The Authoritarian Cyclop

Israel Centeno

EL CÍCLOPE TOTALITARIO

NELSON RIVERA

«El ser humano no puede sentirse orgulloso del recuento que lleva a cabo Nelson Rivera en estas páginas: se trata de una historia de la ignominia del siglo XX, en donde se acumulan expresiones aterradoras de racismo, segregación y exterminio. En medio de semejante devastación, brilla la filosa inteligencia del autor. Un libro imprescindible que nos impide olvidar» —*Sergio Dahbar*

Colección Actualidad

DEBATE

Reading Journal – Day 1

Pittsburgh 2025

Pittsburgh, May 16. A long, dense day—the kind where light never really arrives and you feel like the sky weighs more than your body. Early in the morning, we discussed the looming effects of federal budget cuts in a meeting. I called my congressman, senator, vice president, president. I don't know if it makes any difference. I have the sense—and I'm not alone—that we are living under an administration that has turned all criticism into enemy territory. I left with my spirits lowered and my health shaken. Yesterday, over coffee in Bloomfield, I told an old friend—a self-declared skeptic—that without God, all this would be much harder. I have God, I told him, and that allows me to move forward with a certain lightness, even when my body aches and my medical prognosis is uncertain.

Today I begin reading *The Authoritarian Cyclops* by Nelson Rivera. I hadn't read it before, though it was published in 2009, the very year I left Venezuela with no possibility of return. I saw reviews, knew of its existence, but my exile was urgent, chaotic, a rupture—and what I didn't carry with me remained suspended in an inaccessible time. Only now—fifteen years later, thanks to the generosity of Vasco Szinetar—can I settle that debt. I open it as one opens a book that had long been destined for them, but whose reading had to wait until the storm passed.

As soon as I open it, in the first few pages, I feel at home. Not geographically, but in the gravity. Rivera writes with surgical precision, but also with a strange kind of intellectual compassion. He states at the outset that to think about war in times of peace is almost a contradiction, but also a duty. War, he says, doesn't erupt like lightning; it gestates in the shadows, in collective psychic denial, in the emotional veto of imagining the unthinkable. And that strikes me deeply. Isn't that exactly what happened to us Venezuelans? Didn't we live through a war without war, an annihilation without trenches, a loss of liberties disguised as popular epic?

What Nelson Rivera calls "abstract emotions"—nation, people, homeland, revolution—I experienced as slogans, then rhetorical weapons, then instruments of exclusion. It shakes me to read: "Every war is preceded by a high tide of hope." What a sentence. What precision to describe that moment when we believed everything would change. And it did, of course. But toward the darker. The "new man" ended up being a cyclops, yes, but not out of vision, but due to the mutilation of thought: a single gaze, a single language, a single truth.

I read from Pittsburgh, from this place that fifteen years ago meant nothing to me and is now the city where I grow old. I've become—I once said as a joke—an Appalachian mountaineer, removed from the editorial corridors of my country, a belated observer of its books, a displaced reader. This reading, then, is also a form of return. But not with nostalgia, rather with method.

Rivera's book demands I pause. I can't read it as one looks for quotable ideas. It's a text to ruminate, to dialogue with philosophers, linguists, phonologists, and literary thinkers who have warned of the destructive power of language when it becomes slogan, when it ceases to serve thought and becomes a device of domination. Arendt, Steiner, Michael Ignatieff, even Simone Weil come to mind, as do echoes of our own tradition of critical thought—now so scattered, reduced to ashes or social media posts no one reads.

Nationalism, populism, sentimental socialism, as Rivera rightly points out, are not ideas but emotional devices. They don't operate on the level of reason but of the viscera. In this sense, the book dialogues with a whole tradition of thought that includes everything from Ernesto Laclau's discourse theory to Umberto Eco's semiotics of fascism. Rivera patiently dismantles the way these symbolic apparatuses—when reified and embedded into the community—can produce war as an inevitable emotional logic. He says it without alarmism, with a clarity that chills.

Today I can only read a few pages. I will continue tomorrow. This will be my way of practicing criticism from exile: not as definitive analysis, but as daily dialogue, journal of thought, a way of accompanying a reading that arrives fifteen years late but with an urgency that remains intact.

I invite you to follow these entries, one by one, as if we were conversing together, under this cloudy sky, in a corner of Pittsburgh where there's still hot coffee, and where—despite everything—not all is lost.

The sky hasn't changed since yesterday. The light remains absent. And although I tried to put the book down—because of the density of what it says—I couldn't. I kept reading, like one opening a door that leads not only to the past, but to the raw present: Venezuela in its regression, the world in its silent substitution of liberalism by increasingly sophisticated forms of emotional, symbolic, institutional control.

With the measured pace of a thinker who knows language must not yield to urgency, Nelson Rivera develops a meditation that is not only about war but about the political soul of our time. What he calls "abstract emotions"—that magma of homeland, people, revolution, redemption—has ceased to be the patrimony of classic dictatorships and has become the structural raw material of what we might call the new affective authoritarianism: one that doesn't need shouts or uniforms to impose obedience.

As I read, I think about how the last fifteen years have not only returned Venezuela to the 19th century but have confirmed that modernity was not irreversible. The fall of the Berlin Wall did not inaugurate the end of history, as Fukuyama believed, but merely a truce. What we are seeing now is a world sliding into soft but relentless forms of governance: the algorithm as judge, the hoax as doctrine, the enemy as structural need.

Rivera puts it this way: war, before it is cannon, is language. A language that "flattens the multiple," that "levels," that turns everything into an inescapable system of oppositions: us/them, loyal/traitor, kill/die. In that binary grammar, freedom has no possible conjugation. Only the monotonous echo of the slogan remains. That is where we come in, we who still write, as the last phonologists of dissent.

I read and underline: "the language of war has a purpose: to flatten, reduce, distort reality into insignificance." I think of how many times that operation has repeated among us. In how many state speeches—of all kinds—that have turned the verb into a club. This warrior tongue, as Rivera explains, does not communicate, it commands. It does not seek meaning, it imputes. It does not interrogate, it dictates. War—he reminds us—does not begin with bombs, but with the slow normalization of that hollow, bombastic language that turns difference into a threat.

What Rivera denounces with rigor—and without shrillness—is not only the machinery of physical horror but also the aestheticization of conflict. In a world saturated with screens, war has become transmissible, editable, digestible. Propaganda no longer needs to tell the truth; it only needs good graphic design. It is the contemporary version of the "control of the narrative" that Walter Benjamin warned of in the 1930s: fascism does not destroy art, it makes it part of the decor of power. Today, that aestheticization becomes algorithm, trending topic, storytelling. The authoritarianism of the present does not impose silence: it imposes noise. So much that dissent is lost in the cacophony. Against that, this book is an act of deprogramming.

Later, Rivera offers testimonies. Not figures or concepts: bodies, wounds, children torn apart, women spat upon by their tormentors, men hiding in swamps with their children. These stories (Armenia, Cambodia, Rwanda, Vietnam) do not belong to one continent or one ideology. They belong to the dark heart of the human being when language has ceased to be a home and become a field of extermination.

It is hard to read these fragments without nausea. But I also realize that one cannot think about today's politics without going through these pages. Because war no longer needs to be called war. It can be called "beautiful revolution," "emerging order," "civilizational project." It can have spokespeople with microphones, not rifles. But the effects are the same: silence, submission, hunger, fear.

Rivera forces us to face what others elude with functional theories or conciliatory discourse. He reminds us that true barbarism is not that which produces screams, but that

which imposes silence. The silence heard in the testimonies of those who survived everything and no longer know how to speak.

There is no metaphor here. There is accuracy. War—he writes—is "the fall of God," "the dissolution of the contracts of the human." Reading that in 2024 is to understand that it is not enough to denounce old-fashioned authoritarianism. We must also interrogate the new emotional order that surrounds us: one that turns politics into performance, truth into meme, morality into algorithm. And then ask: will this new model stop here? Will China be its final station or are we approaching a Scandinavian "paradise" where freedom is merely a footnote?

In the end, this reading becomes a testimonial exercise for me. Not only for what Rivera says, but for what it awakens in me as a reader who has seen his country sink without a formal war, but under all its logics. Reading *The Authoritarian Cyclops* is not just reading about war; it is reading from a wound. A wound that does not bleed but does not close either. This book, in its sobriety, in its drama-free forcefulness, brings me back to the heart of a question almost no one dares to ask in public anymore: What do we do when language has been hijacked by those who use it to justify the unjustifiable? Perhaps, for now, the only answer is to keep reading. And to write, even from the margins.

I keep reading. I cannot stop. Not with a book like this. Not with this gravity. Not with this echo that reminds me, with each line, that to think is to resist. That to narrate is to contradict the slogan. That every word not surrendered is a small fire against the language of war.

Reading Journal – Day 2
Israel Centeno

DIARIO D
LECTURA

Reading this chapter on Auschwitz, I can't help but ask myself how far evil goes. To what extent can it take form with total naturalness, dehumanizing one part of humanity and overvaluing another, the one that claims for itself the authority to eliminate—without moral tremor—those it deems unworthy of existence. The horror of Auschwitz is not just historical: it is present. It lives on in the current forms of power, in their discourses, in their extermination strategies that justify themselves through the language of legality, revenge, or preemptive defense.

I cannot avoid thinking of all the wars I have witnessed throughout my life. Vietnam, the multiple conflicts in the Middle East—no longer events, but an endemic disease—Iran, Iraq, Rwanda. Each of those tragedies was a school of dread. And yet, here we are again: Myanmar. Ukraine. Gaza.

Where does moral authority end in an armed conflict? At what point does legitimate defense become unlimited vengeance? The war in Ukraine, with its crossed narratives and symbolic machinery, has almost entirely lost any ethical coordinates. It is no longer clear who is the victim and who the aggressor. The same could be said of the war in Israel. At first, after the attacks of October 7, the State of Israel held, in many eyes, an indisputable moral authority: it had been brutally attacked, had hostages in enemy hands, was wounded in its flesh and memory. The response was understandable. Some will say disproportionate; others will justify it as national defense. The debate was legitimate.

But time passes, and with it, that initial legitimacy dissolves. The death toll rises, bodies pile up, children are buried before they learn to speak, and something in the language begins to fracture. It is no longer retaliation. It is no longer even reprisal. It is extended punishment. It is displacement. It is demolition. And here arises a question that tortures me: at what moment did the Star of David—a symbol of resistance, dignity, of "never again"—cease to be a mark on the chest and become an insignia stamped on tanks advancing over civilian populations? Shouldn't we also ask whether that star—a symbol of identity, pain, and pride—has now been placed, without many noticing, in another place, perhaps a darker one?

Nelson Rivera anticipates it with brutal clarity. He speaks of the silence of the camp as a broken tongue. Of that moment when the echo is canceled, the atmosphere expropriated, humiliation institutionalized. He cites Ivan Klíma, Antelme, Elie Wiesel. Not for erudition, but because their words are keys that open the door to the unspeakable: the ruin of the human soul. War, Rivera tells us, is not an exception. It is the normalization of infamy. The construction of a grammar where killing ceases to be a crime and becomes destiny.

And as I read these pages—so rigorous, so painful, so true—an immense sadness overwhelms me. Because we are not safe. Because we keep manufacturing enemies. Because the cycle repeats itself. Because hate always finds new ways to express itself, to legitimize itself, to celebrate its efficiency.

This book, far from being a treatise, is a mirror. Not of what we were, but of what we could still become. Reading it in 2024 is not an academic exercise: it is an act of conscience. And, at times, of mourning.

Another point I cannot stop interrogating, in the light of these dark pages, is that of the presence or absence of God. Was He truly absent? Or, more disturbingly: was He there, but silent?

From the moment the Nazis came to power, they did not hide their intentions. Extermination was announced, written, shouted. There were no subtleties. Many Jews—perhaps those with a more acute survival instinct, or less attachment to the tangible—fled. And in doing so, they saved their lives. They were not heroes, nor martyrs, nor prophets: they were simply men and women who read the signs of the times and chose flight.

And yet, what about the others? Those who did not flee. What about those who stayed, not out of clumsiness, but out of emotional or intellectual fidelity to an idea of Germany, of Europe, of civilization? They believed, in naivety or despair, that such a nation could not descend into horror. That something in its roots—music, philosophy, language, literature—would prevent absolute delirium. They thought a moral brake still existed. That the night couldn't be that long.

But Kristallnacht came, the Night of Broken Glass. And even then, many hesitated. They waited. They clung. They kept believing. Was it hope? Was it pride? Was it an instinct of attachment stronger than fear?

This is not a question to judge. It is a question that haunts us all. Because if history teaches anything, it is that fleeing also requires faith. And faith, as Wiesel reminds us, is not always luminous. Sometimes faith is the refusal to see.

When I read Rivera speak of the silence of the camp, of the "robbery of the atmosphere's right to echo," I also think of another silence: the one that arises when an entire people fails to react in time, still believing in the possibility of a pact with reason.

And God? Where was He? Perhaps in the voice that whispered to each: "Flee." And that some could hear, and others, out of love, or while preparing armed resistance, or out of attachment, or culture, could not or would not obey. And so, they were devoured by the machinery of the unspeakable.

And the other thing—the thing I cannot keep quiet about—is this guilt that gnaws at me: the guilt of judging from here, from this quiet community where I have water, shelter, safety, internet, and coffee. From this century that no longer feels like a century, but a fragment, parody, shadow. I wonder whether I have the right to think the unthinkable from this place, from this peace that so closely resembles indifference. Because all the alarms are going off. Not in the streets, but in the information flows, the digital contracts, the invisible architecture of obedience.

Everything indicates we are being turned into data, and that data doesn't hurt when deleted.

Deleting data doesn't cause screams. It leaves no trace. It has no blood. It just takes a click.

And with that click—efficient, clean, unresisted—it ends.

Then I go silent. Or I write. I don't know whether it is to resist, or merely to not disappear as well.

Reading Journal – Day 3

Israel Centeno

It’s Sunday. I went to Mass. I understand now why—from the priest to the middle-class woman to the homeless man—we all must recognize our guilt and ask for mercy. Speaking with David and reflecting on my life, I told him I had grown old without ever having killed a man. Then, in a deeper examination of conscience, I wondered whether I hadn’t killed through omission—within the framework of the great human tragedies, of all the horrors I’ve witnessed.

Today I understood, with a clarity that only spiritual maturity can offer, the meaning of original sin and the necessity of a savior. I understood why we are broken. Why goodwill and good ideas are not enough. I understood why Auschwitz did not end in 1945. Because its logic has mutated, and today it operates in subtler forms: the infrastructure of camps is no longer needed to perpetrate oblivion. It's enough for a file to be deleted, a right denied, a story silenced. I understood this as I read Nelson Rivera's passages where Auschwitz is not a place of the past but a language of the present: "the alphabet of the camp," he writes, "has no commerce with life." That alphabet—that apparatus of symbolic annihilation—bears an uncanny resemblance to the administrative language of our time: files, databases, algorithms. If yesterday arms were tattooed, today codes are assigned. If once we were destroyed by fire, now we are erased with clicks. I understood this not through drama, but through the moral precision of testimony. I understood that to be a witness today also means resisting this new form of disappearance: the digitalized, disposable soul. I understood that memory is not an intellectual pastime, but a moral obligation.

Reading the passages on the Armenian genocide and Auschwitz, a sharp pain presses on the chest. History repeats itself—not as farce, but as abyss. Armenia, Poland, Cambodia, Rwanda, Yugoslavia, Syria, Ukraine. More than one hundred million human beings in the 20th century, one by one, one after another, reduced to ashes by disproportion, by a will to annihilate that needs no reasons—only excuses. Auschwitz was not an episode; it was a fracture in modernity. A wound that still bleeds beneath the crust of our civilization. Auschwitz is the absence of God, or His silence, or His judgment. It is the end of language. The point where any explanation becomes obscene.

And yet, there are the witnesses. The voices. The books of Primo Levi, of Wiesel, of Antelme, of Semprún. These texts do not explain horror. They sustain it. They transmit it. They compel us to look. There is no philosophy that can match the moral power of those memories. No political theory can replace the testimony of a tortured body that writes, that remembers, that withholds forgiveness—not out of hate, but because forgiveness is not theirs to give.

Today I also read about Simone Veil. Her return to Auschwitz. Her firmness in saying: "No, I have never forgiven." Not out of hatred, but out of respect. Because to collectively forgive such monstrosity would be to trivialize it.

Veil understood that the commitment to memory requires more than reconciliation. It demands truth, testimony, and continuity.

And here I am, in Pittsburgh, trying to accompany that continuity. Thinking of extermination camps not as distant memory, but as a latent possibility in any society that idolizes power, eroticizes obedience, or aestheticizes violence. There are camps without barbed wire. There are exterminations that don't smell of burnt flesh. There are silences that hurt just the same.

Today I also understood that my role is not that of a judge. It is that of a witness. And the witness is not neutral: the witness takes the side of the victim. The witness refuses to forget. The witness refuses to become data. Because we are being turned into data. Because disappearance today does not always come by bullets, but by clicks. There is no need for concentration camps when it suffices to erase a person from official records, to render them invisible in systems, to reduce them to a line of code deleted without ceremony. For example: when a government deletes a refugee's immigration file with a single keystroke, no body falls, but a life vanishes from the system. There is no visible crime, yet a total erasure takes place. It is extermination without smoke, without gas chambers, without traces. Violence no longer needs weapons if it has algorithms. When a government deletes a refugee's immigration file with a single keystroke, no body falls, but a life vanishes. No visible crime, just total erasure. Deleting data leaves no blood, but it erases stories. It erases voices. It erases humanity.

And so I write. I write because I need to keep the language of testimony alive. I write because silence, in these times, may be complicity. I write like one who prays, like one who lights a candle in the dark, knowing it may not light much—but that at least, it burns.

This is not a review. It couldn't be. It's a jolt.

Today I didn't read—I descended. I peered into the inventory of horrors that Nelson Rivera enumerates like someone trying to keep a candle lit in the middle of a storm. There are no concessions. No summaries. Just dates that smell of gunpowder, words that carry corpses. This is not a historical timeline but an ethical descent into the ruined heart of the 20th century.

Every paragraph of this "Bolshevik Route" is a tombstone. Each line, an unnamed grave. Rivera doesn't seek to enlighten us: he shakes us. He demands that we accompany him into a territory where humanity has failed without nuance. Not once, but so many times that horror ceased to be the exception and became the method.

We read the 20th century, and what emerges is not progress, but dread. Instead of an inventory of conquests—technological, political, intellectual—we have a litany of exterminations. Armenia, Germany, Russia, China, Cambodia, Rwanda, Yugoslavia. Humanity, like reciting a perverse psalm, has rehearsed every possible form of disappearance. And one is left wondering whether redemption still has a place in this story, or if everything has already been resolved—not toward the good—but through the global institutionalization of authoritarian populism and technocratic totalitarianism.

This is not a neutral enumeration. Rivera writes from conscience. From that zone of language where no distance is possible. And so we understand that the spiritual dilemma of the 21st century is not only to remember, but to resist. How do we resist the temptation to justify, to relativize, to manage evil as if it were a developmental variable?

There's something chilling in the idea that glides, barely, between the lines: that we no longer need concentration camps because control is in the algorithms. That there's no need to mark arms when we can classify bodies through metadata. That a single click can make someone disappear from history, from citizenship, from language. The logic of Auschwitz, mutated, survives in spreadsheets, databases, and exclusion protocols. Extermination no longer smells of gas—it smells of efficient bureaucracy.

The cursed years that Rivera documents haven't ended. They've simply changed their backdrop. We no longer need brownshirts when we have platforms. There's no need for a Gestapo if a tracking software will do. Today's totalitarianism doesn't shout—it whispers from our screens. Horror no longer marches with boots; it slides between terms and conditions.

And then I understand, with that mixture of rage and lucidity that intense reading brings, that what is expected of us today is the gesture of the witness. Not the witness who files things away. The one who remembers. The one who writes. The one who does

not surrender to the language of indifference. Because, as Rivera suggests without stating it outright, writing is no longer merely an act of thought. It's an act of resistance. A way to guard what is human.

I don't know if this world has redemption. But I know that as long as there are books like this, and readers who don't turn the page without pausing, there is still hope. Or at least, memory.

Something felt different in Europe's atmosphere before the collapse. Europe worshipped conversation. People dialogued. Words still held a powerful influence in all human affairs. Cafés gave cities their character. The middle class was growing, and urban spaces adapted to a rising need to gather and dream of the world to come. Stefan Zweig writes in that essential book, The World of Yesterday: Memoirs of a European: "If I seek a formula to define the era before the First World War, the era in which I grew up and was raised, I believe I have found the most concise one by saying it was the golden age of security."

Not just in Austria (the setting Zweig writes about). The year 1900 was extraordinary: the Paris World's Fair opened, the Metro began operation in that same city, Alfred Dreyfus was pardoned, and Freud published The Interpretation of Dreams. The next year, Guglielmo Marconi managed to send a radio signal from England to the United States. Stanislavsky directed The Three Sisters by Chekhov at the Moscow Art Theatre. The Nobel Prizes were awarded for the first time. H.G. Wells published The First Men in the Moon. Landsteiner discovered blood types. Rachmaninoff presented his Piano Concerto No. 2.

1902 was the year Debussy brought Poe's nightmares to the stage and premiered the opera Pelléas et Mélisande. In London, the Times Literary Supplement was launched. In 1903, Rilke wrote Letters to a Young Poet, and Matisse painted The Joy of Life. Hungarian Joseph Pulitzer created the prizes that would bear his name. 1904 was a year of extraordinary harvest: Conrad, busy with the world's seas, published Nostromo. Chekhov premiered The Cherry Orchard. In Dresden in 1905, the longing that would manifest in Expressionism began to germinate. Einstein published his Theory of Relativity. In the United States, African-American professor W.E.B. Du Bois led the fight against racial discrimination.

In 1906, Catalan architect Antoni Gaudí designed the Casa Batlló, the first step toward the magnificent Barcelona we know today. Picasso painted Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, launching Cubism. A year later, Romanian sculptor Brancusi created the piece from which abstraction would spring: his funerary monument titled The Prayer. The years leading up to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914—and even beyond, until the Russian Revolution—preserved the horizon's splendor. Diaghilev founded the ballet company that brought together Nijinsky, Pavlova, and Stravinsky, whose echo still reaches us today. In Prague, conferences on new knowledge multiplied, and cafés like

the City or the Corso opened, which Franz Kafka frequented in his most fruitful days. These were the years of Eliot, Mann, Marinetti, Jung, Mahler, Griffith, D'Annunzio, Kandinsky, Pavlov, Chesterton, Jarry, Duchamp, Klee, Bartók, Proust, Husserl, Joyce, Ortega y Gasset, Chagall, and Bertrand Russell.

But here's the thing: the light of enlightened enthusiasm wasn't the only one moving across Europe's surface and spirit. It would be naive to claim otherwise today. Other texts, other feelings, illusions, and unrest simmered behind the scenes. Other natures writhed on the periphery. At the time, they were almost invisible to the worldview and perception shared by the educated classes. Only when war became imminent, and later when chaos spread across vast Russia, did it become clear to the most lucid minds that the order Europe had inherited from the 19th century was teetering—dangling on the edge of a cliff, about to collapse.

It's not a review. It couldn't be. It is a consternation.

I read the episode of Peter the Great pronouncing his famous proclamation on the arrival of the Enlightenment in Russia. I stood still, like someone watching a crack spread across a surface still seemingly whole. The promise was clear: to open the Russian homeland to modern thought, to let the light of Europe reach a land long mired in the mud of servitude. There was something prophetic in that declaration—but also tragic. As if Peter, by invoking Kant and Montesquieu without naming them, had opened a channel that would later be sealed off by blows of repression and death.

Nelson Rivera takes us through that crack. What he does in recounting Russian history is not just to trace an evolutionary line of events, but to expose the moral fracture of a project that, born in the name of the Enlightenment, devolved into the systematic horror of Stalinism. It is that mutation that shakes us: how promises of equality and dignity, aimed at millions of enslaved peasants, ended up as slogans justifying their repression. The logic of Peter I, once perverted, fed the jaws of the new Soviet Leviathan.

What one perceives in reading Rivera is that the Russian Revolution cannot be understood as a simple political uprising. It was the outcome of secular despair—and that despair, that putrid humus of centuries of hunger and exclusion, was the perfect fuel for a machine that, once set in motion, did not halt for pain or reason. The intelligentsia, born under the shelter of Enlightenment humanism, was crushed with particular viciousness. Because it was no longer enough to break bodies—ideas had to be exterminated.

And that forces us to look differently. The Enlightenment, envisioned as a promise of emancipation, can turn against itself if it does not take root in ethics. When the State claims reason without limits and severs itself from the soul, what emerges is not freedom, but its parody: an instrumental rationality that justifies crime in the name of the people.

The names Rivera need not repeat hang in the air of the text: Radishchev, Herzen, Bakunin, the dissidents, those deported to Siberia for writing poems, for teaching Latin, for suggesting that serfdom was immoral. Nineteenth-century Russia, read through this lens, is a struggle between the word and the whip. And in 1917, the whip changed hands—but not its function.

And so we understand that the "Bolshevik route" is a long betrayal. A chain of frustrated illuminations, of ideas murdered before taking shape. The tragedy is not only that the tsars ruled with an iron fist, but that those who overthrew them replicated the same architecture of fear. They simply replaced the altar icon with Lenin's portrait.

And we return to Rivera. What his book proposes—without imposing—is that the 20th century must be read not only as a struggle between fascism and communism, but as the collapse of an enlightened promise. It is not a matter of choosing sides, but of recognizing that at both extremes, the price of utopia was the body of the other. The dissident, the peasant, the poet, the child. All sacrificed in the name of a future that never came.

To read this in 2024 is not an exercise in critical nostalgia. It is a warning. Because the new language of power has learned to camouflage itself. It no longer speaks in Marxist or fascist dialects. It speaks in the name of progress, connectivity, efficiency. But it still demands the same thing: submission. And every time we renounce thinking for ourselves, every time we surrender language to the platforms, we close once more the latch that Peter I tried to open.

So I write. Not to explain history, but to resist its repetition. Because horror, if not named, returns. Because language—as Radishchev knew, as Rivera implies—is the last place where human dignity can be safeguarded.

And because the promise of the Enlightenment is still being contested. It is not dead. It is only, for now, held hostage.

For the first time, many saw electricity. Here and there, across buildings lining Nevsky Avenue, light displays hung that pleaded: "God Save the Tsar." Near the Winter Palace, pedestrians were overwhelmed by strips of blue, white, and red—colors of the dynasty. The double-headed eagle, the Romanov emblem, seemed to watch every move of guests and passersby. Never before, said onlookers, had such a crush of luxurious horse-drawn carriages been seen.

They were celebrating 300 years of the dynasty in Saint Petersburg. In 1913, three centuries had passed since Mikhail Romanov ascended to power. Princes and dignitaries from Armenia and Georgia, from Poland and Lithuania, arrived with ornate carriages

and small armies of escorts. The most politicized sectors of society—persecuted, hunted, imprisoned, or killed—did not celebrate. Nor did many Russians in far-off cities and remote villages, who held a silent understanding in common: never again would such power be witnessed.

The monarchy was dying. The privileged caste was increasingly disconnected from reality. No public sentiment had as many adherents as hatred for the Romanovs. Power drew liberally from its sinister arsenal: it repressed, altered laws, fabricated charges, detained, deported, murdered.

In March 1901, a student uprising gave notice that the growing unrest was not limited to the peasantry—it had reached the urban outskirts. Foolishness, a salon full of perverse advisors, inflated military calculations, vain intelligence reports—Nicholas II decided to declare war on Japan in 1904. His country suffered both defeat and humiliation. The myth of an invincible regime had buckled before a smaller, better-organized, and more determined enemy.

Patriotic cohesion didn't last. There are still those who wonder how the 1905 insurrection, which erupted in January, did not lead to the fall of the tsar. Over 500 dead and thousands wounded was the result of Bloody Sunday—the march that tried to reach the Winter Palace to demand reforms and was met with gunfire. The streets were in crisis. *Potemkin* was the name of the legendary battleship whose sailors mutinied against their conditions that same June. The news sparked a general strike in Odessa.

October 1905 marks the beginning of what would become one of the most severe—and perhaps most futile—questions of the 20th century: Would the fate of millions, inside and outside Russia, have been different had Nicholas II listened to the anguished modulation of that massive portion of society living beyond his comprehension? Defeat by Japan, the student massacre, a general strike that paralyzed the country for months—much of society demanded change, another life. Absolute autocracy gave way to a pseudo-constitutional monarchy, always under the real control of power. In September, the Marxists had formed a Soviet (Council of Workers' Deputies), emerging as a local organ of revolutionary self-government. Nicholas II signed the October Manifesto, authorizing the creation of a parliament (the Duma) and granting limited civil liberties.

Gatopardo: Founded in 1906, the Duma was dissolved in 1907. Entire treatises have been written just to explain the machinations, conspiracies, and challenges faced by the monarchy in coexisting with another power that could curb its reach. 1905 is merely the possible beginning of a file that continued to build in the years that followed, until everything exploded in 1917. Its deepest theme is not the Duma vs. Monarchy debate. It is the tragedy of absolute power doomed to spill blood, because it bears the most intolerable banner for the human race: despair—the belief that there is a single, invincible power against which nothing is possible.

Closing the "Bolshevik Route" in Nelson Rivera's book, I feel no relief.
There is no redemption in these pages. Only a searing lucidity that grants no reprieve. The story told there—without solemnity and without sentimentality—is that of power as a moral solvent. The ideological garments don't matter: the result is the same. Flags change, but the blood remains.

The itinerary Rivera traces, from Peter I to the collapse of the Romanov Empire and the rise of Soviet totalitarianism, is not a saga—it's an X-ray. History does not move forward; it contorts. Sometimes, it disguises itself as promise. Other times, as order. But it always returns to the same place: the cult of power for power's sake. The logic of extermination as management of the human. The erasure of the individual in the name of a greater cause—undeniable, sacralized by fear or dogma.

What impresses me most is not the cruelty, but its effectiveness. Its ability to produce language. To create aesthetic beauty even out of violence. To mask death with concepts: redemption, the people, revolution, purity. Rivera dismantles that apparatus—not with rage, but with a scalpel. And in doing so, he returns to us a word that seemed useless in this century: discernment.

Because the horror of the Soviets—like that of the Nazis, or of any regime that builds its fortress on the corpses of the weak—is not perpetrated solely with bullets. It installs itself in the conscience, in speech, in administration. In the decree, the passport, the archive. In the education that dresses up lies as history. In the obedience learned from the cradle.

Then one understands that the revolution that promised justice was, at its core, a deletion machine. That the project of equality became a system of purges. That the dream of fraternity ended up producing a new caste of untouchables: the commissars of truth, the guardians of the archive, the editors of memory.

The end of the *Bolshevik Route*, as Rivera lays it out, offers no comfort. But it does demand a kind of radical responsibility: never again to join any fervor that promises paradise at the cost of one's neighbor. To reject any utopia that does not include, from the outset, an ethical boundary. To write, again and again, from the margins—from thehollow left when the State occupies everything.

I close this chapter like someone turning off a lamp that has illuminated more than the eye can bear. And yet, knowing that darkness is no longer an option. History cannot be unwritten. The 20th century taught us that: that words matter. That language, in the hands of power, can kill. That to write—when one writes with conscience—is a way of not killing.

Reading Journal – Day 5

This reading feels like peering into a recurring nightmare of humanity—the moment when organized man, wrapped in the pride of civilization, unfolds his capacity for horror. Is it human nature or seduction by power that leads civilizations to dehumanize the other, to erase difference under the guise of "civilizing," of making others believe, think, and live as we do?

If Christianity offered us a simple commandment—*Love one another*—how is it that we still struggle to see the other not as an obstacle or trophy, but as face, as life, as brother? What ethical framework can replace that call to love if it fails to awaken us? What path to salvation remains when the abyss becomes routine?

Millions of victims have lived alongside suicides. They know: even when signs are detected, the decision to end one's life always arrives like a sudden paralysis—untouchable, blinding. Yet no one was surprised when Adolf Hitler took his own life. Many Germans expected it. The dictator himself had linked military defeat with suicide many times.

When General Paulus announced the surrender at Stalingrad in February 1943, Hitler coldly said, *"He should have killed himself."* His own suicide was not a drama but a script long in the making—carefully staged, almost cinematic, as Trevor-Roper noted. It was the final act of a totalitarian opera: *victory or death*.

Hitler embodied a terrifying trait of totalitarianism: turning personal biography into a model for the State. A failed painter and embittered soldier, he claimed the mantle of Germany's "true soldier," barking orders at generals who loathed his arrogance. In June 1941, he launched the invasion of Russia, against the will of the military leadership. He would later assume total command of the armed forces, obliterating the line between party and army.

By 1942, Germany's military momentum was collapsing. Hitler refused to listen. He dismissed, imprisoned, or executed officers who spoke the truth. The failed Ardennes offensive in 1944 sealed the doom: 80,000 German casualties. His delusions deepened. He wandered the bunker, trembling, drugged, sleep-deprived. His body betrayed his decay: a twisted arm, a shuffled gait, mutterings to himself.

While Berlin burned, Hitler spoke of dogs, of betrayal, and of the most "honorable" methods of suicide.

The Wehrmacht was a ghost of itself. Teenagers and old men were conscripted to defend ruins with empty rifles. In early 1945, the Soviets advanced inexorably. Berlin was rubble—each citizen reduced to thirty cubic meters of debris. Yet Nazi propaganda continued to scream: "We have secret weapons. We will prevail. The Führer is more inspired than ever."

On April 20, Hitler's birthday, all hope had vanished. Dignitaries came to plead with him to flee Berlin. He refused. On April 22, in a final conference, he screamed for three hours, then declared: *"It's over."* He announced his intention to die in Berlin.

What followed was theater, monstrous in scope. Eva Braun joined him. They married. Goebbels prepared to murder his six children. Poison capsules were distributed. Hitler dictated a testament filled with the same hollow phrases from *Mein Kampf*. At 3:30 pm, April 30, 1945, a gunshot ended it. Hitler shot himself. Eva bit a cyanide pill. Their bodies were burned as ordered. The last rites of a regime built on ashes, ending in fire.

That same day, Soviet troops stormed the Reichstag. Berlin fell. What remained of the Nazi elite scrambled for alibis, false identities, secret exits. Hitler's suicide, far from a noble martyrdom, was the final lie in a life of delusions.

A dictator, who never visited a bombed city, who never looked into the face of the war he unleashed, had masticated his own death while his people perished in basements soaked in sewage and terror.

The curtain closed on the nightmare not with a roar, but with a sigh of burned flesh. Over the bones of millions, on the ruins of Europe, the racial, totalitarian, genocidal dream collapsed into its true shape: an unredeemable crime against the human spirit.

Aquí tienes la traducción al inglés del texto **Diario de lectura – Día 6**:

Reading Journal – Day 6

Reading *The Book of Asphyxiation* is not reading a political document. It is reading a suffocated breath. A pulse trapped in the throat of a country. I find it hard to even call it a text, because what one receives, what installs itself in the chest as one progresses, is a raw pain: the discovery of a will to dominate that is not satisfied with classical power, but aims at the absolute capture of the soul.

In the humid, murky climate of present-day Venezuela, *The Book of Asphyxiation* is not just a memory of a failed constitutional project. It is the X-ray of the totalitarian dream: one that is not content with governing bodies, but seeks to suppress all interiority, all subjectivity, every space of meaning not previously authorized. It is not the old Leviathan, but its most subtle and lethal mutation: *"if it occurs to me"* as a principle of legality.

This is no hyperbole. The reading unfolds, with surgical coldness, the logic of a device that doesn't need to declare war to establish the camp. That doesn't need uniforms to turn us into battalions. That requires no ideology to make us into pieces. Each gesture of "the unlimited one" is a performance of capture. Each of his words contains the promise of a

total reconfiguration of the world: a geocell, a new symbolic cartography, a new order of what is sayable and livable.

I felt, while reading, that it's no longer about confronting arbitrariness with rights. That language is no longer enough. What's at stake is something else entirely: the very possibility of having an unmanaged soul. A consciousness not yet absorbed by the unlimited's program. As a reader, I felt addressed in my most intimate self—not as a citizen, but as a speaking being, as a creature capable of desire, of resistance, of faith.

What *The Book of Asphyxiation* reveals is that 21st-century totalitarianism doesn't need to roar—it only needs to manage. To gather data. To know exactly where our needs are located. To know what we buy, where we live, whom we follow. It doesn't seek to kill, but to suffocate. To make life unbreathable until we ourselves become our own jailers.

And so I return to the beginning: if the Christian commandment was to love one another, what has failed in us that we are willing to sacrifice the other in the name of any ideology, any project, any homeland? How have we forgotten the essential truth—that without a face, without a neighbor, without compassion, there is no humanity?

The Book of Asphyxiation not only diagnoses the sickness. It brings it close. It enters our homes. It reminds us that the camp can begin on the street where we live. That a single slogan is enough for someone to register your name on a list. That a single shortage is enough for someone to decide whether you eat or not.

Today I have understood that resistance is no longer merely political. It is ethical. It is spiritual. It is a radical decision not to become part of the shouting chorus. Not to become a piece. Not to accept life as mere survival.

To resist, today, is to pray. It is to write. It is to look at the other with tenderness. It is to read knowing that each page may be the last space where the soul can breathe.

I do not know if there is salvation. But as long as there is writing that unmasks the lie, that names the unlimited without fear, that restores the weight and depth of what is human, there remains a possibility. However remote. However small—a spark glowing in the open air.

As I go deeper into these pages, one question becomes inescapable: What has happened to humankind, that having once known the commandment of love, it has chosen again and again the regime of subjugation? Why has it become so difficult for us to coexist without erasing the other, without colonizing their desire, without reducing them to enemy, to number, to variable, or threat?

I think, uneasily, of the spiritual fracture of the West. Of that chasm that has opened between the soul and its foundation. Of that growing distance between being and its transcendent vocation. When God ceases to be a face and a commandment—when He becomes an abstraction or a suspicion—the world falls into disorder. Law loses its flesh. Dignity becomes fragile. Justice is measured in terms of utility. And then power, unrestrained, prayerless, and shameless, occupies the place of the sacred.

But I don't want to fall into nostalgia or condemnation. This is not a diatribe against atheism, nor an apology for dogma. It is a sincere inquiry: Can a civilization survive without a living relationship with the Good? Can a culture endure if it does not recognize the other as a call, as a revelation that invites me to step beyond myself?

I wonder if the indigenous cultures, the ones that crossed the Americas from north to south, knew something we have forgotten. If those civilizations that never wrote political treatises, but knew how to dance, to offer, to give thanks, had an intuition of a harmony we now fail to grasp. Perhaps they weren't innocent, but at least they hadn't severed the bond with the earth, with the cosmos, with the other as bearer of mystery.

And yet, even there, we do not find the absolute cure. History shows us that humankind has been cruel in every latitude. That it has sacrificed in the name of gods, empires, tribal identities. Violence is not exclusive to the West—but perhaps its sophistication and its technified blindness are.

This is why totalitarianism is not merely a form of government. It is a spiritual condition. It is the closure of the other as a possibility. It is the end of hospitality. The end of prayer. The moment when no one kneels before the mystery anymore, but instead manages it. The instant when all height is turned into algorithm.

I keep reading *The Book of Asphyxiation* with an open heart. Like one listening to a distant echo of warning: one cannot live without a soul. One cannot legislate without love. One cannot organize society from fear. Or we will all end up breathing the same lie, believing that survival is enough, and that freedom was an indulgence.

Today I know that to resist is to remember. That to pray is to keep communication with the invisible open. That to write is to offer the other a place to sit without fear. That civilization begins not with control, but with reverence.

Perhaps salvation lies not in returning to the past, but in rediscovering what we left behind. In that forgotten commandment: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. Perhaps there, in that impossible and urgent act, history might begin again.