿dónde está el autor? Es el Dr. Dubois, quien atiende el dictador en su exilio parisino'[549]), begins to comment regularly and perceptively on political and philosophical matters. Dubois comments on the transience of that same power that Guzmán had sought to appropriate forever, and to render divine and eternal. He laconically tells Ana Teresa:

> —Su marido, como todos los déspotas, sabe que no perduraría en el amor de su pueblo, creyendo erróneamente que de hacerse tallar en piedra o en bronce, cosa que jamás hará la

[548] The statues he had put up before Bolívar's centenary had been pulled down in 1879, though months later he returned to Caracas to begin his second mandate.
[549] Lovera, 630.

> posteridad, entrará al Olimpo. Su marido, madame, no es Napoleón, ni Bolívar, ni Miranda. Fue simplemente un aventurero con mucha suerte. Buenas tardes. (237)

Dubois occupies a curious role, offering frank appraisals of Guzmán's fate that are simultaneously sympathetic and critical. As Guzmán's decline continues, Dubois observes:

> Los bailes, tertulias y reuniones que antes celebraba con tanta frecuencia, para codearse con la alta sociedad, se fueron haciendo cada vez más escuálidos, hasta que decidió suspenderlos. La soledad se le fue volviendo insoportable, por más que viviese rodeado de gente, que no le interesaba.
> —Ésa es la suerte de los tiranos —le apuntó el Dr. Dubois—. ¿Qué se puede esperar de usted? ¿Dinero? A usted no le placen los pedigüeños. ¿Honores? No está capacitado para honrar quien honra no tiene. ¿Miedo a sus represalias? Hace mucho tiempo que dejó de ser temible. La soledad, Monsieur le General, es el castigo de la soberbia. (238)

Dubois's statement draws parallels with other works of dictatorship fiction – these words recall García Márquez's exploration of the solitude of the tyrant in *El otoño del patriarca*, for example – while also emphasising the discrepancy between the appearance and reality of power. This is further evidenced by the contrasts drawn between Guzmán's increasing frailty ('a las nueve y quince de la noche la atmósfera de la habitación donde agoniza el Ilustre Americano se hace irrespirable' [238]) and his still quasi-divine status in certain circles: it is noted that 'hizo de París La Meca, de obligatorio peregrinaje alguna vez en la vida, para presentarle sus respetos al Ilustre' (241), and furthermore:

> No obstante tener más de diez años de haberse ausentado de su país, Guzmán Blanco seguía siendo la araña de aquella inmensa tela llamada Venzuela […] Su casa era un incesante desfilar de antiguos cortesanos y de financistas, que pretendían leer en su rostro el destino de Venezuela. (240)[550]

The serious nature and emotional background of this scene, as well as the musings on power that both Rojas and El Viejito contribute, are subverted by Herrera Luque's inclusion of scatological humour that again underlines Guzmán's decline and his humanity:

[550] Compare with the depiction of Gómez's bodily ailments.

> Un flato largo y sonoro, seguido de asqueante hedor, saca arcadas hasta al abad que a su lado rezaba.
> –Es el peo de la muerte… –comenta Rojas con naturalidad. (239)

Shortly after this, the biography is brought full circle, closing with a long and anguished soliloquy as he accepts his own mortality ('pronto habré de morir, la vida me abandona día tras días [sic], hora tras hora' [247]) and the way he will be remembered by history ('dicen que yo no quiero a nadie, y eso es embuste. Adoré a mi madre, como nadie lo ha hecho;[551] 'quiero a mi mujer, como si fuese la mayor de mis hijos; he sido un amante padre que ha vivido por ellos' [247]). He predicts, too, that 'de lograr ser enterrado en el Panteón Nacional, mi tumba sería profanada' (247). After inwardly expressing his wish to be buried in Père Lachaise cemetery,[552] Guzmán dies 'offstage'. El Viejito's narration of his life passes back to Juan Vicente Gómez, and then concludes with Gómez's telling Pimentel of the day he learned of Guzmán's death:

> Juan Vicente Gómez no sabe bailar ni se siente a gusto con aquella gente tan fina y bien vestida. Él sabe que no se ve bien con su ruana de lujo y con aquellas botas de campana. Decide darse una vuelta por la plaza. Al trasponer el portón le sorprende el propio jefe del telégrafo:
> —General Gómez —le dice—, mire lo que acabo de recibir. El telegrama dice: «Anoche 28 de julio de 1899, murió en París a las nueve y treinta de la noche el General Antonio Guzmán Blanco». Juan Vicente Gómez mira fijamente hacia el centro de la plaza, al pie de la estatua del Libertador, donde arde una gran hoguera, y antes de darle la noticia a su compadre, tiene un recuerdo para aquel hombre que conoció siendo casi un niño a orillas de una batalla. (249)

The narrative returns to where the novel opened – El Benemérito's encounter with Betancourt in 1928.

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[551] This detail likens him to many other fictionalised dictators, including Asturias's President, García Márquez's Patriarch, and Vargas Llosa's Rafael Trujillo, all of whom demonstrate extreme levels of filial piety.

[552] Unless Herrera Luque is making a point about Guzmán Blanco's powerlessness extending even to his being unable to choose the site of his own grave, which would accord with the idea of his low status among the Parisian elite, this is a mistaken detail. Guzmán was, in reality, buried in the Cimitière de Passy, a small graveyard in the 16th arrondissement.

> —La muerte de Guzmán Blanco —dijo Juan Vicente Gómez a Pimentel—, me dio tristeza, hasta enterarme y sufrir junto a Venezuela la consecuencia de sus desmanes. Desde que lo conocí aquella noche del 72 hasta llegar al Palacio de Gobierno, llevado por mi compadre Don Cipriano, creía que era un palo de hombre casi comparable con Bolívar, por más que no haya nadie que se le asemeje. Fue tan grande e importante como José Antonio Páez, el primer rey de la baraja… (249)

With this comment, the biography ends. El Viejito, having narrated Guzmán's life and expounded his view of Venezuelan history at length, then disappears, never to return to the *tertulia*. It is notable that the final words of Guzmán's biography say nothing about the man himself, but rather turn to the *reyes de la baraja* theory of history, and where precisely Guzmán fits into this dynastic succession of Venezuelan leaders. This codification of history is discussed in detail in the next section, but it is first imperative to answer two key questions relating to Herrera Luque's biography. Firstly, how it compares to his previous biographical novels; and secondly, how compelling it is.

Certainly, many of Herrera Luque's formulæ remain unchanged from his previous biographical works. He includes a vast array of details – as is the case with Boves and with Gómez – to demonstrate how Guzmán has developed throughout his life, which is itself rigidly regulated into different stages. This is a perennial technique of Herrera Luque's, but in this novel it helps to specify a chronological order, since the framing narrative renders *Los cuatro reyes* less linear than the previous works (and nor do its chapters begin with exact dates). This structure also tracks the gradual psychological development of Guzmán. His emotional and philosophical evolution is depicted in a rather more persuasive fashion than those of Boves or Gómez, being far more logical and notably less stop-start. Consider, for example, this passage, taken from the opening of Chapter Seven just after Guzmán's victory in the Federal Wars:

> El triunfo, como le ha dicho su padre, tiene el don de hacer nuevos amigos, reconciliar a los enemigos y aproximar a los distantes. No hay oportunistas sin oportunidades, y ¡ay! de aquellos que las dejen pasar. Antoñito ya no es el hijo de papá Leocadio, el mozo treintañero, a quien se expulsó del país por la Galipanada; ahora es el General Antonio Guzmán Blanco, Jefe de los Ejércitos Federales del Centro; el genial estratega, que condujo las huestes de Falcón a la victoria. Ya no tiene veintinueve años, sino treinta y cuatro; ya no vacila, ni balbucea, manda. […] De aquellas suaves maneras no resta nada. Ahora es imperioso, tajante y decidido. Sus ademanes son bruscos y enérgicos, mandando a la porra

> al más pintado. Escatima sonrisas y parabienes. Lleva el rostro adusto y altivo el talante. Recibe seco a los relicitadores, los mismos que lo menospreciaron y que ahora acuden como pegones. (96)

This victory represents a symbolic adulthood for Guzmán (perhaps as Antoñanzas's death does for Boves) and his emergence from the long shadow of his childhood trauma and that of his father. Yet Herrera Luque often to struggles to provide compelling explanations for *how* these changes have come about, often having El Viejito rely on exposition, on the interpretations of Guzmán by his contemporaries, or on long interior monologues from the dictator himself that detail his personal and political decision-making processes. This latter technique notably sets *Los cuatro reyes* apart from Herrera Luque's earlier biographical works. While the writer certainly sought to examine the instincts and thought processes of the royalist *caudillo* – both in the first chapters of *Boves*, which are imitated to a degree here – and of *El Bagre*, it is their *instincts* that ultimately take precedence. Boves and Gómez are frequently animalised and seen to act according to primal or inexplicable impulses: their base intuitions, their senses, a desire for revenge, and the almost supernatural abilities that (in Gómez's case) they are ascribed. This is not without reason: to differing degrees, Herrera Luque *intended* to portray them as unreadable, as embodiments of processes that were incomprehensible to the *mantuano* class that governed Venezuela, and as forces of nature who illustrated fundamental schisms within the Venezuelan nation. Guzmán Blanco, on the other hand, can always be understood: his motives are clear, and Herrera Luque provides a cogent and reasonably sophisticated account of his political principles. Boves and Gómez lack these.

A further distinction between Guzmán and those protagonists is Herrera Luque's examination of his family relationships. Gómez's family members and lovers *are* depicted, and Inés Corrales and María Trinidad have an important influence on Boves, but in those novels we know little of their family dynamics. Antonio Leocadio is shown to exercise an important role throughout his son's life, for good and for ill, and Guzmán's relationship with Doña Carlota is described in detail. Unlike Boves and Gómez, Guzmán married, and his relationship with Ana Teresa plays an important role in understanding his psychological makeup. Early in Part Two, Guzmán displays a dismissive

attitude towards women, perhaps the result of his many failed relationships ('para eso y nada más sirven las mujeres: para descargarse, cuando uno lo necesita; o para que le paran hijos, cuando uno los quiera' [92]). His marriage to Ana Teresa is a curious one and emphasises the heavy Freudian undertones of Guzmán's relationship with his mother; Ana Teresa is continually compared to the latter ('era tan cicatera como su progenitora' [128]; 'Guzmán la quería con agradecimiento y con ternura, tanto por sus desvelos para con él, como por el filial trato que le prodigaba a Doña Carlota, su madre' [133]; 'Ana Teresa, con su bondadoso ser y quehacer tan parecido a Doña Carlota' [134]). Ana Teresa is thus de-sexualised and comes to represent a substitute mother for Guzmán. Their marriage is affectionate and Ana Teresa remains resolutely loyal, but it is a sexless and essentially utilitarian match. Guzmán makes a cynical note of this before beginning an affair with her sister Tasia – an affair which itself reiterates the indelible presence of Doña Carlota in her son's sex life:

> Cuánta razón tenía Mahoma cuando permitió a los hombres casarse con cuantas mujeres pudieran amar. Ana Teresa es un ángel, la mujer perfecta para un hombre de mi rango: elegante, fina y leal. Es ideal para fundar una dinastía: bella, sana y de las mejores familias. Todo es paz en derredor suyo. Pero yo no estoy hecho para la paz. Necesito la inquietud, el movimiento, el peligro, el triunfo o la derrota. Tasia, a diferencia de Ana Teresa, es el demonio. Arde su carne, tiene en la boca una vagina y en la vagina una boca. Su piel y sus pezones son suaves y firmes, como huevos de paloma.
> El deseo por Tasia lo enloquece. Se sabe igualmente deseado. Sin miedo a las consecuencias abandonó la cama, disponiéndose a bajar las escaleras. Tomaría posesión de Tasia, por más que su madre durmiese en la misma alcoba, contigua a la de Ana Teresa. (138)

Even in this episode, the moment at which the often effeminate Guzmán Blanco is presented at his most masculine, demonstrating sexual appetites more akin to those of Boves and Gómez, Herrera Luque still undermines him, concluding this passionate affair with an episode that renders Guzmán faintly ridiculous. One night, Ana Teresa overhears her husband and sister having sex, and raises an alarm; Guzmán, in response, 'ordenó al corneta toque de generala para acallar el escándalo. Fue peor el remedio que el daño […] Despertó Caracas a las tres de la mañana' (135).[553] Having seen sweat stains on Tasia's bed and mistaken them for urine, a servant spreads the rumour

[553] The commotion caused in this scene – Guzmán's escapades wake the entire city – are reminiscent of *El otoño del patriarca*, in which life in the city comes to a stop when the dictator has sex.

that 'era tan grande el miedo de Guzmán Blanco, que se mió de susto. Yo lo creía más macho' (138). Here, as in innumerable examples from *En la casa del pez*, bodily functions undercut a protagonist humbled by his own appetites – though this also has the regrettable effect of curtailing the exploration of an interesting, little-explored facet of Guzmán's character.

His family life more broadly is very selectively depicted by Herrera Luque. What might ordinarily be a poignant moment as the ailing dictator confesses his undying love for his wife and children seems out of place, as they are hardly mentioned before this. Herrera Luque's omission of this aspect of Guzmán's character is curious, particularly when one takes into account the words of María Elena González Deluca in her 2007 biography of Guzmán:

> La correspondencia de Guzmán Blanco, en distintos archivos y colecciones, es como una lupa puesta sobre su carácter, sobre todo en los años de su mayor actuación pública. La correspondencia privada, en especial las cartas casi diarias a su esposa Ana Teresa, muchas escritas en campañas militares o en medio de graves conflictos personales, retratan una personalidad que no desdice de la que pinta su actuación oficial. Pero visto a la luz de lo cotidiano y de las trivialidades casi ridículas en las que insiste, resulta desconcertante el perfil público tan solemne que lo caracteriza. Impresiona, sobre todo la gama variopinta de sus preocupaciones en abierta exhibición, hasta en las minucias, de su naturaleza dominante y controladora; también su talento para seducir y su singular celo por los problemas y nimiedades de su familia inmediata, su atención solícita y tirana, pero también tierna, a la esposa, a los hijos, y a otros familiares de un círculo relativamente estrecho.[554]

González's assertions are entirely correct. In Guzmán's correspondence, one discerns a genuine tenderness towards his wife and children in the near daily letters and telegrams he sent. During the illness of his children Ana Teresa and Andrés Antonio – neither mentioned by Herrera Luque – Guzmán stated that 'estoy martirizado, no solo por la enfermedad de la niñita, sino por lo afectada que estás tu'.[555] While separated from his wife in Europe in 1879, he wrote 'Adiós, mi amor; tú eres lo único que me falta. Hasta abril o mayo. Un beso para cada uno de mis ángeles';[556] from Caracas later that year, he wrote in her absence 'no tengo la impresión de estar en casa, porque mi

554 María Elena González Deluca, *Antonio Guzmán Blanco* (Caracas: Editora El Nacional, 2007), 96.
555 Rafael Ramón Castellanos, *Guzmán Blanco en la intimidad* (Caracas: Publicaciones Seleven, 1980), 371.
556 R. R. Castellanos, 417.

hogar eres tú, única y dulce felicidad de mi existencia'.[557] Quite why Herrera Luque neglected to explore this facet of Guzmán's life when his correspondence was readily available – *documentos* that reveal the depths of the *hombre* behind them – is uncertain.

The primary drawback of Guzmán's biography, however, is the excessive guidance it receives from the presence of El Viejito, who takes a far more active role in fashioning his listeners' (and the reader's) view of Guzmán's character and actions than does the detached, omniscient narrator of *Boves* and *En la casa del pez*. Too little is left to the reader's imagination, and there is no room for the *ambivalencia* that acts to the aesthetic benefit of *En la casa del pez*. There is little room for interpretation, with authoritative judgements being handed down (as in the line 'Guzmán, con todos sus defectos […], tenía un gran virtud: su genial capacidad administrativa, que lamentablemente anulaba con su codicia y su irrefrenable tendencia al peculado' [210], which illustrates the 'actitud moralizante'[558] of Herrera Luque in his final years).

Nonetheless, there are qualities to the biography of Guzmán that surpass those of Boves and Gómez. Chief among these is the level to which he represents more general continental, or even universal, concerns about historical processes and around power. Certain questions approached within the novel, such as that of nation-building (a perennial Latin American concern), are of broader resonance – Venezuela was not alone in being 'siete países en uno' (84) – while the 'civilising' aspect of Guzmán, and his role as a kind of enlightened despot, again recalls the age-old battle between civilisation and barbarism ('¿Qué prefieren, la espada de Guzmán o el machete de los bárbaros?' [203]). This likewise informs his split loyalties and the damage inflicted on his political authority and his national identity, as explored through his abandonment of Venezuela for Paris. There are, additionally, many interesting reflections on the nature of power, its transience, and its corrupting influence. When writers of dictator novels were able to transcend merely writing about 'the problems of dictatorships, *caudillismo*, *caciquismo*, militarism and the like' and instead 'unite the specific instance – Francia, Rosas, Estrada Cabrera, Gómez, Pinochet – with the more

[557] R. R. Castellanos, 420.
[558] Viera Rojas, 142.

universal concerns of tyranny, power and evil',[559] their works achieved wider resonance. Herrera Luque's attempts to link Guzmán with universal concerns are repeated and sincere, but he fails to establish this connection fully. When discussing the nefarious side to political power, Herrera Luque's own cynicism is readily apparent alongside Guzmán's. For example, Antonio Leocadio's warning to his son about the false promise of revolutions may again reflect the writer's own despondency at contemporary events in Venezuela and his regret at his role in the revolution of 23rd January:

> —No creas en revolucionarios —le había dicho a su hijo—. Todo cuanto quieren es un quítate tú para ponerme yo. Las ideas políticas, al igual que las banderas, son meros pretextos para voltear la tortilla. Si estás arriba, todo es sonrisa y adulación, si estás abajo, todo se vuelve menosprecio. (15)

Central to the biography is the extent to which Guzmán embodied both power and the Venezuelan nation, or incarnated the historical processes that shaped a particular era. The central principle of *Los cuatro reyes* is a 'great man' theory of history – the belief that the Venezuelan state was more closely embodied through its leaders than its populace. Though his ambitions are unrealised, Guzmán regards himself as the unifier of Venezuela, a nation that he does not only modernise but rather endeavours to create in his own image, and attempts to dominate through a unification of national identity with his own person:

> Al fin y al cabo, soy el artífice de esta nueva Venezuela. Por más que Falcón detente el poder. Las armas y el prestigio son míos, además de las fuentes de las que se nutre la Federación. Si las masas populares y los representantes de la medianía me tienen como su caudillo por haberlo conducido hacia la victoria, el mantuanaje, los godos, la llamada gente decente a la que pertenezco por nacimiento, educación y coexistencia, me tienen como salvaguarda de sus intereses, contra el abuso de esos zambos subidos de grupo y la codicia de los cabezones corianos. Por eso se han reconciliado conmigo, me han envuelto con sus melindres, me recuerdan parentescos olvidados, me llaman Antoñito tú, expresión típica de los caraqueños para dar a entender que son íntimos del alma. Soy el fiel de la balanza en Venezuela; si desaparezco, se encontrarán las partes en pugna de nuevo enfrentadas. (107)

[559] Gerald Martin, *Journeys Through the Labyrinth* (London: Verso, 1989), 266.

This proves ephemeral. However, perhaps the greatest strength of this novel is Guzmán's being cast as an illustrative figure. His personality, though extensively portrayed by Herrera Luque, is ultimately of secondary importance. Where Herrera Luque succeeds is using Guzmán's biography as an entry point into his re-codified vision of modern Venezuelan history. Regardless of his historical importance or lack thereof, Guzmán embodies an era that itself forms a key link in the concatenation of Venezuelan history – which thus raises the question of whether this novel is primarily *about* Antonio Guzmán Blanco at all.

IV. The Return of 'Great Man' History

The most plausible explanation for Herrera Luque's portrait of Guzmán Blanco's being far less compelling than those of Boves and Gómez is a simple one: as a biographical subject in and of himself, he is comparatively unimportant. Despite the writer's claims of the historical and literary value of producing the first biography of Guzmán, and the depiction in *Los cuatro reyes* of the corrupting influence of power, the interest of the biography is secondary. Rather, Herrera Luque appears to have chosen this subject as a means of opening a wider discussion of the patterns that Venezuela's history has followed. Even the title says nothing about the importance of Guzmán himself, but rather alludes to the longer historical succession of leaders into which he fits. Herrera Luque expounds and propagates this theory of the *reyes de la baraja* throughout the novel; at times, the novel's primary purpose seems to be to prove this hypothesis.

Herrera Luque's views of history shifted substantially over the course of his life. At the outset of his literary career, he believed, of course, that Venezuela's *truest* history was a plural one – that is to say, the nation's past and its impact on the present could best be understood through individual histories comprised of legend, anecdote, song, and oral accounts like those handed down to him by his grandparents. These histories were living and dynamic, and existed alongside – and were often asphyxiated by – the canonical, state-sanctioned 'great man' accounts of Venezuela's

development. Herrera Luque positioned himself in opposition to the fact that (in Isaiah Berlin's words) 'history, as it is normally written, usually represents 'political' – public – events as the most important, while spiritual – 'inner' – events are largely forgotten; yet *prima facie* it is they – the 'inner' events – that are the most real, the most immediate experience of human beings'.[560] With differing degrees of success, and employing a variety of methods (chiefly anecdote, essay, and psychoanalytical conjecture), his novelisations of history in *Boves*, *En la casa del pez,* and other novels, notably *Los amos del Valle*, seemed to accord with Berlin's statement. The most effective passages of *Boves* are those in which the development of the *caudillo*'s temperament is expounded – and, as a consequence, his actions afforded an explanation, however rudimentary. Many of the most memorable parts of *En la casa del pez* take place far away from the struggle between Gómez and the Caracas oligarchy, in brothels, cells and humble homes. These earlier novels closely reflect the visions of the past that the younger Herrera Luque had wished to revivify.

Towards the end of his life, however, Herrera Luque instead began seeking to re-codify Venezuelan history into a decidedly more flattened, neatly packaged version of itself. Nowhere is this more apparent than in *Los cuatro reyes de la baraja*. The novel's framing narrative, where historical patterns are discussed explicitly and systematised by El Viejito, once again sets out Herrera Luque's core belief that the essence of Venezuela – the country's collective soul – was incarnated by, and can best be read through, the four men most closely associated with the concept of political power throughout its history. These are, of course, José Antonio Páez, Antonio Guzmán Blanco, Juan Vicente Gómez, and Rómulo Betancourt.

For El Viejito, codifier and noveliser of Venezuelan history in *Los cuatro reyes*, these men 'son la encarnación de Venezuela en cuatro momentos de su devenir. Son las cuatro caras de nuestro país en el siglo y medio que lleva de existencia. Los reyes de la baraja son Venezuela' (250). Elsewhere, they are described as 'los hombres que a raíz de un cataclismo social o en medio de una brecha histórica han podido cambiar el destino de nuestro país respondiendo al mandato de la voluntad colectiva' (166). This almost recalls Spengler's statement that 'there are moments […] when the

[560] Berlin, 15.

individual feels himself to be identical with Destiny, the centre of the world, and his own personality seems to him almost as a covering in which the history of the future is about to clothe itself"[561]). The refrain of the four men embodying Venezuela crops up repeatedly in the novel, usually uttered by El Viejito. Herrera Luque adhered rigidly to his 'reyes de la baraja' theory of history at this point; it was the vision of history that he sought to promote, and its continual repetition certainly has a rather didactic feel.[562] The novel even seems, at times, to function as a kind of manifesto for the view of Venezuelan history (in line with Brown's statement about the function of literature under Pérez Jiménez, for whose regime Herrera Luque had, of course, expressed nostalgia) that the writer wished to propagate.

This view of Venezuelan history was not, however, original to Herrera Luque, and nor did it represent an abrupt turnaround. He appears to have developed it over the course of many years, and there are hints towards it in previous novels, even when he was talking at length about the transience of *–ismos* and political legacies in the country. As early as 1934, in a text referenced in the previous chapter and written while Gómez still ruled Venezuela, Fernando González wrote that:

> Sólo la historia de Venezuela puede escribirse en tres capítulos que tienen por títulos tres hombres: Páez, Guzmán y Gómez.
> Hay otros tres de menor importancia: José Tadeo Monagas, Crespo y Cipriano Castro.
> El primero sirvió de puente para el advenimiento de Guzmán, o el liberalismo; y los otros dos para el de Gómez.
> Los demas – unos trece – han sido suplefaltas y ensayos desgraciados.[563]

Meanwhile, the highly influential Guillermo Morón, a favourite historian and personal friend of Herrera Luque, wrote in 1977 (curiously, long after Betancourt's departure from power) that:

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[561] Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West: An Abridged Edition*, ed. Helmut Werner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 385-86.
[562] This is perhaps *Los cuatro reyes*'s primary flaw. The theorising of the *tertulieros* is often illuminating, but becomes repetitive, particularly by the end of the novel. In *La historia fabulada*, the Autor notes that 'es más fatigoso crear dentro de la verdad que repetir la historia conocida por todas' (*HF 2*, 269) – but it is the repetition of this new theory of history that becomes *fatigosa* for the reader.
[563] F. González, 13.

> El político que va a heredar el proceso caudillista venezolano es Rómulo Betancourt. […] El más ligero análisis histórico podrá llevar su nombre al cuarto lugar en la sucesión caudillista desde 1830, en el sentido de caudillismo politico con impronta histórica de poder. Creo que José Antonio Páez, Antonio Guzmán Blanco, Juan Vicente Gómez y Rómulo Betancourt son los cuatro caudillos venezolanos de mayor relieve.[564]

These writers' contributions may or may not have influenced Herrera Luque's conception of Venezuela's political history as being in some senses dynastic – that is to say, defined and demarcated by the 'reigns' of historical leaders who 'nunca fueron presidentes sino monarcas vitalicios' (79). More than once, he commented on the nation's leaders' having acted 'como si Venezuela fuese un reino […] En Venezuela ha quedado siempre en el aire un olorcillo de monarquía' (156). Boves occasionally thinks of himself as a king, and there are numerous moments in the latter parts of *En la casa del pez* in which Gómez considers handing power to his relatives. In this vein, historical coincidences, auspicious dates and the respective lifespans of Venezuela's leaders were a source of much interest to Herrera Luque. Venezuela's history is, indeed, 'llena de coincidencias' (*HF 2*, 9). For example, Gómez's dates of birth and death were the same as Bolívar's, and 'Betancourt was born in 1908, the same year that Juan Vicente Gómez seized power as the last of Venezuela's caudillo dictators'.[565] These 'cosas del destino' (10) are commented on explicitly in *Los cuatro reyes*: the coinciding of the anniversaries of Venezuela's foundation and Bolívar's death, for example, is noted to be highly curious. Herrera Luque liked to divide Venezuela's history into eras that corresponded to the lifespans of its protagonists. Frank Kermode writes that 'Our sense of epoch is gratified above all by the ends of centuries';[566] in Herrera Luque's works, it is regulated by individuals. In *En la casa del pez* and *Los amos del Valle*, chapters and their sub-sections are divided according to the births and deaths of major characters. Consider in the former work (described as a meditation on Venezuela's 'continuidad dinástica' [*CDP*, 10]) how 'la muerte de Santiago Blanco

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564 Guillermo Morón, 'Historia política contemporánea de Venezuela (1936-1976)', in *Jahrbuch für Geschichte Lateinamerikas*, vol. 14, no. 1 (December 1977), pp. 350-68 (360).
565 Alexander, 19.
566 Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968 [1966]), 96.

rompió un puente largo y vivo que iba de una historia a la otra' (*CDP*, 54), or how that of Víctor Alberto 'conmovió la ciudad […] Todo parecía anunciar el fin de una época' (*CDP*, 209). During Castro's uprising, the *caudillo* predicts a symbolic and auspicious transfer of power from Guzmán to himself, coinciding with the new century and ushering in a new epoch defined and shaped by Castro:

> —Con el siglo que muere —se dice Don Cipriano— también muere una época. Es de buen agurio que la Estrella de Guzmán se apague en el preciso instante en que la mía despunta en el firmamento de Venezuela. Ha terminado la era de Guzmán, comienza la mía. —Gómez y Tarazona, que lo escuchan, simulan extasiarse en la contemplación de un pernil que se dora al fuego. (*CDP,* 161-62)

The first incidence of the term *reyes de la baraja* comes near the end of *En la casa del pez,* when a minor character muses as Gómez lays dying. He talks of 'el gran padrote de aquella inmensa prole' as 'el tercer rey de la baraja […] Dos ases lo preceden: Páez y Guzmán. Entre los tres han centrado a su alrededor ciento veinte años de vida republicana. ¿Cuando aparecerá el cuarto?' (*CDP*, 552), though we note that the precise contours of the theory differ substantially from those set out in *Los cuatro reyes*. In Herrera Luque's 1978 essay on Betancourt, he noted that 'cuatro hombres centran la vida venezolana en más de siglo y medio de era republicana' (*BCH*, 65), explaining that 'individuos egregios, llámense líderes, profetas o gobernantes pueden al igual que enzimas acelerar, congelar o degradar los procesos sociales. Páez estancó la revolución. Guzmán la fustigó para que avanzara. Juan Vicente Gómez la hizo retroceder' (*BCH*, 65). This statement indicates that the four leaders were capable only of modifying social processes that were already in motion. Although El Viejito notes that historians 'parecen ignorar que si a los hombres los hace la historia, son los hombres, a su vez, los que la hacen a ella' (251), *Los cuatro reyes* unambiguously depicts Páez, Guzmán, Gómez and Betancourt – inheritors of a long personalist tradition – as the embodiment of Venezuela. They not only represent its stage of development and the social problems it exhibits, but constitute the form and nature of power itself. They harness and embody the democratic will of its people – a positivistic callback to Vallenilla Lanz's *gendarme necesario* that also recalls Rousseau's statement that 'men cannot generate new strength, but only unify and control the

forces already existing'.[567] In his biography of Betancourt, Caballero says that these four men's domination of the country was such that Venezuelans' very identity came to be defined either in support of or in opposition to their regimes: 'nos hemos visto obligados a definirnos frente a ellos: hemos sido […] paecistas y antipaecistas; guzmancistas y antiguzmancistas; gomecistas y antegomecistas; finalmente, betancuristas y antibetancuristas'[568].

For Herrera Luque, this is symptomatic of Venezuela's immaturity as a nation. In one exchange between El Viejito and his *contertulieros*, the old man suggests that the long mandates of the *cuatro reyes* are themselves useful as a benchmark against which to measure Venezuela's progress (or, at least, its outward semblance of progress):

> —Los jefes de la horda —siguió impertérrito, ante la mirada oblicua del policía—, llámense caciques, reyes o presidentes vitalicios, son los responsables directos y únicos del atraso o del progreso de sus pueblos, mientras éstos no alcancen el nivel de desarrollo de los llamados cultos, a los que falsamente imitamos en la forma. Cuando los países crecen y llegan a la edad de la razón, sus mandatarios dejan de ser fuentes causales, para ser puros efectos de la voluntad colectiva.[569] (76-77)

The narrator notes almost immediately afterwards that the *cuatro reyes* are 'causa y efecto del estar y sentir de una idiosincrasia' (77). This comment is partially at odds with the hypothesis expounded throughout the novel, and recalls Herrera Luque's treatment of Gómez in *En la casa del pez*, where he seems at turns to be both afforded and denied agency. The version of Gómez depicted by El Viejito in *Los cuatro reyes* subscribes to the narrator's view of history. Rather than taking form as an observation put into the mouth of a minor character, as occurs in *En la casa del pez*, the idea of the *cuatro reyes* becomes a reformulation of Venezuelan history imposed from above by the clairvoyant dictator and then accepted as fact almost unanimously by the listening *tertulieros*. Gómez calls *himself* 'el tercer rey de la baraja' (9), and it is Gómez, rather than El Viejito, who first mentions

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567 Rousseau, 48.

568 Manuel Caballero, *Rómulo Betancourt, politico de nación* (Caracas: Alfadil, 2004), 417.

569 After this, El de la Nariz Roja argues that Venezuela's leaders 'no son genuinos representantes del pueblo venezolano' (77), unlike Roosevelt, Churchill and De Gaulle, who are the 'más viva expresión' (77) of their countries. Reflecting the occasionally contradictory nature of the *cuatro reyes* theory, El Viejito unhelpfully replies that 'lo son y no lo son', without any 'intención de aclarar la dilema' (77).

the *cuatro reyes* idea and identifies individual leaders with their respective suit of cards ('Páez es el Rey de Espadas, poque tuvo que echar más machete que todos nosotros juntos; Guzmán es el de copas, por ser *fisno* y elegante, y yo, como no tengo modales, según dicen los malos hijos de la patria, no puedo ser otro que el Rey de Bastos' [10]). Gómez likewise identifies Betancourt as the man destined to lead Venezuela into an economic boom ('tendrá que ser necesariamente el Rey de Oro, lo que le asegurará a Venezuela, no sé si para bien o para mal, mucho dinero, progreso y riqueza' [11] – note the ambivalence here).

A central plot point is the ability of each *rey* to recognise and thereby to anoint (recalling Juan Palacios) his successor using an 'intuición sobrenatural'[570] (252) in encounters that represent a sort of metempsychosis. One incarnation of Venezuela's collective unconscious symbolically dies, and another is born ('cuando muere un rey nace otro rey' [10]). Gómez, in accordance with Herrera Luque's tendency to animalise Venezuela's dictators, describes this capacity thus:

> Tan solo puedo decirle que así como los tigres huelen a los tigres mucho antes de que los sientan otros, a los reyes sucede lo mismo. De un vistazo reconocen al que habrá de sucederles, mucho antes de que sueñen en ser coronados. (11)

The Gómez/Betancourt encounter has already been discussed at length, as has Gómez's meeting with Guzmán and El Viejito's (allegedly firsthand) account of the dying Guzmán's learning of the triumph of the *Revolución Restaurador*, at which point he remembers 'quién es [Gómez] y también lo que avizoré en un futuro' (13). Guzmán compares their encounter to 'aquella energía extraña que le sentía José Antonio Páez en la Viñeta en 1843, cuando era el dueño y señor de Venezuela' (13) – upon his second meeting with Páez, the latter informs him that 'siempre supe que serías tú quien habría de sustituirme' (12). Lovera summarises this chain of encounters as follows:

> Dentro de su acción la cadena fue tal que cada uno conoció al otro, comprendió a tiempo quién sería su succesor. Si Páez y Guzmán se conocieron; si Gómez pudo alguna vez ver

[570] It is worth noting that, during his exile, Betancourt's supporters promoted his own supernatural abilities, creating 'something of a mystical aura which was of considerable importance in establishing him as a popular leader among the still largely illiterate and superstitious masses of the population' (Alexander, 118).

> a Betancourt, ello no sucedió entre Guzmán Blanco y Gómez. Su encuentro es creación imaginaria de Herrera Luque, topetón bellamente fabulado.[571]

Herrera Luque once claimed to have had similar oracular abilities himself. A 1978 letter, posthumously located in his archives, detailed a tipsy meeting with his one-time friend, thwarted political hope, and future *bête noire* Carlos Andrés Pérez in 1967. He spoke of 'La intuición casi mágica que a veces me abruma – y que no vean en esta facultad los perceptivos una prueba más de mis arbitrariedades'.[572] Attending a reception, this intuition induced him to approach 'aquel hombre joven, afable y enérgico que para aquel entonces no tenía la más negra imagen de policía asesino, perseguidor implacable y exterminador de las izquierdas',[573] whom Herrera Luque recognised as extremely charismatic and destined for high office. Continuing the account, the writer said that:

> Por obra de algunos tragos o de esa necesidad que asalta al profeta de enunciar sus juicios le dije en voz alta y en medio de una algazara burlona de los presentes a quienes seguramente pareció absurdo mi juicio: "Tú serás Presidente."[574]

A variant of this phrasing features in *Los cuatro reyes* when Guzmán tells Gómez 'serás el Jefe Único. El señor de los señores. El más grande mandamás' (12), potentially suggesting that Herrera Luque's *intuición* served as the inspiration for that of his fictionalised dictators. An altogether different figure, though one whose spectre looms large over the uncertain conclusion of *Los cuatro reyes* when we analyse it from today's perspective, claimed to have had a similar encounter with Pérez while he was a young lieutenant at a military academy in 1974, which might also be read as a symbolic transference of power:[575]

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[571] Lovera, 627.
[572] Lovera, 460.
[573] Ibid.
[574] Ibid.
[575] Chávez made remarks about *Los cuatro reyes de la baraja* at the swearing-in of his new cabinet in February 2007 – one of the very few works of Venezuelan literature to which he ever made reference, in fact (Viera Rojas, 649).

> Suele la historia tejer secretas correspondencias. De seguro, Pérez pasó cerca del joven Chávez, sin reparar en él, sin mirarlo. Jamás imaginó que un soldado que todavía no salía de la Academia Militar podría años más tarde, durante su segundo gobierno, conspirar en su contra, intentar derrocarlo violentamente. Tampoco pensó que ese soldado podría llegar a ser presidente de Venezuela. El joven Hugo, sin embargo, vivió esa misma escena de otra manera. El 13 de marzo de 1974, escribió en su diario: «Después de esperar bastante tiempo llegó el nuevo Presidente. Cuando lo veo, quisiera que algún día me tocara llevar la responsabilidad de toda una Patria, la Patria del Gran Bolívar».[576]

We see, therefore, that power and – crucially – its legitimacy flow between the *reyes de la baraja* in a series of symbolic coronations. Herrera Luque does not account for the source of this legitimacy, but it must stem from something that goes beyond the personal qualities they exhibit. Repeated attempts are made in *Los cuatro reyes* to ascertain what features they have in common. To El Diplomático's dismissive statement that 'son expresiones de cuatro mundos diferentes' (250), El Viejito replies that 'tienen innumerables rasgos en común, desde su actitud ante las grandes decisiones hasta detalles insignificantes para los historiadores' (251). Beyond a shared level of autocracy, bravery and self-interest, hardly any explanation is given for the former; the latter are, similarly, not fully borne out in the narrative. Indeed, the attributes they *do* share are not consistent. Herrera Luque hopes to depict them as 'la más vívida expresión de nosotros los venezolanos' (251) – the manifestations of Venezuela's very essence. If not wholly immutable, one might expect this essence to be constant by its own nature. The basis of Venezuela's national make-up and identity has to be depicted as in some way unchanging; to depict it otherwise would invalidate many of the claims made in *Los viajeros de Indias* and in *Boves*. However, the four men's personalities, political outlooks, and the aspects of Venezuelan nationhood that they represented differed sharply. There are very few similarities between the rough *llanero* warlord Páez (cast by Herrera Luque and others as a spiritual successor to Boves, and the man who won the plainsmen's support after the Asturian's death) and the educated Betancourt, who routinely denied that he was a *caudillo* or personalist leader. Their actions, likewise, responded to two wholly different worlds. Nor did the near-illiterate coffee farmer Gómez and the excessively refined Guzmán bear many similarities. El Viejito's accounting for these supposed similarities is tenuous (and he does not, in any case, group

[576] Cristina Marcano and Alberto Barrera Tyszka, *Hugo Chávez sin uniforme* (Barcelona: Debate, 2006), 30.

Betancourt in with the other three here[577]), and could apply to almost any archetype or fictionalised version of the Latin American dictator-figure, from Facundo to Asturias's President, to García Márquez's Patriarch, to Vargas Llosa's Trujillo:[578]

> Fueron leales amigos, implacables enemigos y hombres valerosos. Fueron ladrones y aprovechadores, malos maridos y mujeriegos. Amaron a sus madres sobre todas las cosas, admiraron profundamente a sus progenitores y antepusieron por encima de los intereses del país su sentido familiar y tribal. Los tres descendían de canarios; llevaban sangre de los conquistadores y de las razas vencidas; procedían de hogares modestos económica y socialmente. Los tres fueron jugadores y deportistas, madrugadores y desconfiados. Amigos y protectores de los extranjeros. Enemigos de la letra escrita. (251)

An earlier attempt to group them together also comes across more as an enumeration of chance similarities, but offhandedly makes an extremely important point:

> Cada uno de ellos ha ocupado largos lapsos históricos, con las manos de la tramoya desvergonzadamente al descubierto, moviendo títeres a su antojo, haciendo sentir hasta los tuétanos de los venezolanos su omnipotencia y predestinación. Además de todopoderosos son omnipotentes, artífices, guías y conductores de la horda. Como en las fratrías huérfanas que se someten a los mandatos del hermano mayor, fungen de adultos sin dejar de ser niños, al igual que la partida que conducen. (76)

As before, the notion of Venezuela as an immature nation is quite apparent, here likened to a disorganised *horda* (akin to the notion of the primal horde set out in Freud's *Totem and Taboo*) and an orphaned child again *desiring to be controlled* (though here by a brotherly figure rather than a Freudian tyrannical father). This logic is seen to an extent in *Boves*, with the conditions for the *llaneros*' revolt against the *mantuanos* already established, requiring only a leader who could exercise power and channel the collective will of this horde. Power and legitimacy in Venezuela are thus depicted as basic and instinctual concepts. In an interview with Betancourt, Alicia Freilich says that the key to leading the country legitimately is simply to be an *hombre* – a word that, 'en

[577] Elsewhere, El Viejito notes that Guzmán's education 'fue superficial y volandera, como siempre ha sucedido con los Reyes de la Baraja' (55), suggesting that a low level of instruction was common to each of the first three kings of the deck. Rómulo Betancourt, in contrast, was an educated, erudite, and very well-read man.
[578] El Viejito's account of their loyalty, however, sets them apart from these capricious characters.

venezolano, significa "el que sabe y manda y es obedecido"'.[579] According to a 'viejo refrán' (40) attributed to Gómez by El Señor de las Sillas, in Venezuela 'manda el que pueda, no el que quiera' (40) – or as Lamata's Boves puts it, 'en Venezuela no manda el que quiere, sino el que puede, y el que puede, soy yo'.[580]

Other autocratic figures in Venezuelan history, including Pérez Jiménez, Monagas and Falcón, failed to become *reyes* as they lacked 'la legitimidad de sus mandatos' (41) – legitimacy is critical as, without it, 'no basta la fuerza para gobernar' (41). Gómez notes that Presidents Linares Alcántara, Andueza Palacios, and Andrade were mere 'cartas con número' (254), being shallow imitations of the *reyes*. None of these figures is presented as able to possess the same legitimacy as the *reyes de la baraja*. In line with Herrera Luque's characterisation of Venezuela's leaders as avatars of a national soul, the *reyes*' legitimacy stems in part from their ability to respond to the realities of the Venezuela that they governed: what Morón termed their 'comprensión del medio humano donde ejercen su acción, asimilación de las realidades [y] constancia en la actividad política'.[581] This ability itself arises from the fact that these leaders realise 'el fuero de encarnar a Venezuela', for 'los pueblos, idea tan abstracta como la de Dios, se encarnan en sus gobernantes como ha ocurrido con los reyes tantas veces citados' (249).

The term 'abstracta' is fitting here. Herrera Luque's contention is that Boves, Gómez and Guzmán are embodiments rather than progenitors of the historical forces at play during their given eras, but precisely what these forces *were* is not always set out in clear terms – certainly not in Guzmán's case. Colomina-Garrigós suggests that 'el narrador parece buscar difuminar la responsabilidad histórica de estos personajes al conectar sus virtudes y defectos a aquellos típicos del pueblo venezolano en cada período histórico',[582] diminishing their agency. This notion concords with the Positivism that influenced Herrera Luque (though not with the Spenglerian conception of 'destiny', which is of profoundly unscientific). Echoing Hippolyte Taine's formula of *race, milieu, moment*,

[579] Alicia Freilich de Segal, *La Venedemocracia* (Caracas: Monte Ávila, 1978), 27.
[580] Lamata, 57:10-57:14.
[581] Morón, 360.
[582] Ibid.

Vallenilla Lanz had spoken of 'exponentes genuinos del medio y del momento, sometidos a las leyes de la evolución y del determinismo psicológico'.[583] Herrera Luque is at pains to emphasise this hypothesis throughout *Los cuatro reyes*. This didacticism has the effect, however, of reducing Venezuela's history to a mere 'compilación de ejemplos político-morales'[584] – a result profoundly antithetical to the writer's earlier desire to render Venezuelan history more plural and lifelike.

V. A Venezuelan Anti-Machiavelli?: *El abecedario de buen gobierno*

For Herrera Luque, the fact that the *reyes de la baraja* 'son la encarnación de Venezuela' (250) allows us to 'analizar sus virtudes y defectos' (250) as both proper to them and indicative of the wider make-up, temperament, and problems of the Venezuelan psyche. The dialogue between the two historical eras depicted in *Los cuatro reyes* allows for the drawing of parallelisms and meditations (often didactic ones) on the cyclical aspects of Venezuela's history and – notably – warnings for future governments. Herrera Luque was familiar with Niccolò Machiavelli's seminal Renaissance treatise on power *The Prince* (it is referenced in both *La huella perenne* [47] and *Los cuatro reyes*). There is a case to be made that his final novel is, like Machiavelli's work, a 'mirror for princes', at least in part. The chapter of the novel in which Guzmán Blanco sets out his principles of governance is titled, rather ironically given Guzmán's own excesses, 'Abecedario del buen gobierno'. Given that Herrera Luque had elsewhere talked at some length of the 'acción ejemplarizante' (*HF 1*, 34) of Venezuela's heroes, we might instead characterise *Los cuatro reyes* as an *abecedario del mal gobierno* or an anti-*Prince*; that is to say, a manual on what *not* to do as leader of Venezuela.

On one level, the historical patterns to which Herrera Luque points in *Los cuatro reyes* are reminiscent of that hackneyed maxim about those who fail to learn from history being condemned to repeat it. Certainly, the repetition (and even emulation) of previous failures by later rulers is a cornerstone of the *tertulieros*' comparisons between Guzmán and other figures. His overstepping

583 Laureano Vallenilla Lanz, *Disgregación e Integración* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1979 [1930]), 16.
584 Vallenilla Lanz, *Disgregación e Integración*, 11.

of his authority, and his eventual fall from power, echo Pérez Jiménez's own (as Colomina-Garrigós states, 'La novela versa sobre un dictador decimonónico y, al mismo tiempo, se enmarca temporalmente en otra dictadura más reciente, la de Marcos Pérez Jiménez'[585]). El Viejito criticises Pérez's disastrous 1957 plebiscite[586] as being akin to Guzmán's own undoing through his ill-advised personal and financial dealings with Europe ('postergando a su gente para echarse en manos de los europeos. El general con esta decisión se ha condenado a muerte' [256] – each action proves terminal for the respective dictator). Other historical 'echoes' are numerous, with leaders exhibiting the same fatal flaws or repeating the same mistakes. Guzmán and Pérez Jiménez's curtailing of press freedoms is commented upon in negative terms, as are successive presidents' extreme nepotism, personal loyalty, and vindictiveness. Most importantly, José Antonio Páez's defeat and subsequent return to power 'tras diez años de exilio' (81) is compared implicitly to Guzmán's own repeated restorations, and explicitly to Betancourt's prophesied (and realised) return after the inevitable fall of Pérez Jiménez.

Given the fraught political circumstances under which the novel was composed and published, however, we might extrapolate and regard it as a turn to the future. Its novelistic present might well take place in 1957-58, pregnant with the expectation of the return of Betancourt, but a convincing reading is that *Los cuatro reyes* really betrays Herrera Luque's anxieties around the state of Venezuela in 1991. In the foreword to the novel's first edition, his daughter Mariana mentions the two great questions that troubled him at the time of its writing: '¿Qué viene ahora? ¿Qué vendrá después si han muerto los reyes, y los hombres de a caballo?' (5).

Certainly, the novel is pervaded by the nervous anticipation of a new era's arrival. Historically, each period in Venezuelan history had been engendered by the arrival of the *rey* who represents it – 'Los

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585 Colomina-Garrigós, 81.

586 Herrera Luque made many anti-immigration comments in later life, chiefly aimed at the large waves of Spanish, Portuguese and Italian workers who moved to Venezuela during the post-war oil boom; they had been particularly encouraged to do so by Pérez Jiménez, who simultaneously 'reimposed the ban on the immigration of blacks' (Wright, 124). In Volume Two of *La historia fabulada*, the Autor laments how 'la identidad nacional se desvanece ante una inmigración masiva e incontrolada' (*HF 2*, 300). He criticised Pérez Jiménez's referendum as a cynical attempt by the dictator to extend his mandate and buy legitimacy through relying on the votes of recent arrivals from Europe, whom his regime had treated very favourably.

verdaderos reyes insuflan ráfagas de vida nuevo al tiempo nuevo, provocan, a despecho o no de su autoridad, cambios sustanciales en la vida y creencias de los gobernados' (81). An important component of the *reyes de la baraja* theory is the fact that the historical succession between them was marked by 'breves interregnos' (*CDP*, 11). For Alexander, this was a key feature of Venezuelan political history, whereby 'some "doctor" from the city would serve a short term as president as the nominee of a caudillo or as the beneficiary of a situation in which no caudillo had the power to seize the presidency on his own. Insurrection and coup d'état was the normal way of changing government'.[587] Continuing the deck of cards conceit, El Viejito speaks of historical leaders who have preceded or succeeded *reyes* de la baraja but proved unable to represent 'el centro y el poder de las ideas' (252) or 'cambiar sustancialmente el espíritu y los designios del rey' (253) as the deck's *caballos*. Under them, some undefined spirit of the *rey* – incarnation of the times and of Venezuela's essence – continues to govern, as with Betancourt, whose 'presencia sigue vigente y viva, a pesar de estar en el auxilio' (252) despite Pérez Jiménez's dictatorship. To Miliani, Herrera Luque described them as 'hombres complementarios',[588] identifying Monagas, Crespo, Castro and Pérez Jiménez as the *caballos* of Páez, Guzmán, Gómez and Betancourt respectively.

The inescapable undertone of *Los cuatro reyes de la baraja* is that the neat patterns that underscored Venezuela's history from Páez's day until Betancourt's are reaching their end. Herrera Luque establishes Venezuela as a 'larga cadena' (70), patterned, repetitive trajectory with cyclical aspects – a relentless, active force that ensures its own continuation by finding form in 'cuatro hombres […] providenciales'.[589] From the outset, the reader is told that this trajectory is ending – Gómez tells Pimentel that 'Usted tiene por delante, compadre, al cuarto *y último* rey de la baraja' (9, my emphasis), referencing Betancourt's own providential qualities and intimating a break with Venezuelan history that is to follow him. Later, El Viejito lets slip that the chain of betrayals that characterised Venezuela's bloody but nonetheless predictable history 'comienza con Páez traicionando a Bolívar y *culmina* con Pérez Jiménez asesinando a Delgado Chalbaud' (70, my emphasis). Herrera Luque appears to meditate on the prospect of a final break with what Velasco

[587] Alexander, 8.
[588] Miliani, 733.
[589] Miliani, 732.

characterises as a 'history marked more by continuities than by ruptures',[590] and a rupture 'between *governmental* stability and *systemic* stability'.[591] It is not one or another *-ismo* that is set to end, but the Venezuelan state as the writer and his readers know it, and perhaps history itself by extension – though not, given Herrera Luque's boundless pessimism, in the optimistic liberal mould of Fukuyama.

In the novel, Herrera Luque does not make any outright predictions as to what might come next. In 1990, however, he had foretold that 'el hombre normal se va a armar y desconocer al Estado, y va a venir una insurrección con la participación de los militares y el golpe de Estado'.[592] The final chapter of *Los cuatro reyes*, titled 'Sota, caballo, y rey' hints at the possibility of a clown or jack – more tragic, perhaps, than a king – governing Venezuela, and Gómez's final conversation with Pimentel suggests that one might yet appear. However, in Herrera Luque's final interviews, he seems to have predicted the eventual rise of another great dictator,[593] having already noted that exceptional autocrats 'surgen cada vez que se produce un vacío de poder y el sistema democrático se muestra insuficiente para asegurar la justicia, la paz y la dignidad' (*HF 1*, 71). The numerical limitations of the *reyes de la baraja* theory suggests, however, that whoever rose to power after the chaos of the post-Caracazo period would be unrecognisable in comparison to the autocrats who had gone before. As El Viejito vanishes into the shadows of the Panteón, his narratorial duties having ended, the deck of cards he holds aloft disappears with him, perhaps signifying the end of the historical cycles that it represents.

It is by no means a tenuous proposition, given the instructive intent that underlay Herrera Luque's later works, that *Los cuatro reyes de la baraja* can be read on various levels as an attempt to round off almost two centuries of Venezuelan history through its own novelisation, an instruction manual to future leaders of the country on precisely what *not* to do in positions of legitimacy and power, and a rumination on how Venezuela arrived at the situation of the late 1980s. The writer claimed

[590] Velasco, xiii.
[591] Smith, 92.
[592] Pantín, 700.
[593] The writer's positivist oulook and *ambivalencia* over Juan Vicente Gómez intensified in his later life; the *Autor* of *La historia fabulada* admits that 'en lo material las dictaduras tienen sus ventajas' (*HF 2*, 23).

of his characters that 'no sé si los condeno o los celebro'.[594] The nature of his biography of Guzmán Blanco and the *tertulieros*' accompanying analysis of his actions, personality, historical significance, and mistakes (alongside those of Venezuela's other pivotal historical leaders) recalls another way Herrera Luque characterised the aim of his novels: 'mirar virtudes, criticar vicios, y tratar de vislumbrar otro sendero'.[595] *Los cuatro reyes de la baraja* was his final attempt to assist his readers in understanding Venezuela's history and the patterns that governed it, so that this 'otro sendero' might become apparent to them and that they could, as his earlier statement had it, '[ver] claramente el futuro'. [596]

[594] Pantín, 699.
[595] Lovera, 629
[596] Soler Serrano interview.

Conclusion

No lessons, it is said, can be learned from history
because history, unlike science, cannot predict the future.

—E. H. Carr[597]

I. Diagnosis

Herrera Luque concluded *Los cuatro reyes de la baraja* on 14th April 1991, and though he doubtless intended to revise the work further, he believed that his 'tarea […] estaba cumplida'.[598] The novel's completion was followed within twenty-four hours by its writer's death. Herrera Luque suffered a fatal heart attack, aged 64, on 15th April 1991. Carlos Andrés Pérez declared three days of national mourning.

In her short preface to *Los cuatro reyes*, the writer's daughter Mariana spoke of the intense anxiety that assailed her father in his later years as he agonised over what the future held for the nation he had dedicated his life to dissecting, criticising, and novelising. 'Con esta incertidumbre', Mariana wrote, 'se fue su alma' (*4RB*, 5). The agnostic final sentence of *Los cuatro reyes* – the final sentence Herrera Luque would ever write – leaves us with an unresolved tension. It reads simply 'El tiempo lo dirá' (*4RB*, 260).

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[597] Carr, 63.
[598] Lovera, 739. Print editions of the novel conclude with the words 'FIN DE LA OBRA / 9 de marzo de 1991', but the typewritten manuscript held by the Biblioteca Nacional confirms that it was indeed finished on 14th April.

It has often been said that the role of the scientist, far more so than that of the artist, is to provide satisfactory answers to fundamental questions: to uncover empirical truths and to establish the immutable laws that govern and explain nature. Herrera Luque always characterised himself as a scientist first and foremost (frequently, no doubt, as a convenient means of sidestepping critical scrutiny of his literary works' aesthetic shortcomings), and adopted the role of a 'médico funcionario al servicio de una nación'.[599] What this meant in practice was often unclear, but the writer continually returned to his mantra of being imbued with a 'firme voluntad terapéutica' (*VI*, 28).

I have illustrated that his literary and political views developed significantly throughout his life. Herrera Luque was nevertheless obstinate by nature, and never deviated from his belief that Venezuela was a nation condemned to failure: a 'proyecto fallido'[600] mortally wounded by its twin congenital defects of the violent mental imbalances inherited from the conquistadors and its entrenched caste system. Venezuela's 'mal fundamental' was thus rooted in this 'trastorno de personalidad […] no en su circunstancia.'[601] That is to say, modern Venezuela's acute political crises were manifestations of what Hobbes termed 'the infirmities of a commonwealth […] that arise from an imperfect institution, and resemble the diseases of a natural body which proceed from a defectuous procreation'.[602] In one of his most memorable early newspaper articles, Herrera Luque issued what might be termed his medical mission statement: that is, the belief that the therapist should begin treating his patient 'por reconocer la naturaleza de sus males, la labor aniquilidora y el círculo vicioso impuesto por la enfermedad […] que lo envuelve desde sus tiempos más remotos' before commencing the 'acción rehabilitadora'.[603] He, the writer, was to be the medic, and his patient the Venezuelan nation.

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[599] Pierre Accoce and Pierre Rentchnick, *Aquellos enfermos que nos gobernaron*, trans. by Pedro Debrigode (Barcelona: Plaza & Janes, 1978), 297.
[600] Viera Rojas, 12.
[601] Herrera Luque, 'Venezuela, sociedad enferma?', in *Revista Nacional de Cultura,* vol. 192 (March-April 1970), pp. 18-22 (21).
[602] Hobbes, 210.
[603] Herrera Luque, 'Ante una sociedad perturbada'.

On this point, a question that has arisen repeatedly in the present study is that of how specifically Venezuelan Herrera Luque's concerns were. It would do the writer a disservice to conclude that his novels merely depict local instances of wider Latin American and even human phenomena, but many of the ideas he discusses are far from unique to Venezuela. Violent histories of racial struggles, bloodthirsty *caudillos*, flamboyant dictators, political repression, military coups, fraught relationships with foreign powers, mineral exploitation, and mass modernisation projects are common to virtually all Latin American nations. Indeed, the most renowned novels of dictatorship were aesthetic and commercial successes in large part due to their focus on universal themes of power, fear, and corruption – names and geographical locations were of secondary importance. There are many moments in Herrera Luque's novels when such universal themes, the desire for belonging common to Boves, Gómez and Guzmán perhaps foremost among them, are explored in detail. These are not, however, Herrera Luque's primary concerns; his discussion of universals is a by-product of his examination of particulars. His protagonists are the expression of the *alma* of a particular population indelibly marked by past traumas, a destructive 'genetic' composition, and a history decidedly more violent than that of its neighbours.

To prove this, I return to the writer's metaphor of Venezuela as a medical subject. The first and most important question Herrera Luque asked was why 'un pueblo, como un sujeto, viva continuamente en crisis – como es el caso de Venezuela'.[604] He overemphasised this conceit and expressed it inconsistently, but it is useful to extrapolate it briefly. A medic always treats a patient practically rather than theoretically. Disorders such as cancer, schizophrenia, and diabetes may take many forms and can affect any person. Yet a diagnosis and treatment of these conditions as they manifest themselves in one subject must be informed by how that one patient's mind or body is affected by the disease. This is the case with Herrera Luque and Venezuela. When he sought to 'mirar virtudes, criticar vicios, y tratar de vislumbrar otro sendero',[605] this was not for the supposed therapeutic benefit of Latin America or humanity as a whole. The intent behind all of his works was to examine the virtues and criticise the vices of Venezuela alone. If Venezuela was to be

[604] Ibid.
[605] Lovera, 629.

liberated from its past and its social, cultural and political stagnation, it was to be approached 'con la actitud de un maestro o de un psicoterapeuta, que enfrenta a su educando a los males de su personalidad, no por el afán de humillarlo, sino por el contrario, de elevarlo y de liberarlo de su triste condición'.[606]

Herrera Luque thus sought to novelise Venezuela's history for a mass audience to bring about an 'acto de auto-reconocimiento nacional',[607] to borrow Fuentes's expression. It was through Venezuela's leaders, who '[encarnan] y [representan] la voluntad de la nación' (*HF 2*, 161), that writer and reader could 'penetrar en el alma de Venezuela y en sus graves conflictos y enigmas'[608] and interpret its defects. This thesis has framed his three novelised biographies as studies of power: not of what constitutes that slippery philosophical notion of power itself, but how social and political power is sought, obtained, wielded, and lost – and how it reflects Venezuela's 'personalidad básica'.[609]

Boves, el urogallo is the most straightforward of the three novels, both in terms of its composition and in the writer's exploration of these themes. Herrera Luque attempts, and in some senses fails, to comprehend the magnetic *caudillo*'s motives, while undermining canonical histories of the War of Independence to show that modern Venezuela is founded on 'many conflictive and dubious components'.[610] Boves lacks any political philosophy; his engagement with the race-based rebellion he instigates is occasioned by a series of personal coincidences, and his leadership is inspired by base, even animalistic instinct. His legitimacy – without which power can never effectively be wielded – stems only in part from the charisma that made him 'el arquetipo del héroe' (*BCH*, 48), and primarily from his anointing as 'el Taita que nos redima' (*BU*, 28) by Juan Palacios. Boves's legitimacy slips as his vices consume him, and he dies 'habiendo terminado su ciclo heróico' (*BCH*, 51). Although never stated explicitly, he is established as the founder of the dynasty of Venezuelan *caudillos* (*BCH*, 47).

606 Herrera Luque, 'El venezolano y su historia'.
607 Carlos Fuentes, *Tiempo mexicano* (Mexico City: Cuadernos de Joaquín Mortiz, 1972), 133.
608 Lovera, 630.
609 Herrera Luque, 'El venezolano y su historia'.
610 Wilson, 122.

Francisco Espejo, the closest thing to an authorial mouthpiece in *Boves*, muses that the *caudillo* is 'una expresión del alma irredenta de este pueblo buscando su síntesis' (*BU,* 163). A superficial reading may suggest that this popular will is fundamentally self-destructive since it desires the destruction of a large part of the country's population. Boves, however, is 'ambivalente en su odio y en su amor frente a la clase explotadora' (*CDP*, 13), uncertain of whether he wishes to destroy, replace, or join them. Through a 'vía expeditiva y sangrienta' (*BCH*, 50), Boves acts as a catalyst for coherence. By inadvertently ensuring Andrés Machado and Eugenia Blanco's union, and through his procreating with Inés, Venezuela is set on the path to *síntesis* – racial and social reconciliation – through sexual means. A senseless, contradictory whirlwind of violence and charisma, Boves is an accidental messiah after whose sacrifice at Urica the nation can begin an uncertain journey toward liberation from its original sin.

The case of Gómez is less clear-cut. As with Boves, his legitimacy stems partially from his own simultaneous anointing by Juan Palacios and 'Ella' – who transcends centuries and identifies Boves, Gómez, and, later, Betancourt as quasi-spiritual leaders of Venezuela. Compared to *Boves*, however, Herrera Luque spends more time in *En la casa del pez* depicting Gómez's military aptitude and cunning, which provide him with the wherewithal to seize and administer power; he thus has far more agency than the Asturian *caudillo*. Gómez's relationship with the Caracas oligarchy, the true masters of sociopolitical authority in Venezuela, by turns involves bitter rivalry and mutual complicity. Through this relationship, Herrera Luque portrays two intertwined manifestations of power. Whether Gómez acts more as a challenger to, or perpetuator of, Venezuela's historical stagnation is debatable, reflecting the writer's conflicted attitude towards the dictator. Certainly, he acts as the instigator of slow and tentative progress towards modernity, despite the tendency of popular narratives to portray him as an obstacle to advancement. In *Los cuatro reyes*, El Viejito notes that 'con Gómez Venezuela era diferente; si los mandatos de Páez y Guzmán señalan una brecha histórica, el Benemérito hizo de ella un zanjón, un precipicio infranqueable' (*4RB*, 79). It is not for nothing, however, that the 'Gómez' and 'oligarchy' chapters 'van alternando […] hasta que se

unen'.[611] By the conclusion of *En la casa del pez* – if we disregard the epilogue for a moment – there have been few substantial changes to power structures. Gómez, for so long seemingly eternal, has been but fleeting, and things appear set to continue as before 'sin que el Pez perturbase su habitual caudal de agua' (*CDP*, 553).

Chapter Three demonstrates that *Los cuatro reyes de la baraja* is the most problematic of Herrera Luque's biographical novels. Guzmán serves as an entry point into an examination of broader trends in Venezuelan history, his compulsion towards seeking high office and his formulation of a coherent (though cynical) political outlook representing the nation's increasing maturity and revealing more universal considerations of the corrupting nature of political power. More importantly, however, *Los cuatro reyes* depicts the codifying of Venezuela's history according to its narrator's firm (though occasionally contradictory) interpretations of its overall trajectory. The novel's multiple temporal settings allow for the drawing of comparisons between different eras, thereby identifying the repeated patterns of Venezuela's history. The novelistic present of 1957-58 heralds a new cycle in this history with the return of Betancourt, fourth and final *rey de la baraja*, but the qualified jubilation of that moment seems designed to contextualise and contrast with another 'present' – the present of 1991. Today, 'Bolivarian discourse poses [that moment] as an *interregnum* in the rule of the *pueblo* that began on February 27, 1989';[612] it represented, for Herrera Luque, a precipice after which point the familiar cycles of national history appeared set to break down.

One of the idioms used most commonly in these three novels is *voltear la tortilla*; that is, to alter a situation radically and reverse its dynamics. Herrera Luque's view is that changes of regime and ideology in Venezuela might alter society's direction somewhat, but will not change its fundamental composition. In her introduction to *Cinco siglos de historia irreverente*, Dobrudcha González states that Herrera Luque regarded Venezuela's leaders as 'los mascarones de proa de una sociedad cuyos

[611] Moody, 41.

[612] Kingsbury, Donald, 'Between Multitude and Pueblo: Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution and the Government of Un-governability', in *New Political Science*, vol. 35, no. 4 (2013), pp. 567-585 (580).

hábitos políticos y la relación entre sociedad y poder no cambian.'[613] This is key to the writer's novelised histories of power. The notion that Boves, Gómez and Guzmán's personalities reveal much about the national conscience and basic personality of Venezuela is not proven. In each case, all three men are quite unrepresentative of the Venezuelan populace in their given eras, and it has been demonstrated that the people at large do not figure prominently in Herrera Luque's novels. Nevertheless, he endeavours to depict them as epiphenomenal. They are all 'variantes del mismo problema'[614], and the 'concatenación de la historia'[615] they represent is the effect, not the cause, of the nation's essential problems – the symptoms rather than the aetiology. This is a deterministic view of history in line with the writer's own positivistic and Naturalistic tendencies, and the sort which in Berlin's view 'rests on a conception of human beings, not as agents or choice-makers, but as natural objects of processes, law-governed in their behaviours and for that reason predictable'.[616] Their legitimacy is drawn from their being avatars of Venezuela's ill-defined popular will; power remains invested in them for as long as they represent the *volksgeist* of their own era. It is said of Boves that 'esa es su fuerza. A este rey de los zamuros, como a los reyes medievales, nada lo separa del bajo pueblo' (*BU*, 143). This statement applies to all the 'legitimate' *caudillos* of whom Herrera Luque writes. They embody Venezuela's ills rather than engender them, and are thrust into their roles by what often seems to be destiny; a common refrain in the three novels is that 'manda el que pueda, no el que quiera' (*4RB*, 40). Despite grand plans to exert agency and bring about wholesale change, they cannot undo the legacy of Venezuela's defectuous conception. They succeed only in perpetuating its effects – or in igniting phenomena that were destined to take place regardless.

[613] Dobrudcha González, xv.
[614] Miliani, 733.
[615] Ibid.
[616] John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), 78

II. Prognosis

Herrera Luque remained unwavering in his pessimism. Even as his novels became less 'scientific' and his authorial intentions more diffuse, he never truly departed from his original belief in the permanence of Venezuela's congenital defect; 'ni el enriquecimiento, ni la instrucción, ni el sanamiento, ni el progreso en los derechos humanos han sido capaces de sacar a nuestros pueblos del marasmo en que están sumidos, percibiéndose, por el contrario, una exacerbación de sus males tradicionales'.[617] This fatalistic notion conflicts with his oft-stated aim of liberating Venezuela from its past, and is one of the many inconsistencies that defined the writer. Herrera Luque's approach to history, as to life, seems often to have been coloured by events personal to him, and his outlook swung between extremes of despair and buoyancy. One journalist described him as 'un manancial de ideas, de conocimientos, de dudas, de protestas y hasta de frustraciones. Es duro, es amargo, es implacable, pero también es dulce, es comprensivo, es bondadoso, es humano.'[618] Crucially, as Viera writes, 'a lo largo de su vida se vio Herrera Luque seriamente enfermo […] lo que no es improbable que haya desembocado en cambios y cuestionamientos importantes en su personalidad de cara al futuro'.[619]

Though he never saw much use in prognostication – 'no quiso hacer predicciones ni conjeturas sobre nuestro futuro' (*1998*, 10) – it was the spectre of the future more than the spectre of the past that haunted Herrera Luque most. 'La historia', he wrote in 1974, 'es reflexión sobre el pasado para proyectarse en el futuro. La historia de Venezuela es una progresión constante hacia la síntesis'[620], thereby establishing a coherent national trajectory. Of this synthesis, he asked in 1968 '¿La encontraremos?'[621]. It was a question he never succeeded in answering satisfactorily: after years of novelising Venezuela's history and dissecting the form and development of power in the country, he could only answer 'El tiempo lo dirá' (*4RB*, 260). The writer saw the *historia detenida*

[617] Herrera Luque, 'Ante una sociedad perturbada'.
[618] Lovera, 27
[619] Viera Rojas, 36
[620] Herrera Luque, 'Nadie puede decir…'.
[621] Herrera Luque, 'Venezuela y la suma de contrarios'.

and its accompanying *historia silenciada* as a source of Venezuela's underdevelopment – and thus something to be destroyed. Herrera Luque never specified whether there was any definite 'way out of the cyclical curse',[622] the spiral in which the country was trapped. The epilogue to *En la casa del pez* appears to imply, however, that the only manner of breaking these repetitive historical cycles and thereby to 'liberar el venezolano de su pasado'[623] is through occasioning a violent, explosive rupture.

Near the end of his life, Herrera Luque told Eskenazi that 'me duele y me entristece decirlo, pero a Venezuela le falta un acto violento y cruento. Un estallido a ver si se purifica el país'[624], a statement that resonates beyond its narrow contextual application to the political chaos of the 1980s and 90s. However, rather than this representing a source of optimism and a chance to refashion the nation root and branch, freeing it from its sociopolitical torpor – what we might term its 'letargo de siglos'[625] – it instead seemed to have unnerved, even terrified, the writer. This anxiety is evident even in the 1969 edition of *Los viajeros de Indias*, where Herrera Luque noted that Venezuela, 'sin dejar de ser un país atrasado, se ha tornado en un país ansioso. […] De ignorante lúcido pasó a ignorante confuso; del letargo al insomnio, de la quietud silvestre a un malestar atenazante. De una historia detenida pasó bruscamente a una sociología de angustia' (*VI*, 40). No Apocalypse ever looms in his work, but the unrecognisable geography depicted in *1998* and the troubled irresolution of *Los cuatro reyes* point to fear at the impending arrival of a world that Herrera Luque could not interpret.

It is difficult to say definitively what the passage of time since the writer's death has proven. Is it correct, for example, to see Herrera Luque – as many have done – as a Venezuelan Cassandra figure? With hindsight, contemporary readers know what came next for the country, and this might distort our perception of the writer's significance somewhat. It would of course be mistaken to suggest that he in any way foresaw Chávez, Maduro, and Venezuela's 21st-century economic and

622 Boldy, 'Fathers and Sons', 38.
623 Herrera Luque, 'El venezolano y su historia'.
624 Eskenazi, 720.
625 García Márquez, 7.

political collapse. His predictions of turbulent times ahead are perhaps little more than extrapolations of the anxious times he lived in. It is nonetheless interesting to ask what this chronicler would have made of his country today. Did the Bolivarian Revolution truly sweep away Venezuela's ankylosed framework of sociopolitical power, or was it merely another iteration of the same cyclical historical metamorphoses as ever – the patterns that Herrera Luque had once hoped to break by writing them?

This thesis was not conceived as a rehabilitative exercise, nor an attempt to rescue Herrera Luque from comparative obscurity. I have, I hope, addressed the reasons for which his works have escaped serious critical attention, and identified why Herrera Luque is a writer deserving of significant further study. In addition to his enduring popularity, he was perhaps the Venezuelan writer who most effectively captured the *zeitgeist* of a nation ill at ease with its present and its future. This thesis has focused solely on his unambiguously biographical works, though the popularity and complexity of his other novels – particularly *Los amos del Valle*, *La luna de Fausto*, and *Manuel Piar, caudillo de dos colores* – represent opportunities for further fruitful research. His efforts to reformulate popular conceptions of history and nationhood, informed by his own idiosyncratic worldview and produced at a pivotal moment in time, combined with his lasting cultural impact, ensure that his resonance continues to this day.

Herrera Luque never sought to predict the future. As it turned out, neither literature, nor history, nor science could do that accurately. It would therefore be imprudent to speculate on the writer's position in the critical consciousness in years to come. It may be the case that he fades from view, maintains his status as an interesting though peripheral figure of modern Latin American literature, or even that unprecedented future events vindicate his curious sociological views and generate an upswell of interest. This study, however, has shown the value of reappraising Francisco Herrera Luque as an enduringly problematic and even prescient literary figure. New interpretations of his significance and skill may yet emerge in years to come.

El tiempo lo dirá.

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