

Orozco: Civilization and Violence

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The frescoes by José Clemente Orozco unfold within the epic and symbolic tradition of the ancient Mesoamerican murals, frescoes of the church of the colonial era and the European Renaissance frescoes: those “immense fresh, incredible things, as mysterious as the pyramids ...”- how significantly the summary describes in his autobiography. But from his first grotesque caricatures for the magazine *El Machete*, and from his earliest watercolors of prostitutes and brothels, easel paintings, drawings and especially the murals of Orozco are distinguished by expressionism; radical expressionism.

The concept of Expressionism, which throughout the first half of the twentieth century had assumed a vast program of formal and civilizing time in artistic communities as *Die Brücke*, *Der blaue Reiter* or *Cobra*, has been losing its edge as its forms and formats have been commercialized, trivialized, musealized. They have finally succumbed to the gestures of a degraded everyday life and a manipulated market.

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Here, I will confine myself to one aspect however this Latin American and European Expressionism: its mythological roots. No one has shown this poetic openness to knowledge and mythological recognition of people as Thomas Mann and Karl Kerényi in his correspondence during the years of the European war. A dialogue that was also present in Carl Gustav Jung and his theory of symbolic and mythological unconscious repressed in modern humans. Aesthetic theory, this correspondence outlines, is based on the ontological, historical and existential reality of myth. To this is added their psychological dimensions, and their shapes and Narrative Language. This was the poetry that Thomas Mann defined programmatically. And that was one of the most profound tendencies of twentieth-century Expressionism, as in Kafka, in Wifredo Lam, in Beckmann and in that of Roa Bastos.

Literary and artistic experience of a mythological reality is not exactly alien to the cultures of Latin America, immersed in the language and the memories of their ancient cultures, both Amerindian and African and Eastern despite five centuries of violent Christianization. They can be found in the work of Mario de Andrade, who restored the cultural rights of Amerindian trickster par excellence, Makunaima. We also have them in Tlalocán goddesses that populate the basement of Comala, the novel

Pedro Páramo by Juan Rulfo. The myth as reality, at the same time religious and aesthetic, is located in the center of the prose of José María Arguedas. It is also an illuminating means and expression of a psychological, historical and cosmic consciousness that is also an essential feature of the expressionism of Orozco. The myth of Zapata, the murderous power of Hernan Cortes and Carlos V, the myth of dictators and demagogues, or savior Franciscan souls come together extensively in his frescoes. But Orozco particularly addresses three myths that deserve special attention: Quetzalcoatl, Prometheus and Christ.

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On three occasions Orozco used the myth of Christ in his murals and oil paintings. The first, at the National Preparatory School. It was destroyed. It was represented the second time in Dartmouth College. The iconographic theme was always the same. A desperate Jesus, stripped of all human or even divine dignity. Lost in a narrow and desolate space. The emaciated Jesus that, in his last luminous gesture, destroys by ax blows the cross on which he was nailed against an ecclesiastical institution of global power. In *Epics of the American Civilization*, this enlightening rejection of sacrifice is silhouetted against a dark pyramid of guns and swords. It is the human sacrifice imposed by conquest, wars and modern demagoguery. This theme was reiterated later in 1943, in a painting titled *Christ destroying his cross*. It is a humanized but consumed Jesus. This time with the aura of his holiness. But it is not a crucified Christ. It is an un heroic and un divine Jesus. Jesus against Christ. The human humanized that rebels against sacrifice and the divineness of the Cross.

The second myth, that of Prometheus, runs a more complex story. In *The House of Tiles* in Mexico City, where Orozco could paint after *Omniscience* after the Mexican state closed off access to all public spaces, Prometheus is just an allegorical symbol. It is a flame that divine hands deposit on a human hand on the top strip of the mural. In this representation, the Oriental myth of Prometheus may also be associated with its main theme: the birth of the first man and the first woman, also with attributes of the Titan and god. This theme now has a current and specific connotation: the Promethean creation of the new man, under the principle of "omniscience" as ultimate goal of the Mexican Revolution.

Prometheus was the myth that Orozco also elected at Pomona College. There it served as the architectural pointed arch to fit its figure

in such a way so that it accentuates its triangular structure. The figure of Prometheus occupies the central axis of the Gothic pointed arch. The visual impression that the arch would collapse if his Prometheus was not holding the Atlas increases its symbolic role as *axis mundi*. This Prometheus is unmistakably a god. In his environment a human mass exalts him in an upward rhythm. But in an adjoining scene, another mass sinks into despair. The body power of the god directed strongly upward, against the angle of the arch. A powerful oblique line force goes through the composition dramatically dividing the fans of the god, from the sunken mass and desperate under the civilizing power that it represents. All around, a firmament in flames.

The vision of Prometheus of Pomona is, to some extent, affirmative. It could even be called exalted. Its centrality and its corporeality leaves no doubt: he is a hero, a titan. And, I repeat, a god. Everything seems promising and positive in the composition. At least at first glance. Undoubtedly the sky in flames immediately awakes apocalyptic associations, illuminated with a hellish group of convicts to the left of the Titan.

In the dome of the *Hospicio Cabañas*, Prometheus reappears for the third time. In the Corona dome in which the drum is represented the *techani* that Esquilo attributed to the cultural Greek hero: agriculture, architecture, sculpture and theater, navigation, blacksmithing and engineering ... to those that Orozco added some of the Contemporary arts, like typography, aeronautics, and even a "arts integration", in addition to representing painting in general and in particular murals as one more of these promethean artworks-but now it was no longer called Prometheus. It is The Fire Man, or simply, The Man. And it isn't, in effect, a titan. Much less a god. This "man" burning in the flames of its own civilizing fire that one day Prometheus snatched from Zeus is not really Prometheus, but a descendant of the civilizing principle he represents. It is us.

The inherent philosophical reflection of this treatment of the myth of Prometheus by Orozco is transparent- A negative view of industrial civilization, that same civilization whose political leaders, including Benjamin Franklin, were defined precisely as Promethean. It is the representation of such Promethean civilization in flames and its mythological principle, the Titan or their human descendants, burning in them. Nor is there a need for any further explanation.

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A common theme is reiterated in the representation of Prometheus in *Pomona* and the Hospicio Cabañas: in both frescos his figure is confronted expressionistically with the limits of the representation. Limits that in *Pomona* is a Gothic arch, and in the church of Guadalajara, a Baroque dome. In the first fresco Prometheus looks like he is holding his arms in surrounding architectural arch that circles his figure, and thus the architecture of civilization is founded in the mythological fire. In Guadalajara, the same Prometheus rises in the dynamic and infinite universe in the dome. Only now it is a universe ablaze, in which the flames consume the limbs and the whole body of the Titan. His own head disappears into the universal fire.

The Cabanas frescos were performed between 1937 and 1939. During the following years, Orozco tried several times to present the myth of Prometheus in sketches and oil paintings. One of them is in the Carrillo Gil Museum. It is an oil on canvas 73 x 92 cm, dated in 1944. His motive:.. Prometheus fleeing amidst a desolate landscape of dark shades. Behind him, two humans, also naked, depart Titan with a look of horror. His head and arms are wrapped in flames, while one leg is bent in his flight from his own fire.

The tragic conflict of Prometheus is no longer proposed by Orozco in terms of redress and vengeance of Zeus raised by the Promethean rejection of sacrifice to the lord of Olympus and their scheme to recover the fire hiding in a cane. Orozco also doesn't criticize the tyrannical and violent punishment imposed by the Olympic corporation to regain the sacred fire. In this respect he departs from the two central features of the myth in versions of Hesiod and Aeschylus. It does not represent the god Prometheus as the founder of human civilization, but as a negative god who presides over the end of the industrial and capitalist revolution. From the beginning, from the celestial fire deposited in the earthly hand in the *The House of Tiles*, through its representation at Pomona College, the Titan possesses divine powers. Moreover, his place is instead mistaken for Zeus, who Orozco removed from his first sketches for the fresco of *Pomona*. In 1939, during the World War, this Prometheus was elevated to the zenith of the dome of the Basilica of Cabanas burning in the same fire that had risen to the civilizing hero. A prophetic vision called to be realized on the sacrificial ashes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki a few years later.

Other aspects can be highlighted in the Cabana Prometheus. Alma Reed, an admirer, biographer and Orozco dealer, described the climactic scene of his work as an ascension ritual, as a spiritual journey of mystical

transformation “Man enslaved by his fears or fearlessly treading the skies in ethereal release. Man in his solid clinging to the earth; man consumed in the flames of his creative energy. But always... man standing naked and alone, pitted against the immense nature of which he is also a part... He shapes and directs the Forces, his ancient allies, to his will to gain mastery of the planet. In turn, he is molded, mastered, and destroyed by them. The Man of Fire would be associated with the purification and transformation of human existence. His ultimate goal would be individual perfection, no atonement, suffering and self-immolation. The center of this development is the myth of the Promethean fire and light as purifying energies. It is the transcendence of the civilizing subject of mystic exaltation of its subjective spirit , before its irreversible historic end.

This is the ultimate meaning of the immersion of the expressionist art in the world of myth: the myth as archaic and enlightening memory of our being in the world; Mythological fire like a religious experience of our historical and human condition.

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The third great myth that Orozco stated in his frescos is that of Quetzalcoatl, the Mesoamerican feathered serpent god, representing the union of material and fruitful life on earth, and the spiritual cosmos of heaven and light.

Like Prometheus, Quetzalcoatl is linked to the Great Mother, or more specifically to *Coatlícué*, goddess of the underworld which regulates the cycles of preservation of life. Like Prometheus, he is a god, a mediator between the celestial and the earthly world. Like Prometheus he opposes sacrifice. And like Prometheus, it is the creator god of the humans and the arts that gave birth to civilization. Under his reign temples were built, fields were planted, people worked and rested, and civilization arose. Also as Prometheus, Quetzalcoatl is endowed with a prophetic vision of the future, connected to the light and enlightenment.

In the series of thirteen Orozco painted panels on the Baker Library in Dartmouth College in Hannover, entitled *Epics of the American Civilization*, four are dedicated to Quetzalcoatl as a cultural hero and prophet. The fourth of these panels represents his prophecy. This Quetzalcoatl Orozco is a luminous god. The features of his face are severe but kind and glowing. He wears a white robe. These are all attributes that bear a resemblance

to the functions of the Greek Zeus and Renaissance depictions of the Christian God.

It is important to remember in this context the falsification or colonial hybridization of Quetzalcoatl hybridization introduced by the first Franciscan missionaries. A transculturation whose power has been maintained for at least until the same Mexican Labyrinth of Solitude of Octavio Paz. According to these versions, the Aztecs saw in the Spanish conquistador the return of Quetzalcoatl Christianized as messiah, through whose mere contact the cultures of Mesoamerica and the whole American continent would have disappeared as possessed by a mysterious force of self-dissolution. Under this unlikely identification of Quetzalcoatl with the Conqueror and the Crusade the myth has served to represent the genocide under the Spanish crown as a collective suicide or a supernatural disappearance, and be redressed as the process of colonial dispossession, destruction and decay with providential signs of liberation theology.

But in the Baker Library Orozco put this mythological version of Christian monks on their feet. In the third scene, Quetzalcoatl, after creating the splendid civilization of Tolán, has to leave his kingdom which has fallen prey to the forces of darkness and evil, represented in a cool dark mass of people with hostile gestures. In the next panel, the god delivers his prophecy. But that omen is not linked to his own return, but rather to the arrival of foreigners, called to spread destruction and death under the sign of a black sacrificial cross, with the lower end converging on the conqueror's sword next to a pile of corpses. Quetzalcoatl announces the arrival of the new kingdom of the Sword and the Cross. But he not only anticipated this threat. The horizontal line in his arm, hand and finger traces the temporal continuity that begins with the genocidal cross and through the armor of Cortez just to finish in the following pane, in the modern military mega-machine: a futuristic constructivism tubes, gears, plates, wheels and chains of blatant aggression.

The message cannot be clearer. Orozco draws an expressionist epic history as linear progress of destruction and dehumanization continued over time. It is an epic that reverses the enlightened philosophies of the eighteenth and nineteenth catechisms positivists who announced a progress originated in a wild and violent humanity that would ascend gradually to more elaborate and less destructive ways of civilization. The epic of "American civilization" begins, however, with human sacrifice staged by masked Mesoamerican priests. It ends with the sacrifice of a modern soldier fallen under the fanfare of industrial war. Orozco's

vision is daunting, but truthfully contemporary. In *Epics of the American Civilization* only the visionary and enlightening gesture of Quetzalcoatl pointing in the direction of the ending against the dark mass of humans being dismissed, and only the angry gesture of a Jesus who destroys his cross may suggest hope. The final scene of a dark mass of workers lifting the steel frame of a skyscraper is a squalid citation of industrial development presided by the impressive panel chaired by a lethal science: *Gods of the modern world*. An assembly of professors, in reality robed skeletons, preside over the birth of a child, dead in the womb of its own cadaveric mother, lying sprawled on a bed of books and instruments of modern science.

We do not forget the small panel that crowns one of the doors of the library, which leads to the basement. Clearly a secondary entrance or exit. In this panel we find precisely the representation of a human figure, a half naked body emerging from a pile of mechanical junk under "Liberation of man of the mechanized life to the creative life." A principle of hope taken through the back door. No need for further comment.

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The machine, the power of industrial machines and the destructive force of military machines are another civilizational myths Orozco made in his frescoes. The Dartmouth panel entitled precisely "The Machine" can be cited as examples. It is an industrial press, comparable with the press of Ford industrial complex in Detroit that Rivera painted in the guise of the goddess Coatlicue. Groups of pipes rise like towers and the figures have some poise precisely of archaic gods. But neither the space nor the drawing, or composition, or color speak the same language ornamental of Rivera. We found a rather ascetic gesture, with dark colors and shades, and severe strokes and a civilizational catastrophe.

Those machines acquire their most formidable expression in an emblematic work of Orozco: *Catharsis* at the National Palace of Fine Arts, painted in the same year of 1934 that he ended the Dartmouth College frescoes. The machines are here, without a doubt, the star of a new historical drama, like the machines of the story of Rivera's *Man at the Crossroads*, which now occupies the opposite wall of *Catharsis* in the same National Palace. Machines also take center of the Orozco mural, between the bodies of the prostitutes of the lower third and the sprawled bodies and human caught between the irons. The historical view of this mural is transparent and does not require further comment:

the machine, or perhaps we should speak here again of the megamachine, the category that his friend and admirer Lewis Mumford invented, is clearly overwhelming and destructive.

In the murals of the *Hospicio Cabañas*, painted three years later, we can say that this power of steel fills the entire basilica with color and cold textures. Machines and armor of the colonial war and the machines of modern warfare, military parading masses and large machine-masses under the control of tyrants and demagogues, and the industrial blue that covers all of the frescos have an emotional effect and are threatening to the viewer. Moreover, both in Dartmouth as in *Cabañas* Orozco draws attention to the continuity of form and color between the symbols of the Christian Empire machines of yesterday and the industrial imperialism of today. The sword wielding Cortés in his panel is as sharp and cutting as flags flanking the geometrically uniform mass in a march that may be either civil or military. In the frescoes of the other, the ships of the temple. Cool colors and aggressive forms recur in representations of the arts or Promethean *technai* around the drum of the dome. And they give an ambiguous meaning, at the same time creative instruments of civilization, just as in architecture and painting itself, and arms of a civilization of violence.