
Bart L. Lewis. *The Miraculous Lie: Lope de Aguirre and the Search for El Dorado in the Latin American Historical Novel*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003. 184p.

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Known generally as the protagonist of Werner Herzog's 1972 film, *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* (*Aguirre, the Wrath of God*), the sixteenth-century Spanish adventurer, Lope de Aguirre, first attained infamy through the written accounts of the period. A subaltern of Francisco Pizarro during the Peruvian conquest, Aguirre mutinied against his leader and, with a handful of malcontents, embarked down the Amazon River in search of the fabled city of gold, El Dorado. What set him apart from other soldiers of fortune was his inordinate cruelty during the elusive search. Although he plotted the death of two high government officials, Pedro de Ursúa (the expedition's officially appointed leader) and Fernando de Guzmán, and murdered dozens of his men for supposed offenses, none of his acts exceeded in cruelty his stabbing to death his *mestiza* daughter Elvira. Mutineers who survived his homicidal whims, sickened by all they had witnessed, ended his life in the violent manner befitting the monster: they shot him, beheaded him, and dispersed his body parts "about the countryside as a warning to other would be traitors" (9).

While Aguirre was as bloodthirsty, treacherous, and mentally imbalanced as the chroniclers depict him, he nonetheless played a primary role in the forging of the "American identity." His disapproval of Spain's actions in the New World led him to renounce his Spanish citizenship in a 1561 letter to King Philip II. This decision to break with the mother country, to vituperate its king and identify with the American continent, makes him a precursor of Simón Bolívar, José de San Martín, and José Martí.

In *The Miraculous Lie*, the late Bart E. Lewis focuses on five twentieth-century Spanish American novels that derive their plots from Aguirre and his failed quest: Arturo Usler Pietri's *El camino de El Dorado* (Argentina 1978), Abel Posse's *Daimón* (Argentina 1978), Miguel Otero Silva's *Lope de Aguirre, Príncipe de la Libertad* (Venezuela 1979), Jorge Ernesto Funes' *Una lanza por Lope de Aguirre* (Argentina 1984), and Félix Álvarez Sáenz's *Crónica de blasfemos* (Peru 1986). His aim is to link them, through close analysis, to other theme-related Latin American works of the twentieth century, to compare and contrast them to the historical records of the Ursúa-Aguirre expedition, and to determine whether Aguirre can be called the prototype of the Latin American *caudillo*. This term applies to one who defies "the established order" and asserts his right, as a personalist leader, "to prevail noisily over it" (77).

Lewis devotes the first three chapters of his monograph to detailing the historical Lope de Aguirre, the period's searches for the legendary El Dorado, and Francisco Vázquez's chronicle of the Ursúa-Aguirre expedition. The next five chapters constitute the literary exegesis of the five works and to what extent they deviate from this chronicle.

After comparing the Vázquez accounts with Pietri's fictional versions, Lewis concludes in Chapter Four that *El camino de El Dorado* is a regional novel of the *criollista* (nativist fiction written from the Mexican Revolution to the early 1940s) phase that essentially stylizes the historical data. The novel's contribution to Latin American letters is that it certifies Aguirre as a caudillo. In a briefer Chapter Five, yet one richer in plot summary and character observations, Lewis shows that Posse's *Daimón* is the stylistic antipode of *El camino* and an erotic postmodern parody of the Ursúa-Aguirre expedition.

In Chapter Six, Lewis discusses at length the similarities and dissimilarities between the first two novels and Miguel Otero Silva's *Lope de Aguirre, Príncipe de la Libertad*. He documents through detailed examples that *Lope de Aguirre* strays farther from Vázquez's text, particularly in the contents of Aguirre's letter to King Philip II. Because of its dramatizations and multi-voiced foci, Lewis judges the work to be one of transition between the Boom and the post-Boom phases of the Latin American novel.

Jorge Ernesto Funes' *Una lanza por Lope de Aguirre* and Félix Álvarez Sáenz's *Crónica de blasfemos* are analyzed in Chapter Seven and Chapter Eight respectively. In the former, as protagonist Aguirre has the opportunity to engage his chronicler in dialogue. Thus, in postmodern fashion, Aguirre, alleging unfair treatment in the chronicler's depictions, tries to vindicate himself before the court of history and to have the chronicler amend the record as it relates to his life and deeds. (Such historical revisionism veils Funes' desire to have Latin Americans revisit their own history to address possibly biased inaccuracies that have led to erroneous self-perceptions.) Likewise, the latter novel includes the chronicler Estebanillo as a main character; however, unlike the other work, and clearly in keeping with the post-Boom mode, Estebanillo and Aguirre fuse voices to praise and condemn the Spanish mission in the New World. This fusion resonates "the voice of history, transformed into the voice of literature, the only one that endures" (155).

Unlike studies appealing to a group of scholars in a single area, this study speaks to historians, literary critics, and culturalists alike. It traces the changing literary styles of Latin American fiction in the 1970s and 1980s, while amassing substantial historical data on the Ursúa-Aguirre expedition and the El Dorado legend. Less subtly perhaps, by presenting different literary facets of Lope de Aguirre, it reminds

readers that no one is ever entirely evil. Original, insightful and well written, *The Miraculous Lie: Lope de Aguirre and the Search for El Dorado in the Latin American Historical Novel* is a significant source of literary and cultural understanding. ✱