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## The X in México: Xavier Icaza and the Literature of the Revolution

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For much of the twentieth century, scholarship on the art and literature of the immediate post-revolutionary period in Mexico focused on only a few prominent texts and models. In painting, the murals of Diego Rivera were often seen as the representation of the Revolution par excellence; in fact, they *were* the Revolution, just as the novel—especially Mariano Azuela’s exemplary *Los de abajo*—was its privileged literary form. Only recently, with the fading away of the heroic myth of the Revolution and the centralizing and totalizing historiography it produced, have scholars begun to develop a more nuanced understanding of the cultural landscape of that era, a landscape populated by diverse actors with equally diverse agendas and often fraught with contradiction.

It is in this context that I propose to examine the life and work of Xavier Icaza, an innovative writer best known for his 1928 *Panchito Chapopote*, the first novel of the oil conflict. Spanning over four decades, Icaza’s trajectory as a writer and public figure is idiosyncratic and complex. From his apprenticeship at the tail end of the Ateneo de Juventud, through his involvement with the *estridentista* movement in the 1920s and political activism in the 1930s, to his later esoteric writings, Icaza’s long, fascinating struggle to decipher what he called “the X in Mexico” reveals the complexity of the task faced by intellectuals who sought to redefine the relationship between art and politics in the post-revolutionary era.<sup>1</sup>

### The X in Xavier

The exceptionally exploratory and multifaceted nature of Xavier Icaza’s career has made recognition (let alone assessment) of his work elusive. In a chapter of his 1931 book *Mexican Maze* entitled “The Noisemakers,” U.S. journalist Carleton Beals centered

<sup>1</sup> A version of this essay was presented at the XXVI International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, San Juan, Puerto Rico, March 17, 2006.

much of his discussion of Mexico's new literature on Icaza and his novel *Panchito Chapopote*, writing "Xavier Icaza is a spectacular *tour de force*, a projection of the French *sur realiste*" (275). Over half a century later, Carlos Fuentes, in his novel *The Years with Laura Díaz*, included a fictionalized Icaza as a minor but important character, describing him thusly:

He was called a Futurist, a Dadaist, an *Estridentista*, names that no one had ever heard before in Veracruz and that Icaza had introduced with an almost insolent air by driving a yellow Isotta-Fraschini convertible, as if to establish his credentials immediately and well. (2001: 99)

These picturesque descriptions, which place Icaza primarily as a member of the avant-garde *estridentista* movement of the 1920s, contrast strikingly with the way he is categorized in many histories of Mexican literature. These consider him--if indeed he is considered at all--as a writer of the Revolution in a more conventional sense, concerned primarily with social problems or proletarian issues. Yet to these two partial characterizations we might easily add others: oil company lawyer and member of the social elite in post-revolutionary Xalapa; labor lawyer, educator and ardent *cardenista* in Mexico City in the 1930s; writer of esoteric religious plays and neo-*indigenista* epic poetry; and so on, the only constants being the continual re-invention of the creative self and the conviction with which Icaza embraced each new project and new identity.

Central to much of Icaza's work is his attempt to come to terms with Mexico's historical and cultural specificity and in particular, with the Revolution, understood as both the civil war of 1910 to 1920 and as the nation-building effort that followed, culminating in the *cardenista* project of the 1930s. Like many others of his class, Icaza initially viewed the developments of his time with considerable skepticism, and was cynical about the ability of the popular classes to organize effectively or bring about change. In the 1930s, however, he began to participate in the leftist dream of a worker-intellectual alliance that would bring the utopian aspirations of the Revolution to fruition. But for the most part, Icaza harbored few illusions about the possibility of social justice in a world fraught with greed and corruption. Whether attacking corrupt revolutionaries and peasant leaders, foreign oil companies and their domestic lackeys, or elitist intellectuals who refused the social obligations thrust on them by the implacable forces of history, he sought to use language as a weapon to expose both individual and systemic criminality--banditry, that is, in the widest historical sense.

In the pages that follow, I look briefly at five texts representing distinct moments in Icaza's shifting view of the Mexican Revolution and its social causes and objectives. With his 1924 novella "La Hacienda," Icaza helped inaugurate what would come to be known as "literature of the Revolution"; yet the politics of that text are as yet far from what would come to be considered revolutionary over the course of the next decade. In 1926, as a participant in the *movimiento estridentista*, Icaza began to experiment with language and to develop a dynamic, synthetic style laden with humor and irony; this phase is captured in two texts written that year, *Magnavoz 1926* and *Panchito Chapopote*. Following the demise of that movement and his return to Mexico City, Icaza turned more visibly to the left. In 1934, he spelled out his views about the relationship between literature and revolution in an important lecture in which he simultaneously vindicated the avant-garde and called for greater social commitment and

proletarianization of the arts. Finally, in his 1936 play *Trayectoria*, Icaza deployed some of the techniques of his earlier works in the service of political propaganda, thus literally and symbolically bringing to a close the first half of his literary career. While these texts are only a small part of Icaza's prolific output, they allow us to examine in some detail not only his evolution as a writer, but also his ongoing negotiation of the key political positions and trends of his times.

### “La Hacienda”

Born in Durango in 1892, Icaza moved to Mexico City to attend the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria and later the Escuela Libre de Derecho. In the capital, he studied with and befriended eminent intellectuals including Alfonso Reyes, Mariano Silva y Aceves, and Pedro Henríquez Ureña. Although the Ateneo de la Juventud to which his mentors belonged had already disbanded, Icaza absorbed the group's ideas as well as its core concept of an intellectual circle devoted to both erudite cultural concerns and social reform. In 1916, Icaza, Silva y Aceves, Julio Torri, Carlos Díaz Dufío, Jr., and others formed a group around the journal *La Nave*, in which Icaza published his first essay, “Un personaje de Shakespeare: Philip the Bastard.” After a brief stay in the United States, Icaza returned to participate with the *Nave* group in various events and publications in Mexico City, where he also edited and introduced a selection of texts by Friedrich Nietzsche. In 1919, he left for the port of Tampico. His employment as an attorney for the oil company El Aguila then took him to Córdoba, the port of Veracruz, and finally to Xalapa in 1920.<sup>2</sup>

In 1921, Icaza published his first work of fiction, the novel *Dilema*. His first effort to address themes associated with the Revolution, however, appeared in 1924 with *Gente mexicana*, a collection of novellas self-published in Xalapa. In January 1925, one of these novellas, “La Hacienda,” ran in the Mexico City weekly *El Universal Ilustrado*. Its publication thus coincides with the famous “Polemic of 1925” and belongs to the same historical moment: a moment in which Mexican writers began to reflect on the tremendous events they had so recently lived through, and to outline the form that a literature of the Revolution might, could, or most importantly, *should* take.<sup>3</sup>

To summarize this polemic in brief, we may say that lines were drawn between those writers who felt that literature had a social obligation to fulfill, and those who felt that its only obligation was to the muses of private creation. The first group saw itself as aligned with the masses and came increasingly to equate the Revolution with sweat, violence, and masculine virility; the second group, unconcerned with social struggle, was denounced by the first as effeminate, thus counter-revolutionary, and responded in kind with virulent disdain. Yet considerable diversity existed within the two camps; Manuel Maples Arce's *Urbe* and Carlos Gutiérrez Cruz's *Sangre roja*, for instance, both from 1924, were both considered socially engaged poetry, but the two texts reflect quite different ideas about language, its uses, and the social role of the poet. Xavier Icaza, as

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<sup>2</sup> This biographical sketch is based on Zaitzeff's introduction to *Xavier Icaza y sus contemporáneos epistolarios* (1995) and the “Biobibliografía” in Icaza's *De Chalma y Los Remedios* (1963).

<sup>3</sup> On the polemic of 1925, see Schneider (1975) and Díaz Arciniega (1989). For a view emphasizing the role of homophobia in the polemic, see Balderston (1998).

we shall see, also took the side of the *engagés*, but not without a certain ambivalence that would frequently emerge in his work.

“La Hacienda” shows Icaza’s growing engagement with Mexican social reality, yet its upper-class bias is strikingly overt. The novella takes the side of a landowner against a corrupt labor leader and implies that the solution to Mexico’s agrarian problem lies not in class struggle but in voluntary accommodation. The landowner, Oscar de Villalba, is portrayed in extremely positive terms; as the story opens, he departs Mexico City for the family estate, the Ingenio San Cristóbal in rural Veracruz, leaving behind his wife Adriana and their newborn son. San Cristóbal, fictionalized here, was in reality one of the largest sugar-producing estates in the region and--as many readers in 1924 would have recognized--site of numerous violent labor conflicts. Although Adriana expresses a premonition of fear for Oscar’s safety, he reassures her that the peons, although rebellious in the past, posed no danger: “a él lo querían mucho, en realidad, sobre todo desde que les organizó y dotó dos teams de *Base-ball*” (1990: 39).

Just after Oscar’s train leaves, however, a telegram arrives, announcing new disruptions at the Ingenio. While Oscar chats with the train staff and contemplates photographs of his beloved family, Adriana tries in vain to send him the news. Having alerted the reader to this impending danger, Icaza goes into an extended flashback narrating the events of Oscar and Adriana’s courtship, their extraordinarily happy marriage, and its culmination in the birth of their son. Arriving in Veracruz, Oscar orders a round of beer and drinks a toast to little Oscar Jr., blissfully unaware of the danger that awaits him.

This danger soon appears in the form of Raúl Ferrás, the son of a former administrator at San Cristóbal and, as quickly becomes apparent, Oscar’s malignant double. Raúl’s family, having fallen on hard times, had left the hacienda to live in misery in the capital. Holding Oscar responsible for his misfortunes, Raúl has sworn vengeance. The Revolution provides Raúl with the opportunity he needs: “Se lanzó al monte con otros compañeros suyos, como él pobres, como él decepcionados, resentidos como él, igualmente sedientos de venganza...” (46). The Revolution is thus depicted as having been borne not of social, economic and political pressures, but rather of envy, personal frustration and resentment.

But which comes first, Raúl’s poverty or his vindictive nature; Oscar’s wealth or his generosity? For Icaza, the two seem to go hand in hand. As Raúl plots his revenge on Oscar, the narrator muses, “¿Qué mal le habría causado? Directamente, nada y todo; Oscar era un favorito de la fortuna; Raúl, un desheredado; Oscar era aristócrata; él, de origen humilde; Oscar era feliz, distinguido, brillante; él, desgraciado, vulgar, opaco; lo aborrecía con toda la saña de su hígado enfermo” (52). Where does the blame for such inequality lie? Only in fate, apparently, for as the title of another novella from *Gente mexicana* asserts, “Unos nacen con estrella....”

When Oscar at last reaches San Cristóbal, he learns that local landowners have organized to defend themselves from the aggressions of peons, led by none other than Raúl Ferrás, now transformed into the classic figure of the outside agitator. Icaza’s portrayal of this conflict must be seen as a highly polemical intervention with extratextual implications. As Icaza was well aware, the agrarian movement, and specifically the Liga de Comunidades Agrarias del Estado de Veracruz, had gained unprecedented strength by 1924, thanks in part to the Liga’s role in defending the

government against the uprising led by Adolfo de la Huerta the previous year. The campesinos' victory had earned them considerable political capital (including the right to bear arms and the support of Governor Adalberto Tejeda), yet Icaza portrays their struggle as the misguided product of personal hatreds and ambitions rather than genuine social motivations. His condemnation of the "excesses" of the *agraristas* mirrors accounts wielded polemically by conservatives in publications such as the Veracruz newspaper *El Dictamen* and reflects the position of the landowning class.<sup>4</sup>

For Icaza, it is not the campesinos who are to blame for the violence, but rather the corrupt leaders that manipulate and misguide them. Having little will of their own, when treated well by their superiors they are loyal and sympathetic. At the same time as he belittles the campesino revolt, Icaza shows affection for popular culture by reproducing the distinctive speech of mulatto Veracruz and by positively depicting local "characters" and customs. As Abel Juárez Martínez writes, "La descripción geográfica revela al autor como un profundo conocedor de la región a la que hace referencia: la exuberante y paradisíaca cuenca de Papaloapan con su flora y su fauna, sus costumbres, su arte culinario, con las delicadas líneas de los rostros cetrinos de sus habitantes, en una palabra, se trata de la cultura de la costa veracruzana" (1990: 11). This wealth of descriptive detail contrasts with the schematic oversimplification of the story's main characters and of the social conflicts they are made to represent.

In the final pages of "La Hacienda," the two sides negotiate. The landowners agree to cede lands to the campesinos who will, in turn, grow sugar cane to sell to the Ingenio, with Oscar providing material support. This peaceful resolution--logical enough, yet utopian in the history of Mexican land struggles--is thwarted by Raúl, who betrays both sides by ambushing the landowners. In the chaos, both leaders are killed. The tragedy of Oscar's death is captured in a final image: "allí se quedó el hermoso y varonil Oscar, como un criminal o un desertor, herido por la espalda, sangrante la cabeza, convertido su cuerpo en horrible piltrafa" (55). No tears are shed for the repugnant Raúl; yet as Juárez Martínez points out, what is lost in this tragic conflict between opposites is the reality of the agrarian struggle (13). At no time does Icaza consider the San Cristóbal conflict to be a response to exploitation or an expression of the desire of the rural poor for land and liberty. Instead, the uprising of peasants against landowners is seen as a purely emotional and instinctive reaction to external manipulation--a struggle, in effect, between barbarism and civilization.

### **Magnavoz 1926**

In 1925 Icaza made a trip to Paris, where he visited his friend Alfonso Reyes, then serving as ambassador to France. Upon his return to Veracruz, he became involved with the *movimiento estridentista*, founded by Manuel Maples Arce in Mexico City in 1921, but now based in Xalapa. Maples, a Veracruz native, had arrived in Xalapa in 1925 and had become Secretario de Gobierno in early 1926, a position that benefited his group considerably. With resources allocated by Governor Heriberto Jara, Maples and his comrades (among them writer Germán List Arzubide and artists Ramón Alva de la Canal and Leopoldo Méndez) published the monthly magazine *Horizonte* as well as

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<sup>4</sup> On the campesino movement in Veracruz, see Falcón (1977), Domínguez Pérez (1986), Fowler Salamini (1979), and Skerritt (1989).

other literary and political texts, and also sponsored public events and influenced the state's educational institutions. Although this state of affairs only lasted through September 1927, when Jara was deposed by his political enemies due in part to conflicts with the oil companies, it can be seen as a golden age for the early twentieth-century avant-garde in Mexico, even more impressive for having arisen in "*provincia*," far from the cultural resources of the nation's capital.<sup>5</sup>

Although the details of Icaza's relationship with the *estridentistas* are not fully clear, his participation is well-documented in his personal correspondence as well as in the texts he wrote and published during that period. Two of his articles appeared in *Horizonte* during 1926: a discussion of Genaro Estrada's novel *Pero Galín* in August, and an essay on Lerdo de Tejada, "Nuestros héroes y nuestra juventud," in September. In December, the Talleres Gráficos del Gobierno de Veracruz, run by the *estridentistas*, published Icaza's *Magnavoz 1926: Discurso mexicano*. This text represented a radical departure from Icaza's earlier writings; rather, its deliberate blurring of generic boundaries aligned it with the avant-garde.

*Magnavoz 1926* is written in the format of a short play but is in fact, as Vicky Unruh comments, "unperformable" (1994: 52). Its set is all of Mexico, while its characters are well-known intellectuals (Alfonso Reyes, José Vasconcelos, Diego Rivera) and an internal audience defined as the Mexican people; the narrative consists of the former's attempts to interest the latter in its theories and propositions. In contrast to the simplistic nationalism so prominent in Mexican life from the 1920s on, *Magnavoz 1926* shows us diverse voices, none of which seems to have a monopoly on truth, clamoring to be heard by a mostly indifferent populace. In Icaza's Mexico, "Los estudiantes se organizan. Los obreros se agremian. Los agraristas se unen. Los artistas no dejan el pincel. Los escritores, aunque nadie los atiende, perseveran y escriben. Los demás duermen."<sup>6</sup>

What will wake the masses from their endless slumber? Barely heard above the racket of popular revolutionary songs, the first of three gigantic loudspeakers (*magnavoces*) arises from the volcano Popocatepetl, announcing a radio broadcast from New York. The voice of José Vasconcelos is announced, provoking a dispute between "científicos" who try to silence him and students who laud him as the "Maestro de la Juventud Americana." Romain Rolland, from the Alps, interrupts on behalf of the students. Finally Vasconcelos speaks; the "Maestro," however, is overwhelmed by a "chorus of mediocres," which is interrupted in turn by Alfonso Reyes admonishing from the Eiffel Tower, "Acuérdense de ser inteligentes...."

The second loudspeaker emerges out of the volcano Iztaccihuatl, bringing the voice of an Italian reporter who advises Mexico to copy the modernizing programs of South America: "Emigración, inmigración. Colonización. Dinero. Carreteras. Ferrocarriles. Bancos...." This conservative voice is silenced by catcalls from the left and yawns from the general public. Soon another *magnavoz* appears, this time from the Pico de Orizaba, broadcasting the voice of Lenin over the state of Veracruz:

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<sup>5</sup> On *estridentismo*, basic readings include List Arzubide (1926 and 1967) and Schneider (1997a); the latter includes an anthology of *estridentista* poetry and prose. On the *estridentistas'* years in Xalapa, see Rashkin (2006).

<sup>6</sup> Except for the "Proemio," citations of *Magnavox 1926* are from the non-paginated version included in *Panchito Chapopote* (1928 and 1986 editions).

Sones de la Internacional. Hoz y martillo. Salud y Revolución Social.

Veracruz no se limite a escuchar. No sabe hacerlo. No medita. Por sus venas corre el fuego del trópico. Veracruz todo lo traduce en acción. Veracruz obedece el discurso, sin discernirlo bien. Inventa leyes, leyes, leyes. Veracruz es la legisladora de México: Ley de Trabajo; Ley del Inquilinato; Proyectos de Legislación Petrolera; Repartimiento de Tierras; Arrendamiento Obligatorio de Tierras. Descanso Dominical. Participación en las Utilidades. Ley del Candado. Ley del Hambre, y agitación, revolución, agitación...

In 1920s Veracruz, legal reforms were indeed being imposed at an astonishing speed, provoking enormous resistance from landowners and others, including the federal government and its army. Yet in Icaza's description, the social pressures behind these seemingly utopian laws are discounted. In fact, in attributing them to the influence of a distant and poorly understood ideology, Icaza belittles the popular movements whose revolutionary demands had pressured the State into action. *Magnavoz 1926* thus does not depart from *Gente mexicana* in its analysis of class; although the enlightened gentry of "La Hacienda" has disappeared, the majority of Mexicans are said to be living an "inútil existencia vegetativa," a condition which elite politicians use to their advantage and elite intellectuals deplore without being able to develop real alternatives.

Nevertheless, Icaza displays some optimism in his call for a profound exploration of national identity. His Diego Rivera character, the only one that provokes a response from the text's internal listeners (and the only one to speak without technological mediation), insists, "Hay que hacer cosas. No hay que hablar. [...] Realicemos obra mexicana. Hay que ser del país. Hay que expresar a México." Rivera's speech provokes applause from the crowd and dramatic seismic reactions from the landscape itself. The debate, however, does not end there, but rather deteriorates, such that the text's final words belong to a firing squad victim, 2 ½ meters underground: "¡La patria, la patria!... ¿qué patria?"

The fragmented monologues, clipped sentences, multiple voices and ironic humor of *Magnavoz 1926* contrast sharply with the conventional narration of *Gente mexicana*, and instead reflect the aesthetic influence of *estridentismo*. The title itself announces this affiliation: the word *magnavoz* is conceptually related to the word *estridente*, in that both terms suggest ordinary speech rendered loud, aggressive, impossible to ignore. *Magnavoz* is also *estridentista* in its transgression of generic boundaries, its rejection of facile nationalism, and its technological central metaphor: the enormous loudspeakers which emerge out of Mexico's volcanoes, converting the country's natural landscape into a giant, if ambiguous, communication event. As in *estridentista* writer Kyn Taniya's poem "...lu iiiuuu iu..." (1924) in which a radio broadcast is depicted as an overwhelming onslaught of words, images and noise, Icaza's loudspeakers belong to a world in which communications technology does not necessarily contribute to human understanding.

Icaza was to refer to *Magnavoz 1926* frequently as a "farce," a characterization that John Brushwood attributes to "lo imposible, lo casi absurdo del método de presentación y por cierto tono caricaturesco" (1986: 11). Unruh signals the text's resemblance to a manifesto, noting that slippage between manifesto and theater characterizes early twentieth century avant-garde production: manifestos address their

audiences in dramatic fashion, and performance pieces double as calls to action. A “performance manifesto” such as *Magnavoz* carries the manifesto’s innate dramatic qualities further by writing its conflicts into the narrative and incorporating the spectator as part of its story (42-43). Thus in *Magnavoz* we find speakers addressing the masses in the manifesto’s imperative mode; more generally, we find that the text as a whole posits a need for a new way of thinking, in order to change the country. This intention is spelled out in Icaza’s “Proemio”: “Ojalá mi voz sirva de aliento a nuestra juventud, necesitada, como nunca, de consejo y enérgica dirección amorosa” (19).

As Unruh further points out, *Magnavoz 1926* duplicates a tension often found in vanguard manifestos “between the desire to speak to other artists and the desire to reach a mass audience” (54). On one level, the text invokes efforts then taking place (pioneered by Icaza’s friend Vasconcelos) to bring literacy and educational reform to Mexico’s poor and working class majority. Yet by the end of the text, the apathy of the masses has yet to be overcome. Instead, only a “grupo selecto” reacts and “lanza su grito de inconformidad.” It is this select group that really interests Icaza, given his fatalism regarding the masses’ ability to effect change. In fact, Icaza’s greatest respect was reserved for intellectuals like Reyes (to whom *Magnavoz* was dedicated) whose strong nationalism was tempered by constant engagement with classical and European thought. To some extent, Icaza’s open skepticism towards mass movements differentiated him from the *estridentistas*, particularly by 1926 when their alignment with the Jara administration led them further toward a socialist-populist position. Although *Magnavoz 1926* resembles a manifesto of the Mexican vanguard, it is a manifesto that does not glorify a particular vision but rather puts the final word in the mouth of a dead man: the victim not of any particular circumstances but rather of the violence inherent in the post-revolutionary condition, the possible victim of any number of firing squads.

### ***Panchito Chapopote***

Before *Magnavoz 1926* went to press, Icaza had already completed *Panchito Chapopote: Retablo tropical o relación de un extraordinario sucedido de la heroica Veracruz*. However, due to the coup against the Jara administration and the consequent dispersion of the *estridentistas*, *Panchito Chapopote* did not appear in print until 1928, when it was published by Cultura in Mexico City with thirteen woodcuts by Ramón Alva de la Canal. Among the first examples of the subgenre known as *literatura del petróleo*,<sup>7</sup> *Panchito Chapopote* is based on the history of Veracruz’s oil-producing Huasteca region in the early twentieth century, when formerly worthless lands belonging to indigenous campesinos became prizes sought after by swarms of rapacious, fortune-seeking oilmen. Panchito is a humble scribe from the town of Tepetate; his inherited lands are sterile due to their abundant deposits of crude oil, or *chapopote*. The town schoolteacher invents Panchito’s nickname based on this situation, and the community holds raucous festivities in his honor.

One day, a caravan of *gringos* appears in Tepetate, escorted by Mexican soldiers. The businessman who heads the party wants Panchito’s lands, and after thwarting an attempt by a local official to swindle Panchito out of the sale, they strike a deal. Panchito becomes wealthy, but fails to win the heart of his beloved, Amalia María

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<sup>7</sup> See Schneider (1997b) for a useful overview of this literature.

Dolores, who prefers another suitor. As North American and English businessmen—caricatured as Uncle Sam and John Bull—divide up the Huasteca's rich oil fields, Panchito moves on to the port of Veracruz to live a life of leisure and indulgence.

Years later, Panchito returns to Tepetate to pursue Amalia, his old love. He finds his hometown changed due to Yankee influence: instead of the quiet dirt roads and palm huts of old, the town sports paved roads, lunch counters, “hotels more expensive than the Ritz,” traffic, the noise of machinery and English-language profanity. His shock is eclipsed by the arrival of the Revolution, represented schematically by a series of trains, generals, speeches, gunshots. Although Panchito succeeds in buying Amalia's hand in marriage, he soon dies, felled by a “stray” bullet directed his way by the author himself, who comments “Muérete ya, Panchito. Ya no te necesito. Con tu boda y tu plagio, tu razón de ser ha terminado” (76). As the struggle for power goes on, the narrative dissolves into a series of radio broadcasts, then ends with a *son* celebrating the widowed Amalia's marriage to her true love, Enrique. Though the world has seemingly been transformed, the popular spirit of the Huasteca prevails.

Although its storyline reflects actual conditions in Veracruz in the 1920s, *Panchito Chapopote* is not a conventional realist novel. Brushwood points out its affinity with the *Chauve Souris*, the Russian variety theater recreated in Mexico by the *estridentistas* in the form of the Teatro Mexicano del Murciélago (1986: 13).<sup>8</sup> Icaza himself would later make this connection: “hay que desterrar de la novela ese falso e inútil aparato que no hace sino inflarla. Hay que quemar toda esa paja. Debe llevarse a ella la técnica rápida y sintética del Chauve Souris” (1934: 44). It is this “rapid and synthetic technique” that Icaza brings to bear on *Panchito Chapopote*. “Literary” weight is discarded; the narrative moves forward with lightning speed, skipping across genres, combining popular music and speech patterns, cinematic imagery, metafiction and political satire. Indeed, Evodio Escalante asserts that “las audacias de Icaza son tan radicales que no se volverá a ver algo parecido en México sino hasta bien entrada la década de los sesenta, con la llegada de narradores como Gustavo Sáinz y José Agustín” (2002: 99).

One of these “audacias” is Icaza's bold foregrounding of the authorial voice. When the *gringos* arrive in Tepetate and a policeman goes to fetch the mayor, the narrator remarks: “Los pasos del gendarme hubieran resonado, de existir pavimento de asfalto en Tepetate y si usara zapatos. No había asfalto, carecía de zapatos: su marcha veloz y marcial no tuvo el merecido lucimiento” (28). When an official begins to speak, the narrator cuts him off: “Se omite el preámbulo por inútil e imbécil” (29). Throughout the novel, the narrator's terse and sometimes ironic descriptions alternate with dialogue; the narrative often takes the form of a script, allowing speakers other than those directly involved in the plot to intervene, including the author himself as well as amorphous figures like “El Pueblo,” “Lo que parece Pueblo,” and various choruses. Popular songs also become part of the narrative: for instance, Enrique, the jilted lover, angrily strums a *son* on his *jarana* in response to Amalia and Panchito's wedding, while Porfiriata, a real-life figure well known in the port of Veracruz, appears several times to perform a grotesque rumba that seems to parody Panchito's fate, and indeed, that of the nation:

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<sup>8</sup> The Teatro Mexicano del Murciélago was directed by Luis Quintanilla (Kyn Taniya) in Mexico City in September 1924. Often mistakenly described as a translation of the *Chauve Souris*, it was actually an original production that combined traditional music and dance from Michoacán with sketches commenting on modern urban life.

y que viva el Gobierno  
y que viva su madre  
y viva Porfiriata,  
pues yo soy Porfiriata, señores,  
y les voy a rumbiar... (90)<sup>9</sup>

Interwoven with these formal elements is a strong political critique. As legal counsel to the British-owned El Aguila petroleum company, Icaza was enmeshed in the oil conflict at the time of the novel's writing; yet his depiction of the British and Americans' rapacious quest for oil in *Panchito Chapopote* is hardly sympathetic. When both foreign parties arrive at the oil-rich Rancho Viejo, they argue for hours until reaching an agreement to divide the coveted lands in two—with no regard for the original owners or local interests. Alva de la Canal's illustration shows the two sides dividing up not only Rancho Viejo but a map of the entire country. "Se diría que es la manzana bíblica," comments the narrator. "Es el petróleo que se reparten—para México, será el petróleo siempre la fruta prohibida" (49).

Foreign control of Mexican oilfields was consolidated during the Porfiriato much as Icaza and Alva portray it; northern Veracruz was dominated by U.S. companies and the south by their British competitors, with neither side showing any regard for local interests (Pasquel 1971: 54). The Revolution did little to alter this situation, although President Madero did impose the first tax on the industry. In 1926, 20 million pesos in reparations were demanded in compensation for American deaths in the Huasteca during the Revolution, a figure that speaks to the huge U.S. presence in the region. According to *El Dictamen*, "en casi todos los municipios del Norte del Estado se han cometido crímenes en personas de norteamericanos" ("Veinte millones para los norteamericanos" 1).

In the 1920s, efforts by Veracruz governors Tejeda and Jara to curb the power of the oil companies were undermined by the federal government, which was then seeking reconciliation with the United States. Discussions between the two governments regarding Mexico's Ley de Extranjería (regulating foreign ownership of land and business enterprises) hinged on the question of oil, and President Calles was reluctant to take a strong anti-imperialist stance. Abuses thus continued with impunity. The oil companies' usurpation of land was so flagrant that even the conservative *El Dictamen* called for government intervention ("El áureo fluir de petróleo" 1926: 1).

*Panchito Chapopote* parodies this state of affairs. The Revolutionary leaders' hunger for power is expressed in the transparent insincerity of their speeches: "la patria, la imposición, el voto, los tiranos, sacrificio desinteresado, todo por la Patria, (todo con mayúscula)" (73). As the numbers of dead and wounded grow, a "special ambassador" sets out with a suitcase full of juicy offers. Agreements are reached with "someone on Wall Street," and American support for the faction in power is secured in exchange for oil concessions. Soon the civil war is over, and things return to normal in the Huasteca; in oil country, it seems, the Revolution has changed nothing.

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<sup>9</sup> Porfirio Hernández, popularly known as Porfiriata, died in April 1925, and was eulogized fondly in the Veracruz press as "uno de los últimos vestigios de Veracruz anterior, que se distinguió por sus extravagancias" ("Porfiriata murió ayer" 1).

In some ways, Icaza is as pessimistic here as in the novellas of *Gente mexicana*. “El Pueblo” is, once again, a passive entity; when invoked by successive leaders, it responds, “¿Hablaban de mí? No me molesten. Déjenme descansar” (83). Although the Revolution might seem to contradict that image of passivity, it too is parodied: in the streets of Tepetate 50,000 cartridges are fired, but the smoke clears to reveal two dead, three wounded (74). At that moment, the Revolutionary struggle appears to be on a continuum with the earlier act of shooting out Tepetate’s streetlights during a party--an irrational, ludic ritual rather than a popular movement for social change. However, as the corpses multiply, the ritual is rewritten as one of power; in a scene graphically illustrated by Alva de la Canal, the victorious general proclaims his triumph from atop a pile of bones, “grotesque pyramid of the sun” (89). Meanwhile, Porfiriata and the people of Veracruz, disenfranchised and passive but also resilient, “rumbea[n] gozoso” (89). Thus Icaza celebrates the popular vitality of his picaresque characters and tradition-rich communities, but harbors few illusions about the possibility of true political change.

### ***La Revolución Mexicana y la literatura***

After the dispersion of the *movimiento estridentista* and his own return to Mexico City, Icaza published very little, due in part to his other professional activities, including his growing involvement with the labor movement. In 1934, he was invited to deliver a lecture at the recently inaugurated Palacio de Bellas Artes to commemorate the 24<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Revolution. *La Revolución Mexicana y la literatura*, subsequently published in the journal *Futuro* as well as in pamphlet form, marks a shift in Icaza’s thinking away from skepticism and toward a more orthodox leftist position.

In this lecture, Icaza traces the development of revolutionary literature based on his contention that such literature must address the pressing problems of the day. After reviewing the history of Mexican letters in relation to major social upheavals, Icaza turns to the present. He cites in particular two groups as representative of revolutionary literature--the first comprising Mariano Azuela, Martín Luis Guzmán, José Mancisidor, and Nellie Campobello, and the second consisting of “Maples Arce y [Salvador] Gallardo, Arqueles Vela, [Germán] List [Arzubide], Xavier Icaza, Elena Alvarez, [Carlos] Gutiérrez Cruz, Mariano Silva, [Leopoldo] Méndez, el grupo de pintores encabezados por Rivera y los Treintatreintistas” (42). The inclusion of vanguard figures such as Gallardo and Vela is noteworthy; seven years after *estridentismo*’s demise, Icaza still sees its members (and himself) as being at the forefront of literary innovation alongside the likes of Azuela and Guzmán, the most well-known novelists of the Revolution.

What links these writers and artists, says Icaza, is that “en su obra se acusa radical y firme tendencia de carácter social” (42); moreover, “su técnica es más avanzada que la de otros escritores” (43). This advanced technique, he says, involves stripping away literary baggage and integrating popular forms on a fundamental rather than superficial level: “no citar una rumba: escribir, en libros tropicales, con el ritmo ondulante de la rumba” (43). Although these descriptions apply particularly well to his own *Magnavoz 1926* and *Panchito Chapopote*, his own works are ultimately not the point, for the aim of this lecture demands not the individual “I,” but rather the inclusive “we.” By the end, it is clear that Icaza’s history lesson is in fact a manifesto--a sequel, of sorts, to *Magnavoz 1926*.

“El momento es solemne,” Icaza proclaims. “Desde 1926 no había vuelto a sentirse en nuestro México tal sed de renovación creadora. Hay que ayudarle a que la satisfaga” (47). At last, it seems, “encontramos a la intelectualidad de vanguardia cumpliendo su destino” (48). Intellectuals, workers, bureaucrats, professors, poets, painters, “impetuous generals” and “quiet scholars” are finally united as the Revolution turns to the left at the beginning of what historians would later call the “*cardenista* utopia.”<sup>10</sup> By the end of the lecture-manifesto, the question of destiny has gone far beyond that of mere literature:

Es que México se asoma su destino. Y si todos unidos, con firme decisión, vamos por la fragosa vía que por la izquierda corre, y si logramos la honda transformación que exigen la historia y el devenir del mundo, México se habrá puesto de veras a la cabeza de sus países hermanos; la intelectualidad se habrá redimido para siempre de sus viejos pecados, y habremos descifrado por fin, tras larga espera oscura y secular, nuestro enigma agorero, la dura y atormentada X de México. (49)

The leftist dream of a worker-intellectual alliance thus becomes Icaza’s 1934 response to the 1926 question, voiced from underground by an anonymous corpse: “¿Qué patria?” The cynicism and doubts of the earlier text are replaced by a faith in the ability of intellectuals to, as Icaza would later write, “bajar a la plaza pública y participar en la liza” (1961: 7), bridging a social gap that previously seemed unconquerable.

Clearly, Icaza’s position here emerges from the social and intellectual ferment of the 1930s, a time in which the anti-Communist persecution of previous years eased and radical organizations such as the Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios (LEAR) thrived. Like their counterparts in the U.S. and elsewhere, many Mexican writers advocated a “proletarian” literature defined by its accessibility and social orientation. Icaza aligns himself with this tendency when he writes, for example, that “la educación y el arte y la cultura no deben ser ya más el privilegio de unos cuantos. Deben hallarse al alcance de todos” (14). Yet in spite of his embrace of proletarianism, Icaza’s idiosyncrasy is still apparent. If we compare, for example, the ideas of *La Revolución Mexicana y la literatura* to those put forth by Lorenzo Turrent Rozas in *Hacia una literatura proletaria* (1932), we note important differences in emphasis if not in ideology.

For Turrent Rozas, proletarian literature “tiene un estilo sencillo, exento de piruetas literarias, accesible a todos. Su preocupación medular es el examen de la vida actual, su enjuiciamiento desde un punto de vista marxista” (xvii-vviii). As examples he cites Gutiérrez Cruz, List Arzubide and Mancisidor, as well as the authors included in the volume to which his essay serves as introduction. *Estridentismo*, on the other hand, is critiqued as an important but failed effort doomed by the same flaws as the work of the Russian Futurist poet Mayakovsky: “Literatura para minorías, literatura incomprensible a las masas” (xvi). Icaza, in contrast, although just as anxious as Turrent Rozas to put social concerns at the center of literature, is also interested in the question of cultural renovation; as his valorization of *estridentismo* suggests, he is at ease with the notion of formal experimentation as a part of politically committed popular art. Moreover, in suggesting that an enigma lies at the heart of national identity--“nuestro enigma agorero, la dura y atormentada X de México”--Icaza implicitly acknowledges a level of ambiguity and complexity in human life that many leftist writers

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<sup>10</sup> See Gilly (1994) and Aguilar Camín and Meyer (1993: 133-141).

preferred to ignore. Although he asserts that this longstanding enigma is on the verge of resolution, it will in fact remain with Icaza as a kind of X factor whose very mystery he will eventually embrace, and whose presence throughout his work, as I have sought to demonstrate here, gives it lasting value and interest.

### ***Trayectoria***

Unfortunately, the delicate balance between the literature of enigma and a leftist social agenda was not achieved in Icaza's next creative effort, the play *Trayectoria*, published by the Universidad Obrera in 1936. Drawing on techniques Icaza first used in *Magnavoz 1926*, *Trayectoria* employs multiple voices and fast-paced narration to create a schematic overview of Mexican history in key moments of conflict and national self-definition. Yet the drama that *Trayectoria* rehearses is overdetermined; its very title refers to a relentless historical process which the author describes, but in which he claims no power to intervene. Mexico's long, bloody history of struggle has not been in vain, the play proclaims, for the hour of destiny is at hand. Coming full circle from *Magnavoz*, Icaza puts *Trayectoria*'s final words in the mouths of Lenin and "[el] abuelo alemán," Karl Marx: "Recordad mis palabras que son guía y son bandera: ¡Uníos, proletarios del mundo! [...] El mundo apesta, el mundo se desploma. ¡A construirlo de nuevo!" (75).

Didactic as it may be, *Trayectoria* marks the culmination of Icaza's own trajectory as a writer of the Revolution. In it, for the first time, the poor are shown to be capable of articulating concrete emotions and demands. Agrarian and labor reforms are portrayed sympathetically; moreover, an entity called "the masses," no longer asleep or manipulated by the empty promises of corrupt *caudillos*, constantly expresses its hunger for land, bread and liberty. This voice gains power over the course of the narrative; by the end, it is at the forefront of the struggle for social change. The call to rebuild the world is not only a citation of Marx, but a popular demand that Icaza has, it seems, decided to endorse. Yet, in homage to Icaza's habitual skepticism, we might ponder the moment in which a chorus of students, challenging messianic explanations of Mexican destiny, asks: "¿Hasta cuándo nos querrán hacer creer que la Historia es azul cuento de hadas?" (16).

### **Conclusion: The Persistent Enigma**

In retrospect, a text like *Trayectoria* can best be understood as the product of a euphoric but fleeting moment in history, a moment which seemed to promise the fulfillment of the Revolution's deepest goals, yet which in fact would witness the consolidation of that paternalistic and patriarchal hegemonic regime known as the Institutionalized Revolution. It is important to remember that for intellectuals like Icaza, this outcome was not yet apparent; instead, the Cárdenas administration, with its social and agrarian reforms, its support for the Spanish Republic, and its nationalization of the oil industry, was a source of pride and optimism.

During the 1930s, Icaza worked with labor groups, helped found the Universidad Obrera, published books on law and politics, and, as a member of the Supreme Court, had the honor of ratifying Cárdenas's historic decision to nationalize the oil industry. His

final creative work of the era was *Marea encendida* (1937), a collection of poetry celebrating his marriage to Ana Güido and their life together. Overwhelmed with work and perhaps missing the stimulation that he had previously received from participation in groups like the *Nave* and the *estridentistas*, he would not return to creative writing until the early 1960s. His comeback began in 1961 with a second edition of *Panchito Chapopote*, followed by many other books in succession. This later work, though interesting and deserving of further study, does not reveal the same political engagement as the texts discussed above. By the early 1960s, times had changed and Icaza with them; a fleeting reference in the 1962 novel *La Patrona* to the author's "muy mentado socialismo" is teasingly ambivalent and does not indicate any particular political position.

Nevertheless, due as much to his public persona in the 1930s as to his actual publications, Icaza has gone down in literary history as a writer of the proletarian persuasion. In a typology of themes included at the end of Xorge del Campo's textbook *Letras y balas: La narrativa de la Revolución Mexicana*, Icaza is listed under "El problema de la tierra," "Las haciendas," and "Cuestiones petroleras" (2001: 253-255). Such topic-based categorizations, however, reveal nothing about Icaza's formal strategies, and obscure his connections to the avant-garde. At the same time, some scholars of *estridentismo*, including Brushwood, Niemeyer (1999), and Escalante, have emphasized Icaza's contributions to that movement and have seen *Panchito Chapopote* in particular as an embodiment not only of social preoccupations but of avant-garde literary techniques. Yet each of these analyses focus only on a small fraction of Icaza's writing, without seeking to address the more complex whole.

In this essay, I have sought to expand these interpretations by showing Icaza as a versatile thinker who struggled to negotiate the myriad social and political questions unleashed by the Revolution and expressed that struggle in his writing. Icaza's writings, with their preoccupation with Mexican identity and at the same time, their frequently foregrounded ambivalence and contradiction, add a provocative twist to the literature of the Mexican Revolution; rather than decipher the prophetic enigma at Mexico's center, they invite us to contemplate it, sometimes with bitterness, more often with humor, and always with curiosity and wonder.<sup>11</sup>

On another level, Icaza's texts lend themselves to what might be called a post-heroic approach to the Revolution and its actors: an approach that allows us to diversify cultural canons, to change the criteria of evaluation, and to question certain positions (such as homophobia) without losing sight of the particular historical context in which those positions emerged. If many of the issues debated in the 1920s and 1930s--land distribution, workers' rights, education--are still relevant, the terms of the debate have shifted considerably. Indigenous activism, feminism, gay and lesbian movements, the ongoing mobilization of a pro-democratic civil society, and the transnationalization of culture and daily life are some of the factors that have challenged and exploded the limitations of post-revolutionary nationalism, that "deber ser" of which Ricardo Pérez Montfort writes so elegantly in his books on the subject (1994, 2000).

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<sup>11</sup> Ramón Xirau comments on the consistency of style, vision, and humor underlying the apparent diversity in Icaza's works: "lo que predomina en la obra de Xavier Icaza podría acaso resumirse precisamente en esos dos términos: espontaneidad y conciencia alegrada de la vida" (1963: 10).

If once it was possible for politically engaged writers and artists to say, like David Alfaro Siqueiros in 1945, “No hay más ruta que la nuestra,” such monolithic certainty is hardly feasible now that recognition of not only class but also gender, regional, ethnic and sexual diversity has come to the forefront, making visible a multiplicity of strategies of survival and resistance. Yet rather than negating the contributions of previous generations, a post-heroic approach frees us to critically reexamine the polemic figures of the past without becoming entangled in debates that are no longer useful. This is the strategy we find, for example, in the catalogue accompanying the 2003 art exhibit *Estética socialista en México. Siglo XX*, in which cartoonist El Fisgón (Rafael Barajas) celebrates the leftist art of the post-revolutionary era even as the title of his contribution repudiates the excesses of the era’s great ideologues: in distinction to Siqueiros, Fisgón affirms, “Sí hay más ruta que la nuestra.”

The writings of Xavier Icaza, with all their internal diversity and contradiction, indicate some of the many routes that art and literature of the Revolution could and did take. Like many of his peers during the turbulent post-revolutionary period, yet more candidly and nakedly than most, Icaza at his best reveals to us the hope and anguish of the intellectual confronted with a country--his own--whose essence is an enigma and whose tragicomic trajectory is implacable. Though he implores his readers not to forget to be intelligent, it is the persistent enigma, rather than any single solution, that prevails: “¡La patria, la patria!... ¿qué patria?”

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