

THE NATION APOCALYPTIC:
RAPE IN ESTEBAN ECHEVERRÍA'S HYBRID TEXT
"EL MATADERO"

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THE founding text of Argentine narrative—and the founding text of Latin American hybrid texts—Esteban Echeverría's narrative chronicle "El matadero" was written ca. 1840, but not published until 1871. The text, written by Echeverría (1805-51) during his exile in Uruguay from Argentina and the dictatorship of Juan Manuel Rosas (1829-52), ends with same-sex male sexual humiliation, often read as including rape. "El matadero" as a founding hybrid text of Latin American writing is something of an icon of the eccentric understandings of Romanticism in Latin America.¹ Argentina was certainly the most literate country of the day and the one most steeped in the work of French and English writers, whose influence Rosas attempted to forestall. He used an array of violent tactics, such as impaling in public view the heads of uncooperative booksellers and the routine rape of opponents with dried shucked corncobs before or after the slitting of their throats (called "playing the violin"), often with dull knives, by thugs known as La Mazorca (that is, The Corn Cob). Clearly, the stakes were high for European-inspired Romanticism in Argentina (mostly that meant Buenos Aires), and Echeverría was a major player, who saved both his neck and, one might say, the integrity of his masculinity, by writing from Uruguay across the Río de la Plata.

"El matadero" is, of course a transparent allegory of Argentina under Rosas, one where beef, the main export item of the young country (the Republic only dated from 1816), is used by the dictator to control

¹ See studies by Ghiano and Pupo-Walker on the originality of Echeverría's hybrid text. See also Lindstrom (88-93) for an extremely intelligent characterization of the particularly forceful nature of Echeverría's narrative and the appeal of its complexity to contemporary readers.

the masses; their access to meat after an imposed abstention only exacerbates, in Echeverría's view, their inherent violence.²

The story is customarily discussed as consisting of two distinct parts or narrative movements. The first is the description of the beef-starved frenzy provoked in the masses when the dictator makes some live animals available for their consumption following a fast imposed by the closure of the slaughterhouse due to flooding. This is a grotesque local-color sketch in which the crowd quite simply tears the animals to pieces. These scenes have often been recycled and refashioned in Argentine literature as an ur-narrative of the social and political violence that is part of the fabric of national history, most recently in the form of the neofascist military tyranny from 1976-83, which has often been called the Argentine Holocaust because of the ideology and policy of extermination of the Other the generals pursued.

The second movement of "El matadero" is more of a short story proper (or, at least, the sketch for one), in the sense of having a conventional protagonist and a narrative arc. The protagonist is a member of the opposition to Rosas who has the misfortune to fall into the clutches of the syndicate that controls the slaughterhouse. Bored, they decide to torment him, first verbally and then by trimming the characteristic beard worn by incautious members of the opposition (instead of the blood red ribbon that identifies Rosas supporters). Not satisfied, they decide to tie him down and humiliate him with a bull's pizzle. Now let me be clear: the text describes him being tied down, his pants lowered, and the indication that he is to be whipped with the

² Concerning "El matadero" as a foreshowing of violence in Argentine social history and as a literary text *ab quo* for the treatment of such violence in Argentine literature, see Jitrik, Guitérrez Ludovic, and Marsal. Sorbille, in a psychoanalytic reading of the relationship between Rosas and Echeverría (and other Argentine romantics), sees this fascination with violence, and especially the sadomasochistic dynamics of rape, as deeply personal and autobiographical and much more than the allegorization of incipient national social history.

pizzle.³ The intended rape is not actually described. However, I would maintain that since Echeverría and his immediate Argentine readers would have known very well of the practices of the Mazorca, whose members came in part from the slaughterhouses, narrator discretion here does not translate into narrative ambiguity.⁴ Moreover, in the ensuing struggle, the young man has a hemorrhage and dies (i.e., more blood is spilled, joining that of the animals in the first movement).

This apoplectic trauma is a rather extreme response to the actual acts described. The head of the syndicate claims that all they wanted to do was have some fun with him; too bad he died. Echeverría's story is a bit vague in the details, and I often have to press students for them to fully grasp what is happening. But despite Echeverría's reticence to be fully explicit (I will return to this below in the context of Argentine homophobia⁵), Argentine readers are likely to be quite aware of what is

³ Another possibility is that he might be castrated, which would echo both the shearing of his beard and the castration of a bull, much to the delight of the spectators, earlier in the story.

⁴ That the members of the Mazorca did, in fact, entertain themselves with raping their victims, characteristically with the corn cob that gave them their name, is explicitly developed in the novel by Echeverría's near contemporary, Eduardo Gutiérrez, *Juan Manuel de Rosas: los dramas del terror* (1882). Interestingly, it was Eduardo's brother Juan María, who discovered Echeverría's text and published it posthumously in 1871 in the *Revista del Río de la Plata*. Sorbille (181 no. 33) asserts that the young *unitario* of the story would have known that the Mazorca routinely sodomized its victims; Haberly also accepts the fact of "both physical and sexual violence" in the final scene of the story (304). See Ellis for a detailed examination of the use of male-male rape as a form of slave punishment in a Cuban text contemporary with Echeverría's. As in Echeverría's story, the actual rape is figured in the Cuban text in much the same way as it is in the Argentine writer's.

⁵ The history of homophobia in Argentina is integral to Bazán's account of the history of homosexuality in that country. Bazán also asserts that the intention of the slaughterhouse workers is to rape their victim, and he proceeds to cite an array of popular culture references from the period that leave little doubt as to the practices of the Mazorca (82-83).

happening and, indeed, Echeverría's story figures in a long list of narratives that include reference to the same-sex male rape of opponents or enemies, in conjunction, to be sure, with a long list of narratives that describe the rape of women by men for similar reasons, in addition to any universal sexist basis.

Of course, we know that there is a long history of the raping of the conquered by the vanquishers, not just of women and children, but of enemy combatants, as a form of iconic emasculation. This is, in fact, part of the narrative of the 1982 Argentine-British conflict over the Islas Malvinas (claimed as the Falkland Islands by the British), where the Indian Gurkas in the service of the British were reputed to have raped the hapless young Argentine conscripts (virtually abandoned by their superiors), while the Argentines openly relished the thought of capturing Prince Edward for similar attention.⁶ Half-history, half-imaginary, ritualized male rape is an insistently recurring theme in the narratives of war and violent political conflict. Indeed, part of the practices of the torturers during the Argentine Holocaust involved the rape of both sexes, although most men were raped by instruments of torment rather than directly by the body of the torturer; women were frequently directly raped as part of the bounty of the torturer. But then, this is not unique to Argentina, nor, in the case of Argentina, does it only occur after 1976; there are many sordid annals of abuse in this regard.

⁶ See the novelistic account by Rodolfo Fogwill, *Los pichiciegos* (1983). Other important Argentine texts dealing with male-male rape for purposes of social control include Beatriz Guido's *Fin de fiesta* (1958), David Viñas, *Los hombres de a caballo* (1967), and Enrique Medina's *Las Tumbas* (1972). Miguel Bonasso's personal memoir *Recuerdo de la muerte* (1984) describes the official use of male-male rape, although typically via the use by the rapist of various instruments rather than his own penis, during the neofascist military dictatorship in Argentina, 1976-83. References to male-male rape recur throughout the documents, chronicles, personal memoirs, and fiction relating to this—and previous—periods of military tyranny in Argentina. And, of course, references to male-female (i.e., agent of oppression-female detainee) abound, as in all societies.

But I don't want to hold on to a characterization of "El matadero" only in terms of the same-sex male humiliation and possibly rape with which it concludes, but to consider what the overall sense is of the narrative universe Echeverría luridly recounts in both movements.⁷ Clearly, by any definition, "El matadero" is a narrative of apocalypse. Although the text may not be cast exactly in the format of Judaic prophecies,⁸ it is no less dire, strident, and unrelenting in its depiction of the angry unbridled mass of Argentines, goaded on in its homicidal fury by a cynical dictator, desirous of consolidating his iron grip of power at any cost:

Pero a medida que adelantaba, la perspectiva variaba: los grupos se deshacían, venían a formarse tomando diversas actitudes y se desparramaban corriendo como si en medio de ellos cayese alguna bala perdida o asomarse la quijada de algún encolerizado mastín. Esto era, que ínter el carnicero en un grupo descuartizaba a golpe de hacha, colgaba en otros los cuartos en los ganchos de su carreta, despellejaba en éste, sacaba el sebo en aquél, de entre la chusma que ojeaba y aguardaba la presa, salía de cuando en cuando una mugrienta mano a dar un tarazón con el cuchillo al sebo o a los cuartos de la res, lo que originaba gritos y explosiones de cólera del carnicero y el continuo hervidero de los grupos, dichos y gritería descompasada de los muchachos.

. . . . Oíanse a menudo, a pesar del veto del Restaurador y de la santidad del día, palabras inmundas y obscenas, vociferaciones preñadas de todo el cinismo bestial que caracteriza a la chusma de nuestros mataderos,

⁷ Haberly, in a fascinating discussion of the anxiety of masculinity among Argentine Romantics, sees the violence against the *unitario* in "El matadero" very much as a figuration of the anxiety of the opposition to the brutal masculinity of Rosas against which Echeverría and his fellow artists had little chance of prevailing.

⁸ Foster, however, analyzes the Christological symbolism Echeverría deploys in describing the death of the young victim ("Paschal Symboly").

con las cuales no quiero regalar a los lectores. (Echeverría, “El matadero” 75-77)

Echeverría would publish in 1846 the *Dogma socialista*. Despite its title, *Socialist Dogma* was a blueprint for the application to the formation of the Argentine nation state of the principles of democratic constitutionalism, with the expected influence of the French Enlightenment and Revolution.⁹ Echeverría was very prescient as regards to the unchecked violence of mob rule, whether spontaneous or orchestrated. The pertinence of the story in Argentine literature, particularly as a founding text, derives from the ways in which social commentators have linked its images to subsequent national historical events, in terms of the first part of the story, mass movements such as those supporting the populist president Juan Domingo Perón (first administration 1946-55), those supporting the neofascist military dictatorship (1976-83) (e.g., the xenophobic crowds that were manipulated as part of the 1978 World Soccer Cup held in Buenos Aires), the crowds supporting the military’s disastrous invasion of the Malvinas in 1982, or the *piqueteros* (picket bearers) protesting the policies of the alleged economic enemies of the Cristina Fernández de Kirchner populist administration (current as of this writing in mid-2014).

In terms of the second movement of “El matadero,” the abuse of the circumstantial victim of the slaughterhouse and the echoes of La Mazorca certainly parallel the systematic use of torture by the state or its surrogates throughout Argentine history and particularly the technologically based practices since the 1930s. With appropriate textual modifications, Echeverría’s story could be reinscribed as apocalyptic prophecy in all too frequent moments of the march of Argentine history. Or, to put it differently, Echeverría with “El matadero” foresees subsequent history, despite his parallel intervention in intellectual movements with other Argentine writers and thinkers devoted to creating a civilized state out of the chaos of independence. It must be remembered that Argentina did not have a solid colonial bureaucracy/aristocracy as did many other Latin American nations on

⁹ Basic references on Echeverría’s understanding of romanticism are García Puertas, Anderson Imbert, and Arrieta.

which to base nation formation. The slide into the Rosas's dictatorship after Independence in 1816 meant the unmitigated catastrophe for the new nation of a legacy of mob violence such as Echeverría's story portrays. Juan Manuel Rosas touted himself as the Restorer of Laws (laws in general, but also certainly Spanish laws that the independence movement had sought to repudiate such as the union between Church and State), but Echeverría ensures that the irony of Rosas's disingenuous exercise of power is ever-present in the rhetoric of the story:

Es de creer que el Restaurador tuviese permiso especial de su Ilustrísima para no abstenerse de carne, porque siendo tan buen observador de las leyes, tan buen católico y tan acérrimo protector de la religión, no hubiera dado mal ejemplo aceptando semejante regalo en día santo. (69)

“El matadero” figures all of Argentine society as a slaughterhouse, with a series of equivalencies established between the Restorer, his collaborators among the clergy, the syndicate of slaughterhouse employees, the committee of butchers (a harbinger of the eventually almighty Sociedad Rural of Argentine cattlemen), the mobs in the street, and even the rats cowering in the corners of the slaughterhouse, fearful of being eaten in place of the beef withheld until Good Friday because of the flooding of the slaughterhouse. The author and his delegate within the narrative universe of the story, the young victim of the slaughterhouse workers, are all that stands against the tidal wave of catastrophic violence. And, of course, the young man is “martyred” and Echeverría would die in exile in 1851 approximately a year before Rosas finally fell. When the story was discovered and published in 1871, Argentina had gone a long way toward establishing a civilized society, although one might be hard put to determine at what point it is possible to say that the fully functioning constitutional democracy Echeverría and his associates dreamed of was ever effectively put in place. Argentines, often more benevolently than Echeverría, speak of the ups and downs of Argentine history as “el tango nacional” (the national tango), but Echeverría, were he writing today within the colloquial poetics of contemporary Argentine Spanish, might well speak of “el fango nacional”: the national muck, a word resonating with a semantic cluster of vivid nouns used in his story.

I would like to close by returning to the conclusion of “El matadero” and what it means in terms of the conjunction of body and nation and the way in which a putatively civilized nation guarantees the health and autonomy of the body. The use of the trope of rape as the culmination of a crescendo of violence against the body of an opponent of the regime consolidates a specter of homophobic violence for Argentine society. This it does via the synecdoche of the bull’s pizzle, which stands for the beef that is used to control the mob, not to mention as a metonym for the slaughterhouse syndicate’s boss and a displacement of his own penis. As I mentioned before, there is a literary record deriving from “El matadero” that employs rape as an act of violence against the Other, and one of the grim ironies of this practice is that the victim (either legitimately perceived as the queer Other or made to assume such a role as a way of augmenting the revulsion otherness—social, political, cultural—provokes) is made to experience violently what he is (correctly or otherwise) presumed to desire for purposes of sexual pleasure. In this fashion, the vision of the catastrophe of Argentine mob violence and the prolepsis inserted into any reading of the story subsequent to the specific historical moment it describes are grounded in homophobia as a form of sociopolitical discourse. A hundred years later, the 1970s revolutionary Montoneros group would chant “No somos putos, no somos faloperos, somos montoneros”¹⁰ and another chant of the left of the day was “El pueblo no es puto.”¹¹ Argentina has only recently been able to overcome this homophobic mindset, having become in 2010 the first country (and is still the only country as of this writing) in Latin America to approve gay marriage on a national scale.¹²

¹⁰ We’re not fags, we’re not dope heads, we’re Montoneros (members of the Peronist-inspired guerilla movement).

¹¹ The common man is not a fag.

¹² An integral part of the transition from neofascist dictatorship in Argentina following the return to constitutional democracy has been the defense of gay rights. Gorbato’s book on gay culture in Argentina in the early 1980s is an important assessment of a movement that will culminate in the 2010 approval of gay marriage on a national level.

Echeverría's "El matadero," is a very skillfully written political tract. Its apocalyptic tone as in foretelling of the catastrophe for Argentina of mob rule, whether as a tool of reactionary forces or of those of populism, has ensured it a permanent place in the canon of Latin American Romanticism.¹³

I would like to close with a meditation of the status of "El matadero" as a hybrid text. While it would be tempting to argue for something like a discursive intensification of the text as a consequence of its hybrid nature—chronicle and appended short story—this would be merely speculative, as well as appearing to maximize and justify what is its circumstantial textual nature. Indeed, this nature is routinely overlooked when one decides to discuss "El matadero" as principally an essay (as I have done in "Procesos significantes") or as a short story (as I have equally, and therefore, contradictorily done, in "Paschal Symbology," and as we routinely do by including it in surveys of the Latin American short story as a founding text). Quite simply, it is both one and the other, with the included middle or being neither one nor the other, but what it is, a powerful literary text with no need for labels.

Roberto González Echevarría, in this provocative *Myth and Archive* (where, however, he does not mention Echeverría's text), argues eloquently for two major paradigm shifts. The first is to move away from structuring our knowledge of (at least in this case) Latin American narrative in terms of nineteenth-century European models that we too often continue to subscribe to as optimum classification models. It is not difficult to agree with him that we continue to teach a lot of Latin American literature that is a questionable fit with those models and engaging in special pleading as to why they are not.¹⁴

¹³ The reader may wish to see the Enrique Breccia's graphic narrative version (8-19) of Echeverría's story in Ricardo Piglia's anthology of graphic versions of Argentine narratives of social violence. It is the inaugural story in the collection.

¹⁴ See, for example, Lindstrom's detailed analysis of the question of Zolaesque naturalism in the novels of Eugenio Cambaceres (typically, *Sin rumbo* [1885] and *En la sangre* [1887]).

The second paradigm shift follows seamlessly from the first, and that is to turn critical literary attention to those Latin American narrative texts that engage in significant and original sociocultural interpretations of continental history, eschewing, in the process, those prose texts (conventionally called “novels”) that undertake to examine that history via the optics of the aforementioned European genre conventions, such as Zolaesque naturalism. These former texts have often been studied as second-order literary documents, but they are customarily believed to belong solidly to an emergent Latin American social science discourse. Much is made, then, of a text like Juan Domingo Sarmiento’s *Civilización i barbarie* (1845; aka *Facundo*), but—and in the process correcting the Spanish-language bias of hegemonic Latin American studies—González Echeverría spends much profitable time on Euclides da Cunha’s magnificent *Os sertões* (1902), a vast journalistic account of the so-called Canudos rebellion in northeastern Brazil in the late nineteenth century, something like the return of history against the project of modernity at any cost of the new Brazilian republic based in Rio de Janeiro. Sarmiento, Cunha, and others provide González Echeverría with the framework for discussing a new narrative paradigm for Latin American prose, one that is, as one might suspect, borne out by the twentieth century masters in both Spanish and Portuguese. And, as one should not by this point in reading *Myth and Archive*, it is a paradigm marked by hybrid texts such that one feels downright sophomoric in wondering whether we are talking about a novel or a social-science treatise. If “El matadero” is a founding hybrid text of Latin American literature, it begs, as a consequence, to be read in terms of a direct line of descent for the most contemporary texts of Argentine and Latin American narrative.

Such a reading remains yet to be undertaken, but it would include, very pertinently, the most contemporary apocalyptic texts regarding the military tyranny of the 1970s and 1980s and its current aftermath.¹⁵

¹⁵ This would include the post-apocalyptic trilogy, which have become veritable cult classics, of Rafael Pinedo: *Plop* (2004); *Frío* (2010); and *Subte.* (2012). It is worth noting that male anal rape is an institutionalized practice in this universe, which appears to be the Buenos Aires of a late capitalist or

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neoliberal debacle. Although Zimmer postulates the relationship with Sarmiento's *Facundo*, he misses the opportunity to connect it with Echeverría's "El matadero," despite the fact that sheer material muck of *Plop* is more evidently shared with the latter text than with *Facundo*.

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