
CHAPTER 1

Beginnings: Narrative and the Challenge of New Nations

The principal challenge of an introduction to Latin American fiction is to combine a clear and cohesive narrative history with a sensitivity towards the inevitably vast and varied nature of such a phenomenon. Take the very concept of 'Latin America' itself. The term refers to a huge subcontinent made up of many different regions and nations. Spanish is the principal language, but in the biggest country, Brazil, Portuguese is spoken. In the Caribbean meantime, other languages, such as French and English, are the national tongues of some states. Within many Spanish-speaking countries, especially Andean ones, various indigenous or 'Indian' languages are spoken. And when does 'Latin America' begin? Is one to include the period before the arrival of Columbus or can the word 'Latin' only refer to the post-Columbian experience? Are the writings of the colonial period Latin American or often merely Spanish (even if written in the so-called New World)? Do Latin American culture and identity really begin in the nineteenth century with Independence and/or with the forging of nation states? Is the term valid anyway or merely the projection of a colonial European mentality? Does it include or do justice to the ethnic range and mix of the subcontinent (for example, of indigenous, European, African, other or mixed descent)? And what about the increasingly Hispanicized USA? Is this also the locus of Latin American culture?

Unsurprisingly, the sorts of questions and issues raised here have led to long, fractious and often unresolved debates about the scope and nature of Latin American identity and culture. Indeed, with regard to literature, for instance, the last few decades of the twentieth century

saw a growing trend in Latin American literary criticism away from synoptic histories or the discussion of broad movements towards instead highly contextualized studies of specific historical periods, genres and sub-genres, countries, areas (such as, say, Central America, the Caribbean, the Southern Cone) or social groupings. Still, despite its obvious shortcomings, the term 'Latin American fiction' is still widely used, even if it is often mainly applied to narratives written in Spanish from around Independence onwards. Moreover, contemporary critical accounts based on a discourse of marginality and exceptions, while often a valuable corrective, sometimes ignore the realities of literary history and the validity and importance of a coherent explanation of trends and patterns that do come to prominence and form part of what must ultimately be seen as a mainstream.

What follows here will, while retaining a consciousness of difference and the heterogeneous, generally seek to provide such an account of mainstream tendencies in Latin American fiction, concentrating (largely, though not exclusively) on writing in Spanish from the nineteenth century onwards.¹ That account is based on an acceptance that the rise of the Latin American New Novel and the Boom of the 1960s (which brought to international attention writers such as Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa) represent, in literary-historical terms, the most significant developments ever in Latin American writing. However, the New Novel did not grow out of or remain in a historical vacuum (literary or political). The character of Latin American narrative was in many ways shaped by the experiences of colonialism and independence, the relationship – perceived as both positive and negative – with Europe, and the tensions surrounding modernization and the consolidation of national identities. Thus the evolution of Latin American fiction will be examined first in the context of developments in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It will also be considered in terms of what happened after the Boom, a period of both refinement of and reaction against the New Novel. Moreover, the discussion will be extended to include Hispanic fiction from the US. Finally, given the obvious potentially polemical nature of any discussion of fiction from Latin America, we will also examine briefly the ways in which 'Latin American fiction' functions as a concept in society, the market and the academy, and address the very legitimacy of a project that seeks to offer an expository survey of the nature of Latin American fiction.

The Nineteenth Century

The history of Latin American fiction has to be understood in two broad and interrelated contexts: the socio-political and the literary. This seemingly straightforward contention is far from uncontroversial in the Latin American context. A common argument to explain the success of the New Novel and the Boom is that such fiction constituted a rejection of a previous tradition of instructional narrative, designed to teach patriotic lessons or offer ideological challenges to them, in favour of a more fundamentally literary approach in which language and fiction were playfully or experimentally liberated from a narrow and local social context. This in turn led to a backlash after the Boom, with such a position being attacked as elitist, Eurocentric and in denial of cultural specificity. Needless to say, there is something of truth in both perspectives. Many developments in Latin American writing are a function of an essentially *literary* history, but it is undeniable and crucial to realize that literary history in the region is often inextricably bound up with issues of society and politics. In the colonial period, for example, the first books were largely designed to aid in the evangelization of the natives, and the diaries, chronicles and other narratives of the era were often basically an expression of the mentality of the occupying colonizers. But even at this early stage there were tensions. The most renowned document of this period is probably *El lazarillo de los ciegos caminantes* (tr. 'A Guide for Inexperienced Travellers Between Buenos Aires and Lima', 1775 or 1776) by Concolocorvo (real name Alonso Carrió de la Vandra, c.1715–c.1778). This travel narrative with novelistic flourishes echoes the Spanish picaresque tradition and also functions as an official report for the viceregal authorities. However, it is also highly satirical and gestures towards the ignorance of the colonizers and the honourable nature of local practices and values. None the less, it is not until the nineteenth century that a more obviously political literature begins to emerge in tandem with a republican spirit seeking to foster a new sense of nationhood.

Civilization and Barbarism

In conceptual terms, the cornerstone text of Latin American fiction (as well as of other areas of literature, arts and thought) is undoubtedly

Facundo, produced in 1845 by the Argentine Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811–88). Sarmiento's book is not really a novel as such but a peculiar hybrid of fiction, history and essay, and its importance lies in its ideological content rather than its intrinsically literary qualities. It is a work born of political circumstances and historical change, specifically the opportunities, challenges, threats and anxieties surrounding Independence. The Wars of Independence in the early nineteenth century (more or less between 1810 and 1825, with Independence completed in most places by 1828)² marked a desire for freedom from colonial restraint and the authority of the Spanish crown. However, the wars were essentially promoted and prosecuted by the white *criollo* or creole elites of European descent, who essentially sought to secure the control of trade, wealth and power for an American-born ruling class.

'Independence' was thus a problematic concept. Despite the discourse of liberty and (often quite genuine) political idealism, independence was, in practice, more immediately significant for the few rather than the many and had little real meaning for the ordinary, indigenous or mixed-race masses, who, even after Independence, continued to suffer under a system of extreme social hierarchy, a semi-feudal agricultural sector, racial division and, in some areas, even slavery. The result was that Independence often brought with it unrest and instability, and the key concern for so-called liberal thinkers in the period after it was how to achieve stability, progress and modernization on, say, a British, French or North American model in newly emerging nations characterized by difference and strife. The growth of a print press had already helped fuel republican discourse and the beginnings of a new sense of national identification, but now, increasingly, literary or semi-literary texts were produced to foster national identities and the sort of national values the educated writing and reading classes wished to project for the new prototype nations with which they were associated. In other words, 'literature', for want of a better term, became a major force in nation-building or the forging of what Benedict Anderson has famously termed 'imagined communities' – a now much-touted notion in Latin American cultural criticism referring to the kind of ideal or aspirational national social order that writers and intellectuals hoped or wished to come into being.

The background to *Facundo* is post-Independence Argentina. The region now called Argentina was torn by quarrels in this period between liberals and conservatives, leading to a series of wars between

1820 and 1870 involving two main sides, known as Unitarians and Federalists. The first group were largely city-based liberal intellectuals who supported the idea of a centralized state run from the capital Buenos Aires, while the second were often rural landowners who preferred a decentralized system of more or less autonomous provinces which would safeguard their own local power. The clash between the two groups was often presented as one between pro-European modernization and progress on the one hand, and xenophobic Catholic traditionalism on the other – a clash in other words between the forces of what could be termed ‘civilization’ and ‘barbarism’. Indeed this conflict gave the name to the subtitle of Sarmiento’s seminal work: *Facundo o civilización y barbarie* (‘Facundo, or Civilization and Barbarism’). From now on, ‘Civilization and Barbarism’ would become a stock phrase in and theme of Latin American writing and thought. It expressed, in the initial stages of the term’s development, a concern about the future direction of newly emancipated Latin American nations, as the elite attempted to build on a rather precarious sense of order and ‘civilization’ (associated with the ‘progressive’ urban metropolis) which was thought to be under threat from the disorderly example of the wild, untamed, ‘barbaric’ – and often native or part-native – masses (associated with the undeveloped interior).³

The embodiment of ‘barbarism’ in the Argentine context was a provincial caudillo or boss figure called Juan Manuel de Rosas, who eventually became a ruling dictator (in differing contexts from 1829 to 1833 and from 1833 to 1852). Rosas built on his early power base of rural gauchos to develop a huge mass movement, structured around a hysterical personality cult and supported by fanaticism, terror and the forced expulsion of his opponents. Though Rosas eventually fell from power and though Sarmiento himself later became president of a now united republic, the cult of the dictator is seen by many as casting a long shadow over Argentine history and contributing to a cultural pattern that would later lead, in the twentieth century, to phenomena such as Peronism, military dictatorship and the Falklands/Malvinas debacle. Indeed this cultural pattern soon came to be linked by writers and thinkers with the Latin American subcontinent as a whole. Not surprisingly, then, the theme of Civilization and Barbarism influenced thought and literature well beyond the mid-nineteenth century Southern Cone and – in various forms and with various revisions and permutations – would become one of the main prisms

through which Latin American literature and culture came to be analysed and understood.

Sarmiento's book actually focuses on one of Rosas' rivals (and, ultimately, victims), Facundo Quiroga, another country landlord and gaucho leader. It sets Facundo's rise to power against the often gory background of life on the Argentine *pampa* or grasslands, but also charts his downfall at the hands of Rosas. By the end Rosas has become a dangerous national incarnation of Facundo's barbarism, while the liberal alternative of the likes of Sarmiento is projected as the only antidote to his institutionalized destructiveness and cruelty. This alternative is symbolized by Buenos Aires itself, presented as the opposite of rural barbarism, a thriving capital and port characterized by budding modernity, new thinking and a trading culture which also implies a transatlantic awareness and openness to European and North American values.⁴ It is easy to see how *Facundo* came to be seen as the fullest expression of the idea that the only way forward for the newly independent nations of Latin America was the advancement of (usually) coastal city-based, European-influenced, economic, political, social, intellectual and moral values, via the taming of the terrifying propensity for the undisciplined barbarism of the native or near-native interior that constantly threatened to unseat a newly created and highly vulnerable system of civilized society.

This reading of Sarmiento was to have enormous impact. A wealth of fiction would revisit the civilization-versus-barbarism theme in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and in some ways this theme would be the dominant one of the Latin American 'classics' of the first half of the twentieth century. But literary and other writings would also challenge this version of Sarmiento, in particular the perception that the humble gaucho was the source of the nation's ills. Not only did this lead to much revisionist 'gauchesque' literature in Argentina (most notably the great book-length epic poem *El gaucho Martín Fierro* ['The Gaucho Martín Fierro', 1872 and 1879] by José Hernández [1834–86]), in which central government was portrayed as itself the bringer of social unrest by its annihilation of traditional national cultures; it also laid the ground for an entire way of debating the very nature of Latin American culture and identity that is still very much alive right up to the present day. The irony is that the negative reading of Sarmiento's position is something of a caricature and his stance is often quite ambiguous. In many ways, Sarmiento's

notion of barbarism was simply the abandonment of responsible government as personified in Rosas. And though he did himself caricature the gauchos, *Facundo*, especially in its early stages, often seems to romanticize the longstanding gaucho way of life. It may even appear to mythicize the caudillo figure via the exaggeration of the cult of Quiroga. The point is that Sarmiento was, as a literary writer, a man of his times. Romanticism (especially French Romanticism in the Southern Cone) was an important cultural influence in Latin America from the 1830s onwards and writers like Sarmiento, despite hard-nosed political concerns, were unable to avoid some degree of romanticization of the past as well as the visionary future.

Spanish America's first major Romantic writer was Esteban Echeverría (1805–51). However, he is probably best remembered for a short narrative that predates *Facundo* and offers a more accessible if cruder anticipation of Sarmiento's Civilization and Barbarism ethic, *El matadero* (1838). The title refers to a slaughterhouse and this stands as an allegory of the nation under Rosas. The '*pequeña república*' or mini-republic of the abattoir is run by an all-powerful master-butcher who oversees an assortment of grotesque butchers in typical provincial garb and vile, filthy labourers scrapping over animal waste – an unmistakable echo of Rosas, caudillos and their gaucho followers: 'simulacro en pequeño era éste del modo bárbaro con que se ventilan en nuestro país las cuestiones y los derechos individuales y sociales' ('this was a microcosm of the barbaric manner in which matters concerning individual and social issues and rights are aired in our country').⁵ The brain-washing mystique of Rosas is reflected in the portrayal of the ordinary folk as equivalent to cattle who passively go to their slaughter. One bull, described as being as stubborn as a Unitarian, stands out and refuses to give in, but its eventual capture and castration clearly represent the emasculation of decent liberal values.

A similar fate befalls a real-life Unitarian in the tale. In contrast to the mindless slogan-chanting and sporting of pro-Rosas emblems of the butchering masses, the Unitarian is civilized, well-spoken and elegantly dressed. Like the virile and independent-minded bull, this man has 'cojones' or balls and is willing to stand out from the conformist crowd. He finally dies following a fit of rage, when his savage torturers perform a metaphorical castration by stripping him and cutting off the whiskers he wears in the Unitarian style. None the less, and foreshadowing the epilogue of *Facundo*, this fine man is compared in

his torment by the mob to Jesus on the cross (p. 159), underscoring the importance of the class he represents as not only the unfair victim but also the potential saviour of the nation. Echeverría's tone is more consistently extreme than that of Sarmiento, but in a sense his real message is the same: his *Dogma socialista* (1837) reveals a notion of 'sociability' (rather than socialism in the modern sense) which posits the ideal of a mutually respectful society based on fairness and social cohesion.⁶

The ideas of Echeverría and the more influential Sarmiento are conceptually foundational to the development of fiction in Latin America. However, the first real Latin American novel predates them and predates Independence. It is *El periquillo sarniento* ('The Itching Parrot', 1816) by the Mexican José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi (1776–1827).⁷ Though the novel is little studied and was probably of little real impact, it is an interesting forerunner of the concerns about nation that would come to characterize later novels of the nineteenth century and beyond. Having said that, it is really rooted – echoing Concolocorvo – in the Spanish tradition of picaresque novels such as *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554). Like Lazarillo, Lizardi's protagonist Periquillo follows a series of jobs (for example, student, monk, judge, soldier, pharmacist, doctor's assistant, tradesman, barber, beggar and crook) in a largely episodic narrative that allows for a wide range of social satirical observations bringing out the hypocrisy of Mexican society. The social satire, though, albeit derivative in a literary sense, actually gives the novel a degree of national focus. Periquillo's range of adventures can be seen as an embryonic tracing of an imagined emerging nation and as a commentary on the type of society that is emerging. There is virtually no explicit excitement about the idea of Independence here, but the satire surrounding the 'hero's' apprenticeship in life does encapsulate *criollo* concerns about the barrier to their own social and economic progress represented by the colonial system, as well as offering a morally corrective perspective on the *criollo* class. From this point of view, *El periquillo sarniento* can be seen as anticipating or even paving the way for subsequent narrative of a more explicitly nationalist persuasion.⁸

National romances

As has already been hinted with regard to Echeverría and Sarmiento, 'nationalist' writing was very much bound up with Romanticism.

Romanticism was always wrapped up in concerns about changing values after the Enlightenment and the aftermath of the French Revolution in Europe, leading to either a sense of malaise or idealism. In Latin America these mixed feelings were projected, especially by liberal intellectuals with a vocation of civic obligation, on to the new nations, with the result that those narratives which could – to a greater or lesser extent – be described as Romantic tended to offer an idealistic map for national evolution coupled with an anxiety about its possible failure. The differing portrayal of the gaucho – barbaric threat or romantic repository of national tradition – is a case in point.⁹

In Brazil, the figure of the Indian offered the potential for similar ambiguities. In reality, Indianist literature or *indianismo* was largely escapist and with little social content, its sources being Longfellow, Fenimore Cooper and Chateaubriand as much as Brazilian society. None the less, Indians did become a projected emblem of national identity, largely because – unlike the non-native black slaves from Africa – they could be taken as authentically Brazilian while remaining conveniently distant and exotic. In *O Guarani* (1857), José Martiniano de Alencar (1829–77), Brazil's major Romantic novelist, envisions a kind of ideal world of harmony between Indians and Portuguese, but his best-known work, *Iracema* (1865), is more uncertain. Here an Indian princess, Iracema, falls in love with a white man, Martim, but as a result is forced to abandon her community. The couple have a son, Moacir, who might be seen as emblematic of a positive future for an authentic mixed-race nation. However, such optimism may be neutralized by the fact that Iracema dies as a result of the birth. She is effectively assimilated and then killed off. Her fate surely calls into question the meaningfulness or even possibility of any potential ideal transcultural state.

This intriguing mixture of ill-fated love story and ambivalent national allegory was pretty typical of a number of Spanish American novels of the same period, most notably the two great national romances *Amalia* (1851), by Argentina's José Mármol (1818–71), and *María* (1867), by Colombia's Jorge Isaacs (1837–95). In an important revisionist study of the genre, *Foundational Fictions*, Doris Sommer contends that the mid-century fashion for novels about young lovers wooing each other across class, regional or racial divides was a projection of a desire for nation-building and national conciliation. The romantic love theme is really about, then, the need to court and

domesticate civil society after the *criollos* had won independence (Sommer 1991, p. 6).¹⁰

The earlier novel, *Amalia*, has a much more obvious political focus. Set against the background of the Rosas dictatorship, it deals with an abortive Unitarian conspiracy against the dictator in 1840. In many ways, it is a historical novel with much overwhelming detail of life in Buenos Aires under the dictatorship and a wealth of historical characters, including Rosas himself and his deliciously wicked sister-in-law María Josefa Ezcurra. The political dimension of the plot centres on one Daniel Bello's scheming against the system. But if Daniel is heroic, he does not really achieve very much. Moreover, the Unitarian perspective of the novel risks creating an impression of neo-aristocratic moral superiority (particularly with regard to race). Equally awkward is the weaving into this historical framework of the love story involving Daniel's allies, Eduardo Belgrano and Amalia. Even so, the love plot can be read politically. Eduardo is a wounded plotter who is cared for by the eponymous Amalia, but ultimately forced into exile: the lovers' curtailed domestic idyll may therefore be a manifestation of the positive national values associated with the Unitarian cause that are threatened by the savagery of the regime. Significantly too, Amalia is from the interior while Eduardo is from the capital. Their romance is thus an expression of the desire for an ideal state of the nation in which the conflict between 'civilization' and 'barbarism' is resolved. But, of course, Amalia is no barbarian and certainly no gaucho: the national conciliation sought is really more the wished-for triumph of the values of the pro-European elite.

In *María* the love story is much more to the fore, and in this sense this is probably a more successfully worked and less diffuse novel – even though its narrative structure is rather loose, with its meandering, descriptive passages and sub-plots. It was (and, to some extent, remains) hugely popular and is widely regarded as Latin America's great Romantic novel. At the same time, this makes it a rather unlikely candidate for a nation-building narrative. For a start, it may be seen as just a love story. It is about the love of a young man, Efraín, for the orphan girl, María, whom his father has taken in as his ward. Despite the fact that they are like brother and sister, the parents agree to their wish to marry as long as Efraín first finishes his education in London so as subsequently to establish himself back home. Unfortunately, María has a hereditary disease of sorts (in fact,

epilepsy) and – tragically – dies before Efraín returns. This inexplicable tragic ending also dilutes the national dimension in that it seems to present the star-crossed lovers as victims of an arbitrary curse of destiny rather than of social circumstances – something underlined by the symbolism of the ‘ave negra’ or black bird which appears menacingly as an image of a dark fate at key moments of misfortune in the novel. The setting of *María*, nevertheless, on a slave plantation, should alert us to a possibly significant social, economic and political context, and Sommer, indeed, offers a persuasive political reading of the novel. The very fact that the lovers’ idyll takes place on a near-feudal slave plantation and that there are precious few references to Colombia’s political and economic difficulties suggest that *María*’s largely first-person narrative is characterized by a nostalgic or anxious harking back to the colonial heritage of slave owning, before abolition initiated a radical transformation in class culture. It is a novel, in other words, of the fears and anxieties about the building of a new nation based on racial mix. The inherited disease is a metaphorical symptom of the withering of what was essentially an aristocracy.

Another novel worthy of consideration in the context of Romantic fiction and narratives of slavery is *Sab*, published rather earlier than *Amalia* or *María*, in 1841, by the Cuban Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda (1814–73). Avellaneda actually spent most of her adult life in Spain and it is not clear that *Sab* was especially influential in the development of Latin American fiction, but it has received considerable critical attention and been consequently canonized from the late twentieth century onwards, following the rise in academic literary critical circles of feminism and postcolonialism.¹¹ The novel is usually read as an abolitionist anti-slavery work that draws a parallel between the position of the slave in Cuba and woman in a patriarchal society. Indeed the comparison is explicit: ‘como los esclavos ellas [las mujeres] arrastran pacientemente su cadena y bajan la cabeza bajo el yugo de las leyes humanas’ (‘just like the slaves, they [women] patiently drag along their chains and bow their head beneath the yoke of the laws of men’) (p. 194). The apparent emphasis on slavery and the position of women explains much of the novel’s contemporary appeal to critics, but equally appealing to them is the opportunity offered by the text for historical revisionism. Like *Amalia*, the historical setting is quite explicit for a novel often Romantic in character. The main action is on a slave plantation in Cuba in the early nineteenth century when the

island was still a Spanish colony. It concerns a mulatto slave, Sab, and his impossible love for his master's white daughter Carlota. Carlota agrees to marry the grasping materialist Englishman Enrique Otway. The marriage is jeopardized when Enrique discovers that Carlota is not as rich as he thought, but is finally made possible after Sab secretly donates his winning national lottery ticket to Carlota. In true Romantic style, Sab dies the very moment that the couple wed.

What is interesting about this story is that it actually sets events in a much wider context than slavery alone. This is really another book about the decline of the landowning classes as they become vulnerable to economic modernization and the demands of foreign commercial interests. In allegorical terms, the beautiful *criolla*¹² Carlota is the prize of Cuba, built up with the support of a slave economy, and now open to exploitation by mercenary foreign entrepreneurs (Enrique). The 'Carta de Sab a Teresa' ('Letter from Sab to Teresa [Carlota's cousin]') which concludes the novel may well be an echo of the Latin American Independence hero Simón Bolívar's famous *Carta de Jamaica* ('Letter from Jamaica') of 1815, in which he outlined his core political beliefs (Hart 1999, p. 72), and therefore a veiled gesture (Avellaneda was, remember, based in Spain) towards the cause of Independence. Sab himself gains independence in the novel when he is freed. But it is at the level of race and slavery that the novel's main ambiguities can be seen. Sab is a rather unlikely character. Intelligent and honourable, he is really a projection of Rousseau's noble savage (a figure so dear to the Romantics) – a fantasy of liberal white desire for reform without loss of privilege. Indeed his behaviour is almost that of the ideal white man and it should come as no surprise that he is particularly light-skinned. The other slaves, meanwhile, are often portrayed as passive and essentially contented. And Sab, is, in any case, just like any other Romantic hero – ultimately a victim of love and fate (hence his melodramatic death) as much as of society.

Despite any such revisionist reservations about the limitations of Avellaneda's social perspective, there can be no doubt that *Sab* remains a striking example of the literature of national reflection, not least because of the centrality of a black character at the heart of the narrative and its unquestionable abolitionist thrust. The fact is, though, that in its day it was very much the work of a Cuban in Spain. It did not have a great degree of impact in the years after her death, though slavery was at last abolished in Cuba some thirteen years later in 1886.

Costumbrismo

What is true of *Sab*, and of all the major texts considered here so far, is that, despite varying degrees of connection to the idea of Romanticism, they are all very much concerned (even *María*) with the social, economic, political and geographical reality of Latin America. Indeed, later, more experimental literary reactions against first nineteenth-century and thereafter early twentieth-century writing have tended to be explained in terms of a rejection of the instructional, patriotic, national or, broadly speaking, 'realistic' nature of such writing. Given that post-Independence nineteenth-century narrative of note was always, to a greater or lesser extent, bound up with the legitimization of new nations or the expression of aspirational ideals for them, it is not surprising that it also seeks to be something of a reflection of reality. For example, much nineteenth-century narrative was heavily influenced by *costumbrismo* or costumbrism. *Costumbrismo* was a type of literature that paid particular attention to the customs or habits of a particular region or, later, country, and is often associated with the depiction of picturesque scenes of local colour. In Spain, for example, portraits of rural Andalucía, such as *Cuadros de costumbres* ('Sketches of Customs and Manners', published in 1857, though written earlier) by Fernán Caballero (the pen name of Cecilia Francisca Boehl von Faber [1796–1877]), had significant impact (Caballero was a friend of Gómez de Avellaneda), as did the more analytical sketches of Mariano José de Larra (1809–37).

'New World' writers soon followed the Spanish example as costumbrism was applied to the demand after Independence for vivid portraits of a specifically Latin American reality. In fact, all of the works discussed so far contain obviously costumbrist elements, with their eloquent descriptions of, say, gaucho life on the *pampa* or plantation society.¹³ But perhaps the most quintessential Latin American manifestation of *costumbrismo* was the *tradición* (traditional sketch), associated nowadays almost exclusively with the Peruvian Ricardo Palma (1833–1919). His *Tradiciones peruanas* ('Traditional Sketches of Peru', published over a lengthy period between 1872 and 1910) were colourful and witty pieces which focused on the historical past, usually the colonial period, though sometimes the pre-Columbian or post-Independence eras. They covered the whole range of Peruvian society from vagabond to viceroy, were often of a satirical bent, and dealt with a variety of anecdotes concerning social disagreements, religious practices, popular

linguistic expressions and the like. In effect, what they did was to supply the padding of a national tradition for the new Peruvian nation and help in the forging of a sense of national identity. But also, in expanding the scope of *costumbrismo* (which tended towards the escapist), they provided a bridge between Romanticism and Realism, as a more recognizably realist style of literature began to come to dominance (with some, as shall later be seen, major exceptions) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Realist narratives

Talking about Latin American realist fiction is really rather problematic. As has been indicated, many later writers would regard the works considered so far as very much connected to social reality, while many of the major so-called realist novels to appear in Latin America after Romanticism do not really stand comparison with the European Realism of, say, Balzac, Dickens or Galdós, or the Naturalism of, say, Zola or the early Pardo Bazán. A looser, broader and less historically specific notion of realism (with a small r) may well be a more helpful way of understanding the evolution of Latin American fiction from the late nineteenth to the mid twentieth centuries. In the meantime, though, three transitional figures should be briefly mentioned.

The Chilean Alberto Blest Gana (1829–1904) is usually credited with producing the first European-style Realist novel in the form of *Martín Rivas* (1862). Romance and sentiment are not entirely absent from this novel, but it echoes very much Dickensian Realism, with its eponymous hero pursuing a trajectory from the shabbier and semi-dependent end of society to the point of entry into mainstream upper middle-class society, against a background of colourful lower-class rogues and saucier sorts providing lighter relief. The main Naturalist writer of the period is probably Argentina's Eugenio Cambaceres (1843–89). His *Sin Rumbo* ('Without Direction', 1885) is a dark novel dwelling, in a kind of perverse realignment of the *costumbrista* tradition, on the sordid and often unspeakably violent detail of human reality, while his *En la sangre* ('In the Blood', 1887) clearly alludes to that other Naturalist credo of hereditary determinism. The last notable Naturalist novel was probably the Mexican Federico Gamboa's (1864–1939) *Santa* (1903). However, despite its emphasis on the squalid and deterministic, Shaw sees it as marking a kind of swansong for

Naturalism because of its tendency towards the love ideal and moral regeneration (Shaw 2002, pp. 30–2).

The problem is that none of the preceding titles can be seen as great novels and they have received scant critical attention so far. They did form part of a strand of development in Latin American fiction that continued into the twentieth century (the grotesque realism of the later Boom writer José Donoso's first novel, *Coronación* ['Coronation', 1957], being a striking case in point), but never helped create a really strong trend for urban or provincial Realism or Naturalism in the European tradition. What the brief burgeoning of Realism and Naturalism at the turn of the century did show, however, was that a concern with social reality was becoming a self-consciously central feature of Latin American fiction.

Perhaps a more interesting example of fiction of a sort of Realist-Naturalist inclination, and perhaps more typical of the kind of direction Latin American realism would broadly take after the nineteenth century, was Clorinda Matto de Turner's (Peru, 1852–1909) *Aves sin nido* ('Birds without a Nest', 1889). Although its feet are still partly in the costumbrist and even Romantic camps, *Aves sin nido* sees itself as a departure from the norm. In her preface to the novel, Matto emphasizes two things. One is what might be called realism: to describe her literary aims she uses words like 'fotografía' ('photograph'), 'observar atentamente' ('careful observation'), 'exactitud' ('exactness') and 'copia' ('copy'). The other is social protest: she expresses her love of the indigenous people and her hatred of tyranny (which she associates with the church, government and landowners), and wishes her work to offer a 'moraleja correctiva' ('moral corrective') that will help to 'mejorar la condición de los pueblos chicos del Perú' ('improve the condition of the communities of the Peruvian interior') and contribute to 'los progresos nacionales' ('national progress').¹⁴ The text that follows her introductory remarks may not fit the classic critical definition, but what emerges here is a consciousness of a kind of social realism that is not only a first step in the development of Indigenism but was to become, in general terms, characteristic of much Latin American fiction for the next half century or so. Unlike the romantic projections of Brazilian *indianismo*, *indigenismo* sought to combine a more realistic presentation of the 'Indian'¹⁵ experience with social and political critique. Indigenism became a genuine phenomenon in the first half of the twentieth century, but Matto's work clearly anticipates it.

It has become fashionable to point out the limitations of Indigenist writing, emphasizing the sometime tendency to idealize the Indians and the paternalistic or maternalistic outside perspective of writers who were usually white, urban and middle-class. Both things are true of *Aves sin nido*, and its explicit political preaching further limits its status as major literature. But for its time, it is a fierce and powerful piece of work (Matto was excommunicated and exiled for her troubles). In a sense the novel revisits the theme of Civilization and Barbarism, this time in an Andean context and with a tweaking of Sarmiento's perspective. There is a clear progressive, modernizing agenda here, but the presumptuous nature of a concept like civilization is implied, while, more importantly, barbarism, or *salvajismo* (wildness or possibly savagery) as Matto prefers to call it, is not inherent in rural folk but precisely a result of and reflection of their appalling mistreatment by the authorities. The barbaric exploitation of the Indians is the key background to the plot of the narrative. Lucía Marín is a white woman who temporarily relocates to the fictional Andean village of Kíllac because of her husband's mining interests. Her attempt to help the local Indian Yupanqui family results in a violent backlash in which the Yupanquis are killed and the Marín home is attacked. Lucía adopts the Yupanquis' daughters and takes them away from the mountains to the city – away from barbarism to a (hopefully) more enlightened, liberal urban culture.

The gendered perspective of the novel (with the positive emphasis on Lucía and other female characters) can also be taken as a wider expression of the hope for change and progress. But the ending introduces another negative. The birds without a nest of the title are obviously the orphaned Yupanqui girls. However, at the end the image undergoes an adjustment. Young Margarita Yupanqui is to marry the (also adopted) modern lawyer Manuel, but it is dramatically revealed that both are in fact the offspring of Kíllac's corrupt bishop. The young lovers are now referred to as the 'aves sin nido' of the title (p. 220). Once again the threat of incest is raised as a barrier to human happiness (as in *María* or even *Sab*, where Sab and Carlota are possibly cousins). But the incest theme here seems emptied of any Romantic overtones of cursed destiny. Here instead it is a searing reminder of very earthly injustices – the corruption of the church, the brutal attitude to women, and more generally the very lack of civility in the new nations that is such a threat to progress.

Matto's brand of realism may be too didactic or melodramatic for some tastes, while that of Blest Gana and Cambaceres may be too derivative or, even, uninteresting. However, there is one stand-alone figure in Latin American nineteenth-century Realism who could, without exaggeration, be easily mentioned in the same breath as Flaubert, and that is the Brazilian Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis (1839–1908). His mature works are not only masterpieces of Realism but also go much further, anticipating the profoundly modern style of literature that would characterize the most internationally famous Latin American novels of the twentieth century. His greatest work is *Dom Casmurro* (1899). At first sight it is typical of the sort of female-adultery novels that were successful in nineteenth-century Europe, such as Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) and the Portuguese Eça de Queiroz's (1845–1900) *O primo Basílio* ('Cousin Basílio', 1878). The solitary and ageing first-person narrator, Bento Santiago, the Dom Casmurro of the title, tells the story of his love for his childhood playmate Capitu. This seems like an echo of many other nineteenth-century novels, but there is a twist: Bento's account shows how, after marrying him, Capitu betrayed him by having an affair with his best friend Escobar.

The real twist, though, is embedded in the narrative perspective itself: the alert reader will see through Bento's version of events and conclude that his description of Capitu is a distortion of the facts, the manifestation of a manipulative and paranoically jealous mind. The reader needs to read between the lines. For example, if Bento's suspicions are examined closely it can be seen that they are initially aroused by nothing more than a look in Capitu's eyes; and when he suspects that his son Ezequiel is really a bastard because of a resemblance to Escobar, the reader ought to remember the narrative's numerous references to unexpected physical likenesses and the fact that such likenesses exist only in the eye of the beholder (let alone Escobar's suggestion that their children should intermarry, most unlikely if he were Ezequiel's real father). There are, in fact, many hints at Bento's immaturity and childish imagination. Moreover, it becomes apparent that, in writing in the present about the past, he is projecting on to the story of Capitu present feelings which may not even have existed at the time. On the final page of the novel, Bento addresses the reader directly: 'tu concordarás comigo: se te lembras bem da Capitu menina, há de reconhecer que uma estava dentro da outra, como a fruta dentro da casca' ('you will agree with me: if you

remember Capitu the girl, you must perforce recognize that the one was already inside the other, just as a piece of fruit is always already inside its husk').¹⁶ Bento here clearly foreshadows the unreliable narrator of modern narrative, persuading the reader to accept a dubious and doctored interpretation of reality as truth. In this sense, Machado is stretching the boundaries of conventional realism and enticing the reader into a world of ambiguities and multiple points of view that would later become the main feature of the New Narrative of the mid-twentieth century.

Having said the above, this does not mean that *Dom Casmurro* is an utter problematization of the realist project. As with other stories of domestic love considered here, the novel has a very definite social, economic, political and historical context. It is set during the *Segundo Reinado* or Second Reign (1840–89), when Brazil was an empire, a kind of constitutional monarchy headed by Pedro II – a system that was more representative in theory than in practice. The economy during this period was dependent on slave labour and the export of sugar and coffee. The eventual abolition of slavery in 1888 is generally seen as hastening the collapse of the empire and the creation of a republic in 1889. Although Machado's novel is set in Rio de Janeiro, Bento's wealth is based on inheritance from a *fazenda* or plantation economy. The novel's background detail and the implied decadence of Bento may encourage us to read it as a commentary on the decline of the oligarchy and the empire it supported, as the slave-driven *fazenda* economy wanes and a new mercantile economy emerges. The patriarchal family with which Bento is associated is thus an allegory for an entire system struggling with a painful process of erosion and change. Such an allegorical reading might not be entirely surprising if one considers what is known about the life of Machado de Assis himself. Machado was a mulatto (and a dreadfully short-sighted epileptic with a stutter to boot) who, none the less, discreetly made his way up the Brazilian social ladder to become a significant player in white society. *Dom Casmurro* may well be – though this is speculation – a sly or nervous comment on the culture of dissimulation in later nineteenth-century Brazil and on the treacherously shifting sands of politics and economics on which that culture was precariously built.

One important thing to note about the two re-readings of *Dom Casmurro* mentioned here is that virtually nobody seemed to notice the possibility of them until the later twentieth century. Helen

Caldwell's *The Brazilian Othello of Machado de Assis*, published in the USA in 1960, was the first work to reveal the implied second narrative of *Dom Casmurro* in which an insanely jealous husband seeks to frame his innocent wife. And John Gledson's *The Deceptive Realism of Machado de Assis*, published in the UK in 1984, was the first – albeit building on Brazilian critic Roberto Schwarz's work on Machado's earlier fiction – to uncover the historical-political dimension.¹⁷ This raises interesting questions about the nature of literary criticism as applied to Latin America (of which more in chapter 7), but may also explain why Machado is less well-known than he perhaps deserves. Not only was he writing in Portuguese, and moreover in Brazil, but also his work was probably taken largely at face value by his contemporaries. It is possibly for this reason that Machado was not the huge influence on the development of modern writing that he might otherwise have been. It was not until the Boom of the 1960s that Latin American fiction came to be widely associated with modernist experimentalism, and it was only in the 1940s and 1950s that greatly influential evidence of experimental fiction can be plainly identified on any scale. For the time being, at the end of the nineteenth century and well into the first half of the twentieth century, the realist thrust remained the dominant strain in Latin American letters.

This last assertion might seem surprising to some scholars of Latin American literature. The reason for such surprise would be the curious emergence at the turn of the century of what was known as *modernismo*, followed by the rise of the so-called *vanguardia* or Latin American avant-garde in the early twentieth century. Recent criticism has, rightly, seen these movements not as the self-contained phenomena they have sometimes been thought to be, but as the first signs of a genuinely modernist aesthetic in Latin American literary production. However, the strength of *modernismo* and the *vanguardia* lies mainly in their poetry: the *modernista* and avant-garde novel – despite recent attempts at critical re-evaluation – represents more of a subterranean tendency. These movements will therefore be considered later, when focusing more acutely on the rise of modern fiction in Latin America in reaction against the perceived dominance of realism (chapter 3). The reality is that, as the first decades of the twentieth century unfolded, the main emphasis of canonical Latin American fiction continued to be the exploration of emerging national identities within the framework of an attempted realist model.