

INTRODUCTION

ANY DEBATE ABOUT what banditry is, who a bandit is, or what a bandit and his supporters, sympathizers, and enemies want, is part and parcel of a debate on representation. What and who do bandits represent, if anything at all? On the other hand, who represents (who defines, depicts, and/or narrates) bandits, and how, and in which contexts, and for what purposes? Studying bandits and studying how these figures were represented assumes (perhaps controversially) that there is no way to tell the bandit—the “real” bandit—apart from his representation. This is what I have called elsewhere, using the terms of an old philosophical debate, the “nominalist approach” (as opposed to the “realist approach”).¹ According to the nominalist approach, a bandit is defined as whoever was called or labeled a bandit and treated as such. This would cancel (or reposition) some of the problems that have nagged bandit scholars for decades. The first problem is that the rubric applies to such a wide array of actions as to make a simple, unequivocal definition either impossibly complex or artificially simple, and that the rubric “bandit,” in all its lexical variations,² has been applied to a wide array of rural insurgents—from the humble peasant highway robber (armed perhaps with a machete) to a leader of thousands or tens of thousands of men fighting a war of international resonance, such as Augusto César Sandino or Francisco Villa, or from a band of murdering sociopaths to a group of high-minded revolutionary fighters. It is not crucial in my approach to decide once and for all if a particular man or

woman was “really” a bandit, or if his particular action was “really” an act of banditry; rather, the importance lies in the examination of why, how, and for what purpose and with what effect the label was used, and how it was contested, contradicted, or accepted by the bandit himself, by his contemporary allies and enemies, and by posterity, in relation to similar or different problems than those that gave rise to the original labeling act.

This is the larger problem that frames this book. In tackling it, however, many different approaches are possible, depending on disciplinary training, theoretical perspective, the problem emphasized, or the genre or cultural form chosen. This study has a very defined scope. It explores the uses of the bandit character as a cultural trope in literature (novels and short stories, mostly) and in discursive practices that do not belong to literature proper, but that tap into literature’s authority and prestige (such as Pancho Villa’s autobiography and some of Hugo Chávez’s public interventions). At a minimum, then, this is a thematic (and necessarily fragmentary) mapping of how banditry was variously depicted, during a specific period, by a number of intellectuals in twentieth-century Latin America. This book studies how men of letters bodied forth their desires regarding literature’s place and authority and, perhaps more prominently, how they embodied their anxieties regarding the increasingly problematic place and role of literature within national cultures (and, complementarily, the increasingly problematic place of the very notion of national culture). These desires and anxieties are both given expression, at the level of the narrative plot, in the conflicted relationship between bandits and men of letters.

I would like to emphasize, then, that this book is not about bandits per se. It is about how men of letters articulated the bandit trope, in order to reflect upon their own practice, their own place in society, or to carry out a particular literary or political project. The self-referential use of the bandit trope, as a tool for either the legitimation or the critique of the ideology regarding the role of modern literature in national societies (or of particular literary and political projects within those societies), is perhaps the most important point I address. By contrast, the two chapters in which this preoccupation is not present (chapter 1, on Pancho Villa’s autobiography, and chapter 2, on Hugo Chávez’s construction of his own persona as the culmination of an insurgent lineage) are the two chapters in which the importance and value of lettered practices is more unequivocally affirmed, and rather taken as a given.

The self-referential use of the bandit trope arises, I would venture, from the perception of a crisis in the literary institution, a loss or lack of legitimacy of its social standing and its mission (and a need for the redefinition of both), and an erosion of its prestige and authority. To put it succinctly, it was a crisis regarding representation, in both senses of the term: how adept was literature at depicting individuals and societies, and how legitimate was literature's claim to represent individuals and societies? One can say, with reasonable certainty, that the avant-garde movements in Latin America were the first to articulate this sense of crisis as crucial to the (self-)perception of literature as an institution. This book will not focus on how "real" this crisis was (even if it could be quantified), or on whether crisis equals decline, as in Jean Franco's expression "the Decline and Fall of the Lettered City." It will focus, instead, on how modern Latin American literature was defined, to a significant degree, by this perceived crisis, and how the most important literary efforts of the period tried either to overcome this challenge, to deny it, to embrace it, or to tread some middle path between the previous options.

Things were quite different during the long nineteenth century, when literature (as conceived and practiced in national literatures), and the writing practices and disciplines associated or competing with literature, were struggling but ascendant social institutions. Perhaps literature as a practice was devoid of economic or institutional support, its professionalization hindered or stunted, its practitioners attacked or persecuted or ignored. But very few (and least of all, very few men of letters) doubted the crucial role of literature (and increasingly, within literature, of prose narrative) in the constitution of the national cultures of Latin America. Literature was, if I may be allowed the hyperbole, sovereign. Writers and educated heroes could be brutalized, mocked, or even killed (like the young *unitario* in *El matadero*), but the dignity and importance of the lettered practice remained unpolluted. This is the meaning of the (by now mythical) scene of young Sarmiento leaving Argentina to eat the bitter bread of banishment, but literally writing on stone his core conviction: "On ne tue point les idées" ("Ideas should not be killed" was Sarmiento's preferred translation). The fact that the quotation is in fact a misquotation—as Ricardo Piglia ([1980] 2002) has noted and reasoned—is as telling as the ironclad conviction that motivated the inscription.

This conviction about the centrality of the lettered practice has a long lineage in Latin America, and it is, in fact, one unifying trait within Latin

American culture (as Ángel Rama has proved in his seminal *La ciudad letrada*). In the postcolonial era, however, this conviction became less of an administrative fact—the mastering of a technology, a place in a bureaucracy—and more of a moral and epistemic position. The man of letters would have been the one who knew, mapped, and diagnosed the present, the one who could recover and animate and interpret the past, and who could predict, figure out, or fend off the future. This can be traced to the European Romantic revolution (William Blake: “Hear the voice of the Bard! / Who Present, Past & Future, sees”) and its uncomfortable adaptation to the Latin American milieu. It was romantic in origin, but over the years it intersected and superseded ideologies and literary schools. Through many metamorphoses, many academic and political lexicons, many displacements and revisions and reinventions, this ideology is still with us today even though, as this book seeks to prove, a consciousness of its dilemmas and shortcomings underpins some of the best literary efforts of the last century.

How does banditry fit into this scheme? During the long nineteenth century both conservative and liberal writers used the bandit trope to legitimize or criticize the social order (or specific aspects of it). At the same time, banditry served as a point of contrast or a reservoir of cultural capital that helped writers to legitimize their own practice: its place, its necessity, and its sovereignty within the nation-state in the makings (see my commentary on Fernández de Lizardi below for a kind of “primal scene” of this relationship where the national writer is born in the face-to-face with the body—the corpse—of the outlaw). This manner of articulating the bandit trope has not disappeared in the twentieth century; the bandit trope (or tropes, referring to the forms of nonstate violence that have replaced it, or at least displaced it, in the cultural landscape: the terrorist, the drug trafficker, the urban criminal—*motochorro*, *pirata del asfalto*, *secuestrador express*, *pibe chorro*) still embodies or gives expression to conflicts that have little to do with actual outlawry. (Take as an example the controversy and media hype on the topic of “urban insecurity” and “the narco” as a crucial political arena in Argentina.) Banditry is indeed mobilized in order to create narratives of legitimation or to criticize such narratives, and twentieth- and twenty-first-century authors still draw on the authority of literature in order to craft and impose those narratives. But the standing of literature within the social realm, and the very notion of

what literature is, have changed decisively since the beginning of the twentieth century.

Even within a narrative project that ends up affirming the power and status of literature, the interrogation, I would contend, is always there, and more often than not, the dilemma resurfaces in one way or another (when it is not the driving force of the narrative project). This book traces a number of cases in which this affirmation/interrogation is conducted through a face-to-face between a bandit and a man of letters. The scene that puts the bandit and the man of letters face to face, either to confront or to collaborate, in horror or in awe, is not just a topic among others, but the topic that gives expression to one of the deep undercurrents of the entire postcolonial cultural process. Allow me to present two scenes of this face-to-face that I hope will make the thrust of this book clearer. One of them belongs to the nineteenth century, but I would argue that its relevance as an emblem extends into the present.

It can be said that Latin American postcolonial literature begins with the rotten corpse of a bandit. This rotten corpse appears in book 5 of *El periquillo sarriento* (1816), a Mexican novel by Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi, considered the first Latin American postcolonial novel (although it was written in the midst of the Mexican independence wars). Perico, the son of decent parents turned rogue and criminal, is its protagonist. At a late point in the narrative, Perico is down on his luck after a brief stint with a gang of highway robbers. The Acordada, the colonial corps in charge of providing security in Mexican *camino reales* (king's highways), had stamped the gang out of existence. Perico was the only survivor. This would seem like just another episode in his adventurous life, but something else happens this time. Riding away from the scene of the ambush, he spots the bloated corpse of Januario, executed as a brigand chief, hanging from a tree. Januario was Perico's childhood friend, and a partner in and sponsor of his early misdeeds. Perico understands that this is no chance meeting. This is a "lesson" that the dead Januario "loudly voices." How Perico reacts to this rather ghastly sight is significant: he composes a sonnet and carves it into the very tree from which Januario's dead body hangs. This encounter, as I have argued elsewhere (see Dabove 2007; Dabove and Hallstead 2009), is, although brief, the axis of the novel. Because of this encounter, Perico realizes that he must redeem himself sincerely and for good. He abandons his criminal career and becomes Don Pedro: a model

citizen, a husband, a father, and an owner. But above all, he becomes a writer—the writer of the autobiographical narrative that is *El periquillo sarniento*, dictated *in articulo mortis* to El Pensador Mexicano, Fernández de Lizardi's nom de plume and, here, his fictional alter ego.

There are two dimensions of this scene that I would like to highlight. The first one is the decisive role of the state in the production of the man of letters. Januarío probably did not die by hanging, but was most likely shot by a firing squad or killed during a skirmish and later hanged (as so happens, for example, with the execution of el Zarco in Altamirano's novel *El Zarco*). The state's posthumous assault on the body (the refusal of a burial, the theatrical display) is a *plus*, not of violence, but of meaning. It shows that in Januarío's dead body there is a message. This is what was called a "theater of the law," the deliberate communicative/performative techniques through which elites reasserted their hegemony when challenged from below.³ The assault dispossessed Januarío of his voice (the hanging by the neck could not be more symbolic in this respect), and animated what was the empty carcass, the dead flesh, with the state's own voice. Januarío thus becomes a talking corpse that repeats the law ad infinitum: the one, antecedent any actual laws, that makes the bandit an enemy of mankind, bound to be killed on the spot. Perico hears that voice, he feels that it interpellates *him*, since Januarío is a mirror image of his own self, and this act of "hearing" the state's voice is the origin of the novel, in a very literal sense (reinforced by the fact that Perico's first reaction is to write a poem on the very fatal tree from which Januarío is hanging). But additionally, the state provided the event that organized Perico's aimless wandering into a "life," a time with meaning, a politically and ethically relevant learning process. Don Pedro provides the raw facts, but the state has provided the meaning, the narrative framework of which the raw facts are only illustrations. Don Pedro's memories (*El periquillo sarniento*) want to be a life lesson for his offspring. But Don Pedro is less the author of that lesson than the translator into words of the lesson that the state taught him through the dead body of the bandit.⁴

The second scene was conceived in the other extreme of Latin America. In 1967, at the height of the revolutionary tide that swept Latin America and the world, Pablo Neruda (1904–1973) published *Fulgor y muerte de Joaquín Murieta*. It is a play that has a half-serious, half-humorous tone, perhaps

in the path of John Gay (*The Beggar's Opera*, 1728) and Bertolt Brecht (*The Threepenny Opera*, 1928). This is to say that *Fulgor* is a play in which humor never distracts from the project of a scathing critique. Neruda traces the life of Murieta (spelled by him with one *r*, in the Chilean tradition). Murieta is, in Neruda's account, a Chilean *roto* who goes to California following the elusive promise of golden riches, only to become a bandit of the avenger variety and to find a violent death at the hands of early Californian justice (*injusticiado* is the neologism Neruda plays with). His head is severed from his body, and it seems to have a life in the entertainment industry as a display piece, just like the head of Lampião, almost a century later, taken on a tour of the Brazilian northeastern backlands by his slayers (Grunspan-Jasmin 2001). The head eventually disappears, entering the realm of legend and speculation, much like the head of Pancho Villa, stolen from his grave in Parral shortly after his death and never to be found again.

Fulgor y muerte does not rank among the best of Neruda's works. However, the play closes with two telling moments. One is the soliloquy of the severed head of Murieta (of which I reproduce here a fragment):

*I speak as a Head bled of its force and inflection.
The voice that I summon is strange; the lips are not mine.
What can the Dead say? The Dead with no other direction
Than that which the wind takes as it works in the void of the rain?*

*To whom is it given to know? What intruder
Or friend, tracing the naked truth in the snow,
Shall interpret my story or sing it in truth, in the end?
My time is a hundred years hence. My lips shall be Pablo Neruda. (171)*

The final chorus (after this monologue) intones a poem that ends with these lines:

*Joaquín, return to your nest: gallop the air toward the south on your blood-
colored stallion.
The streams of the country that bore you sing out of silvery mouths. Your poet
sings with them,
Your fate mingled bloodshed and gall, Joaquín Murieta; but its sound*

is still heard. Your people repeat both your song and your grief, like a tolling bell struck underground. The people are million. (175)

Murieta, the bandit, is not merely a man of the people, but through his death he becomes the point around which a People coalesces, acquires its identity and its self-consciousness. The People is not merely the People of the Nation, but a transnational, class-based identity, spanning from Chile to California to Republican Spain (mentioned in the song too) to Vietnam, mentioned at the end, and whose sufferings are equated with the sufferings and death of Murieta (79). By making Murieta a Chilean, Neruda not only follows an established tradition (see Leal 1999), but also disengages Murieta as an icon of frontier culture, of Chicano culture, and makes him an icon of the Third World and of peasants everywhere. And the man of letters (Neruda) is the one who would put the voice of the bandit into words, a voice that otherwise would have been deep but lost in the unintelligible voices of the river or the wind. Neruda's voice—Neruda as a character of the play—is the voice of the People because Neruda is the only way for the People to acquire a voice. Neruda is the one who is endowed with superior knowledge (endowed by the bandit head), capable of leading the People out of the “fog” of ideology.⁵

Murieta's head was cut off as a trophy (and for its cash value). Decapitation as a penalty was not contemplated in American penal codes, and in any case he was already dead when the decapitation occurred. Its decollation and exhibition was intended to show that Murieta was indeed dead, and to serve as an object lesson to would-be insurgents (like the photographing of Guevara's body more than a century later). When it comes to banditry, this use—exhibiting the head or the corpse of the dead outlaw—survived long, long after it was superseded in the rest of the West. American Western iconography supplies many obscure instances. But more famous examples of this can be found in the treatment of Conselheiro's corpse and head after the defeat of Canudos in 1897, Jesse James's corpse after his murder in 1882, the aforementioned destiny of Lampião's head after his death in Angicos in 1938, and Sangre Negra's corpse (airlifted by the Colombian army in a tour of the area's villages in order to prove that he was indeed dead). However, Murieta's head later acquired a meaning that was not explicitly contemplated in Janes's (2005) classification: the decollated head as commodity and spectacle for market consumption.⁶ This is perhaps its most famous avatar, since the poster referring to the

exhibition of Murieta's head has been amply reproduced (Neruda dutifully reproduces the poster in the first edition of *Fulgore*). Neruda transforms the head into a sort of "ancestor head." It is not a trophy displayed by the vanquisher, but rather the emblem of a spirit of a precursor that guides the community toward the future, by the promise of eventual emancipation.

Thus we have a talking corpse (Januario) and a talking head (Murieta). Both speak to the fictional alter egos of the authors (to Perico, and through him to El Pensador Mexicano; to Neruda). Both scenes have optimistic overtones, but for opposite reasons. Perico defines himself, his place, and his task, as a (forced) ally of the state that displayed and wrote the corpse. Neruda (the Neruda that appears in the text) defines himself, his place, his task, as an ally, heir, and voice of the bandit that fought the state and the racist, imperial oppressor. In both cases, the man of letters translates the corpse's message into words of enduring appeal. And the triad is the same: the state that dealt with the bandit, the bandit himself, and the man of letters. The legitimacy and the nature of the bond among the three positions is different, however. In both cases, the state's violence is productive. But in Fernández de Lizardi, it produces a citizen-writer allied with the state and defined by this alliance. In Neruda, it produces a collective popular subject opposed to the state and defined by this opposition, and a writer—not a citizen—allied with said popular subject.

These are just two examples. My intent in this book is, precisely, to provide others and to reflect upon them. Of course, this face-to-face (head-to-head) is not exclusive to Latin American literature. Sir Walter Scott's hugely influential highland novels present the same pairings: the English aspiring writer Francis Osbaldistone is saved by the highland rebel (and robber, and smuggler, and racketeer) Rob Roy MacGregor (*Rob Roy*, 1817), and bookish Edward Waverley and Fergus Mac-Ivor forge an enduring friendship that will last until Fergus's exalted execution (*Waverley*, 1814).⁷

In the chapters that follow I examine cases from Mexico, Argentina, Peru, Brazil, and Venezuela. I make occasional references to other national contexts as well, such as Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, Chile, Nicaragua, Cuba, and Colombia. Also, as has always been the case in the "field" of bandit studies (if such a thing exists), numerous comparisons are drawn from contexts both outside Latin America and outside the specific period under study.⁸

This volume is divided into four parts. Part I (“Banditry, Self-Fashioning, and the Quest for Legitimacy”) analyzes the way in which two revolutionaries, at the beginning and at the end of the chronological arc that this book covers (roughly from the Mexican Revolution to the so-called Bolivarian Revolution), fashion their public images by embracing an outlaw past. On the one hand, Pancho Villa (1878–1923), in his *Retrato autobiográfico* (posthumously published), surprisingly embraces his prerevolutionary outlaw career in order to find, in that period of his life, not the negation of his revolutionary present, but its condition of possibility. Villa constructs himself as a “mirror of bandits,” the social bandit par excellence, and his outlaw stint as the military, political, and cultural school for his revolutionary stint. This allows him to create a triple identification between himself, the People (defined in a *sui generis* fashion), and the Fatherland, to therefore erect himself as the only loyal and possible mediator between the just ruler (Madero) and the sovereign (the People). This is possible by a double appeal to the authority of literature. First, he recruited a traditional intellectual (Manuel Bauche Alcalde) who received his confidences and heavily edited the written version of those confidences. Second, Villa tapped into preexisting traditions (both written and oral) of bandit narratives.

Hugo Chávez (1954–2013), the second case to be studied in this section, legitimized his socialist agenda by highlighting, in speeches, interviews, and performances, that he was a descendant of a rural insurgent, Pedro Perez Delgado, also known as Maisanta (1881–1924), the so-called “last man on horseback.” Maisanta was an outlaw and rebel from the *llanos* (Venezuela’s legendary cattle frontier) who fought against the long dictatorship of General Gómez (1908–1935), the president responsible for creating the modern oil-dependent Venezuela. By highlighting this ancestry, Chávez linked himself to a lineage of “anti-imperialist” insurgents that dated back to the sixteenth century and the Indian rebellions against the Spaniards, through the llanero insurgents of the nineteenth century (in particular the popular Federalist leader Ezequiel Zamora). This lineage allowed him to construct an image of the “real” (and only) Venezuela, as one of the contenders in a prolonged conflict against “empire,” a conflict that encompassed all the realms of the social. This strategy justified the mixture of legalism and exceptionalism that defined Chávez’s presidency.

Part II (“Banditry and the Epic of the Nation”) examines how the bandit

trope played a significant role in the crafting of twentieth-century nationalism. *Las lanzas coloradas* (1931), by Antonio Uslar Pietri (1906–2001), is, together with Rómulo Gallegos's *Doña Bárbara* (1929), one of the most important Venezuelan (and arguably, Latin American) novels of the first half of the twentieth century. *Las lanzas* focuses on the 1813–1814 llanero insurgency and its deleterious effects on the Creole hacendado class, in order to construct a synthetic/dialectic version of the national subject and the national leader (Bolívar, as a synthesis of *mantuano* enlightenment and llanero martial prowess). The Mexican Rafael Muñoz (1899–1972), on the other hand, uses the Villista epic of 1913–1914 with a purpose that is similar, but only to a certain degree. He creates a version of a popular subject (the group of fighters called the Leones de San Pablo), but, at one point in the novel, he disassociates Villa from *Villismo*, thus uncoupling the popular leader from the popular subject, in order to create a narrative of the revolution congruent both with its myth of origin (as a peasant revolt) and with the triumph of the authoritarian faction to which Muñoz belonged. However, once the disassociation of Villa (and his loyal follower, Tiburcio) from the popular subject takes place, the novel ceases to be a war novel and it becomes a bandit novel. By “bandit,” however, the novel means the ethical or epistemological distance between the man of letters (i.e., the American sergeant), his worldview, and the premodern rural warrior, incomprehensible, but an unavoidable presence.

The Peruvian Enrique López Albújar (1872–1966) takes yet another path in the concoction of a “popular” subject out of rural violent subjects. López Albújar is usually read (following the early indications of José Mariátegui) as either a precursor or a founder of literary indigenism, a condition that has ensured him a solid (albeit minor) place in Peruvian literary history. Perhaps López Albújar should be read as a writer of frontier adventure stories instead, in the line of Jack London, Bret Harte, or Guy de Maupassant and his short stories of Corsican theme. It is not that López Albújar did not have the “national problem” in mind. But instead of addressing banditry as part of what I will call “narratives of crisis,” that is, symptoms or testimonies of the impossibility that Peru faced of coalescing into a cohesive nation, I argue that López Albújar tried to put together a sort of minor frontier epic, an Andean Western of sorts, in which the “Indian problem” (but not the Indian) disappears.

At the same time that López Albújar was writing *Cuentos andinos*, Jorge Luis Borges (whose work I examine initially in chapter 6) also had something

of a minor epic in mind. Gauchos, *guapos*, and *orilleros* (the nomenclature is deliberately vague) were its main characters and Borges (1899–1986) developed a series of short stories in the 1930s and 1940s to that effect. But his case is vastly different from that of López Albújar. Borges had to contend with a well-established version of the gaucho as Argentina's epic hero, and thus he polemically deals not with national heroes, but with *malevos*, deserters, orilleros, runaways whose only luxury is an unblemished reputation of courage (a different kind of heroes, then, the so-called *cultores del coraje*). In order to do this, he intersects the illustrious epic with a minor product: Eduardo Gutiérrez's dime novels. Borges's minor epic (the term is deliberately a contradiction in terms) is also singular because, unlike the classic epic hero, who is one with his community and one with the epic law, Borges's men of courage experience their destiny as a burden, an invisible jail from which they will never escape (because that destiny is what they are). This is why I propose in this chapter the idea that Borges's tales of men of courage should be read as a melancholic epic, assessing both the political and the aesthetic value of the term.

Banditry and the politics and thought of the Left have a long, shared history. The bandit label was used as a badge of infamy to apply to leftist movements, assimilating one with the other. In other cases, the threat of leftist insurgency replaced banditry in the cultural imaginary, as well as in policy making (this is presented in narrative form in "Complot," a short story by the Chilean Lázaro Baeza). In other cases, for either derogatory or encomiastic purposes, a genetic relationship is posited, with banditry blooming into full-scale revolutionary war. This is the case with Eric Hobsbawm, whose whole theory of social banditry is predicated upon establishing a link between "prepolitical" peasant protest and full-fledged class struggle. Latin American Marxists were not absent from this debate. Part III ("Banditry and the Latin American Left") presents two (hopefully emblematic) case studies in order to show how Latin American writers of Marxist affiliation examined, in fictional form, and reflected upon an intellectual and political issue of utmost importance for the Latin American Left at the time: that of the revolutionary potential of the peasantry, and its relationship to the Communist Party and the modern Marxist intellectual in particular. This issue was always present in Marxist thought, especially in the cases of the Andean countries (witness, for example, Mariátegui's *Siete ensayos* [1928]) and in the context of the Mexican Revolution. But it acquired a renewed emphasis with the Chinese

Revolution and the Asian and African anticolonial wars from the 1940s on. I examine this in detail in the chapters on Jorge Amado (Brazil, 1912–2001) and José Revueltas (Mexico, 1914–1976). Even though both authors' points of departure are similar (both were party loyalists and two of the most important Marxist writers in Latin America), their conclusions are starkly divergent. Amado successfully incorporates premodern peasant outlawry into a narrative of the transformation of the premodern peasant into a modern rural proletarian, transformation that would herald, in his view, a modern Communist Party–led revolution. The opposite transformation occurs in Revueltas. The militant, fascinated by the power and moral authority of the outlaw (Ventura), “goes native.” He does not abandon Marxism. He abandons Marxism as a set of dogmas, a defined vision of a comprehensible world, in favor of a hybrid version of Marxism as the gateway to an aesthetic/ethical revelation (of the sublime in the object) infused with Christian motifs but devoid of any transcendentalism.

In the last part of the book (“Banditry and the Dilemmas of Literature”) I consider how the bandit trope helps certain writers (Jorge Luis Borges, João Guimarães Rosa [1908–1967], Mario Vargas Llosa [1936–], and Ricardo Piglia [1941–2017]) to engage in a prolonged self-reflection on the epistemological and political limits and possibilities of literature as a cultural practice. As I mentioned earlier, this entire book is, in one way or another, about this. But in the works specifically analyzed here, this problem acquires another level of urgency, centrality, and self-awareness. João Guimarães Rosa's *Grande Sertão: Veredas* (1956), the best Brazilian novel of the century (possibly of all time), is our first case study. It is well known that the novel is a sort of cultural laboratory where all the trends, all the disparate aspects that compose Brazilian and Western cultural identity, appear. It is also well known that the novel is a sustained reflection on the nature of language (and national language) as well as a glimpse of an impossible, utopian language, made out of archaisms and neologisms, localisms and foreign words, anomalous constructions and quotes from the classics. This Babelic feat happens in the voice of a rural outlaw, the *jagunço* Riobaldo Tatarana, usually considered less a *jagunço* and more a synecdoche for the rural subject, the *comarca oral* (oral hinterland) (Pacheco 1992). This may be true. But it is not irrelevant that Riobaldo is an outlaw. He is not any *sertanejo* (inhabitant of the *sertão*, the rural hinterland) or just a more representative or colorful or recognizable *sertanejo*. The novel

is a reflection on language, but on a particular aspect of language: its role as a vehicle of the law, and also the place where the law finds its limits. The possibility (or impossibility) of the pact with the devil (which is what allows Riobaldo to become a bandit chief) is the most extreme aspect of this. So perhaps the merit of my analysis is its attempt to link together the formal aspect and the thematic one, and what it means that this utopian language is the language of an outlaw, whose most important life event, the pact with the devil, happens outside of language (and hence may or may not have happened).

Chapter 6 has already explored how Borges crafted a melancholic epic to reignite the literary value of the gaucho and the orillero against both the liberal and the authoritarian state-centered nationalism of the 1920s–1940s. By doing this, he refashioned the images of the gaucho and the orillero in Argentine culture. In chapter 10, “Borges and Moreira: Inglorious Bastards,” by contrast, I examine the “late” Borges (although some of the texts that I mention are from at least the 1940s). Borges, a staunch opponent of both Peronism and Marxism, revisits the topic of the gaucho malo. This revision is double. It is a critique, on the one hand, of nationalist populism (in particular, left-wing populism, influential in Peronism from the 1960s on), but also, and perhaps more decisively, of his own literature. Both aspects are presented emblematically in the short story “La noche de los dones,” a rewriting of Eduardo Gutiérrez’s *Juan Moreira* (1879) influenced by Borges’s admiration for another of Gutiérrez’s novels, *Hormiga Negra*. For Borges, the adoption of the orillero and the gaucho malo as centerpieces of his literature was both a political and an aesthetic mistake. One could call it willful blindness toward history. If in *El idioma de los argentinos* (1928) he affirmed that “the pampa and the slums [*suburbios*] are gods” and that “the future is the most secure, cherished possession of the Argentines,” by the late 1940s he was able to sorely experience that the future was in fact an ominous reenactment of the past, and the telluric gods were not the gentle deities of a *locus amoenus*, but the bloody insatiable gods of a barbarian cult.

The shortsighted journalist who is the protagonist of Mario Vargas Llosa’s *La guerra del fin del mundo* (1981) makes the same mistake. The journalist wants to be the Brazilian Oscar Wilde. If Dorian Gray, in search of unusual experiences and edgy thrills, went slumming, the journalist goes to the backlands embedded in the army charged with quashing the millenarian movement in Canudos, deep in the Bahian sertão. While there, he becomes

separated from the army (which has been utterly routed by the jagunços), gets lost, and spends the war among the jagunços. There, the sought-for experience and the thrills indeed happen. But they are experiences, not of knowledge and enlightenment, but of blindness and loss; and the thrill is that of sheer terror, not of excitement. Paradoxically, it is in that loss that he finds the conditions of possibility for his future work, that he becomes a true twentieth-century writer. Just like in Guimarães Rosa, it is through an excursion (and an experience of loss) deep into the premodern sertão that modern literature is possible.

Journalists and bandits close the final section of the book. *Plata quemada*, the commercially successful (and controversial) 1997 novel by Ricardo Piglia, tells a story not of rural bandits, but of an urban gang of bank robbers (based on a true story). However, it is my contention that the novel stands (in Borgeian fashion, perhaps) as a revival of sorts of the nineteenth-century popular novels of gauchos malos. If *Respiración artificial* (1980), the novel that secured Piglia's place in the Latin America literary canon, was fashioned by Piglia as a twentieth-century *Facundo* (Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, 1845), *Plata quemada* was the twentieth-century *Juan Moreira*, a tale of outlaw resistance to the (post)modernizing leap of the 1990s, when it seemed that neoliberalism and the Pax Americana were here to stay.

Finally, the book's final chapter takes up some of the topics presented explicitly in the preamble and implicitly throughout the book. I present there a reflection on the always-elusive meaning of the word "bandit."