

UNCOMMONPLACE HAPPENINGS:
Post-Tlatelolco Mexican Narrative

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I am one thing, my writings are another matter!
Friedrich Nietzsche

My work gets thought in me unbeknown to me. I appear to myself as the place where something is going on, but there is no "I," no "me." Each of us is a kind of crossroads where things happen. . . . There is no choice, it is just a matter of chance.
Claude Lèvi-Strauss

LA NOVELA MEXICANA (1967–82). By JOHN S. BRUSHWOOD. (Mexico City: Editorial Grijalbo, 1985. Pp. 130.)

VOICES, VISIONS, AND A NEW REALITY: MEXICAN FICTION SINCE 1970. By J. ANN DUNCAN. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1986. Pp. 263. \$24.95.)

J. Ann Duncan begins her study of selected contemporary Mexican narrators with a bold assertion from Carlos Fuentes's *La nueva novela hispanoamericana*: "It is not the novel that has died, but precisely the bourgeois form of the novel and its singular referent: realism."¹ The so-called boom literature and its aftermath brought to traditionally descriptive, sociologically oriented, pseudo-objective Spanish American narrative, if not death, certainly a marked abatement. It is specifically this abatement that Fuentes circumscribes.

In contrast, the recent outpouring of "post-boom" prose in Mexico is enjoying a unique status. The year 1968 marked the Tlatelolco crisis, which John Brushwood believes remains omnipresent in the "collective consciousness" of many Mexican writers. This tragic event was followed by a confusing mass of multivalent rhetoric during the Echeverría presidency. The subsequent uncertain years and a devastating economic crisis accompanied by escalating corruption have impelled many of the country's prominent writers, and her intellectuals in general, toward renewed introspection.

Octavio Paz's two collections of essays, *El laberinto de la soledad* and *Posdata*, punctuate Mexico's principal moments of self-reflection in

this century.² The first book was published during the turn to conservatism of the “revolutionary family” following the Cárdenas years. This period was important for two reasons. First, it marked the commencement of the “new narrative” throughout Spanish America. Second, it took on special prominence in Mexico due to the appearance of three major works, Agustín Yáñez’s *Al filo del agua* (1947), Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo* (1955), and *La región más transparente* (1958), Carlos Fuentes’s first novel. These works, in addition to initiating a renaissance in Mexican letters, placed the Mexican Revolution under critical scrutiny. The general consensus was that if the Revolution was not yet exactly “dead,” it was evincing symptoms of debilitation that might prove irreversible. *Posdata* was published shortly after the Tlatelolco crisis, the second turning point in the trajectory of contemporary Mexican narrative. This change of course will be the initial focus of the present review.

Professors Duncan and Brushwood offer what could be complementary studies. Brushwood’s *La novela mexicana* is essentially a survey. His apology for the absence of detailed analysis is reinforced by his promise of such a study in the future. As is helpful in a survey, Brushwood includes a brief bibliography of selected criticism on recent Mexican prose as well as a chronological list of the works discussed, ranging from 1967 to 1982. Detailed name and subject indexes (a rarity among comparable books printed in Spanish America) furnishes another aid for quick reference. In brief, the book is well organized and informative, although readers might occasionally wish for more thoroughgoing exposition.

Following a general sketch of the Mexican novel from 1967 to 1982, Brushwood discusses three technically innovative works that appeared in 1967, a pivotal year immediately preceding Tlatelolco: Fuentes’s *Cambio de piel*, Vicente Leñero’s *El garabato*, and José Emilio Pacheco’s *Morirás lejos*. Brushwood then specifies four salient characteristics manifested in the narrative that followed: the impact of Tlatelolco; the prominence of a self-reflexive, hyperconscious style (that is, meta-fiction); the development of an uncertain, unstable identity (*identidad inestable*) in many characters; and the predominance of urban settings, especially Mexico City, accompanied by a vague trend toward nostalgic longings. Brushwood insightfully suggests that the last three characteristics could well be at least indirectly motivated by the Tlatelolco crisis.

Although Brushwood’s approach is primarily literary, his preoccupation with Tlatelolco endows *La novela mexicana* with the trappings of a sociological, even anthropological, orientation toward the broad issues confronting Mexico. While the study is intended to be a survey, it goes beyond cataloguing authors, works, and dates to provide the reader with a conceptual grasp of current trends in Mexican literature

as well as the important themes and techniques employed by its authors. The contrast between Brushwood's objectives and those of Duncan is conspicuous. Brushwood briefly characterizes narrative prior to 1967 in order to outline important changes that followed. He discusses established prose writers and younger writers on the scene as well as more politically committed authors. One of his chief concerns regarding post-1967 literary expression is to capture the interplay between the four above-mentioned characteristics and how they bring about an interdependency between themes and techniques. This phenomenon is most prevalent in the self-reflexive novels of the period that "analyze themselves." In addition to discussing *Morirás lejos*, *Cambio de piel*, and *El garabato*, Brushwood focuses on Salvador Elizondo's *El hipogeo secreto* (1968), Gustavo Sainz's *Obsesivos días circulares* (1969), Juan García Ponce's *La invitación* (1972), and the work of Julieta Campos (one of the most hyperconscious of contemporary writers) and others. Brushwood concludes that in many cases themes do not bear directly on Tlatelolco or generally on the politico-socioeconomic crisis that has become part of the collective national consciousness. Nonetheless, narrative techniques—including self-referential language, multiple ambiguous identities, indeterminacy of meaning, and imaginary, nightmarish, and even hallucinatory settings—do interact with themes to highlight what has not been and possibly cannot be said.

In contrast, Duncan's *Voices, Visions, and a New Reality: Mexican Fiction since 1970* shifts away from the "totalizing" novels that attempt to provide an all-encompassing view of society, epitomized by Fuentes's *Terra nostra* (1975), Fernando del Paso's *Palinuro de México* (1977), and Arturo Azuela's *Manifestación de silencios* (1979). She limits herself—perhaps excessively—to a more detailed study of selected works of experimental fiction by younger writers, some of whom have not yet enjoyed much of the critical spotlight. After briefly discussing the experimental nature of recent Mexican fiction, Duncan proposes a concise definition of the "new novel." This narrative generally emphasizes the irrational aspects of reality, which at times border on the uncanny. The world presented is consequently "unfamiliar and disorienting, multifaceted and never explicable in terms of a single phenomenon." It ultimately creates an atmosphere that is "in itself a statement about reality—the only definite one we are given" (p. 10). Duncan summarizes literary innovations during the 1960s by such writers as del Paso, Elizondo, Sainz, García Ponce, and Leñero. She then focuses more closely on a relatively younger group, dedicating individual chapters to Pacheco, Carlos Montemayor, Humberto Guzmán, Ester Seligson, Antonio Delgado, and Jesús Gardea. Strangely enough, however, authors like Julieta Campos are virtually ignored.

Duncan's book is engaging in content, despite occasional trite expressions and obvious errors (the publication date for *Pedro Páramo* is listed twice as 1965). Quotes tend to be rather lengthy and usually (but not always) appear in both languages, which becomes somewhat cumbersome. Most of the translations are the author's because many of the works have yet to appear in English. In the broad view, however, this study provides a useful introduction to some of the most exciting literature in Mexico today. The writers Duncan discusses are searching for unique ways to express what they consider to be a new reality. Yet "they all tend to take the literary innovations of the previous decades . . . for granted, and to operate within this idiom, interpolating their own innovations with the confidence and lack of dogmatism only possible for those who have had a path blazed in the jungle of prejudices before them" (p. 34).

Trapped among the Ciphers

At the outset, the literary innovations Duncan discusses appear to be nothing breathtakingly new. Innovative writers the world over have complained that previous forms were lacking, that they could not adequately express the new self-awareness. Differences have become evident, however, between narrative that appeared during the heyday of the "boom" era in Spanish America at large (the 1940s through the 1960s) and the self-reflexive, self-conscious literature in Mexico after the late 1960s. Writers of the boom period occasionally rebelled against literature itself and against language, but the younger Mexican group consciously accept the fact that they are condemned to the printed page. The former strive to adapt other artistic media, especially film, to literature; the latter explore the relationship between literature and the usual conception of "reality," challenging readers to alter both their reading of literature and our view of the world. In this light, Duncan presents a group of authors who exercise a general shift toward constructing alternative realities, toward creating fantastic, dreamlike worlds. "Reality," which is never objective anyway, is replaced in this narrative by imaginative realms, where space and time are vague and characters are equally ambiguous, much like Brushwood's fabricators of "uncertain, unstable identities." This kind of prose has not predominated in Mexican writing, however, and it bears mentioning that exceptions abound to the narrative methods of Duncan's chosen authors, as Brushwood points out.

Yet even the authors that Duncan has singled out come from many walks of life, and their literary efforts diverge, perhaps more than she is willing to acknowledge. To cite a few of the most noteworthy

examples, Pacheco juxtaposes in *Morirás lejos* three historical instances—the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus's Roman legionaries, the annihilation of the Warsaw ghetto in 1943, and the extermination of Jews in Nazi concentration camps—with the singular instance of a possible narrator of unknown identity paranoically watching from a window another man seated on a park bench reading a newspaper. To accomplish this juxtaposition, Pacheco coalesces modes of writing ordinarily thought to be incommensurate (for example, history, documentary, and imaginary constructs), an approach that blurs the boundary between fact and fiction. The reader, who is given no more than an intricate set of tenuous conjectures, uncertain refutations, and suspicious approximations, is forced to participate but seldom knows when he or she is approaching or straying farther from any determinate answers.

To cite other examples of diverse approaches, Carlos Montemayor's *Las llaves de Urgell* (1970), a collection of nineteen short pieces with no apparent continuity, is disconcerting yet stimulating. It demonstrates hardly any purpose beyond its mere existence. Its passages are suggestive rather than descriptive or explicit, evoking a mood rather than visual images. In Humberto Guzmán's *El manuscrito anónimo llamado consigna idiota* (1975), language becomes radically self-reflexive, somewhat like Beckett's prose, and becomes anti-literature. Consisting of four disparate pieces, the work reveals a sense of futility. Yet it displays a compulsion to continue—that is to say, language obstinately pushes itself forward, inch by inch, in a manner reminiscent of Beckett's *How It Is*. The problem here is the impossibility of communication. This outcome creates a crisis for literature, for if there is no communication and if the text refers to nothing but itself, then we have what John Barth (referring to Borges and others) calls the "literature of exhaustion."³

In contrast, Esther Seligson's work is highly lyrical, even mystical at times in its quest for hidden meaning in human existence. Her preoccupation lies in a search for identity; her means entail syntheses through love, spiritual quest, and a timeless sense of unity in diversity. Antonio Delgado explores various forms of existence on different planes of "reality": flexible time and space, the plurality of identity, terror and fascination with the infinite, and joined to all of this amalgamation, an obsessive uncertainty. In Delgado's *Figuraciones en el fuego* (1980), as in Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*, it is well-nigh impossible to discern whether the characters are alive or dead. Like Delgado, Jesús Gardea presents distinctly Mexican plebeian themes in a rather mundane reality, returning to rural settings in what seems to be starkly simple, direct prose. But this writing is not mere neorealism. The dividing line between mundane matters and fantasy is fused, as characters are

viewed from the outside, through their actions rather than their thoughts or speech. For other writers like Federico Campbell and Guillermo Samperio, language itself is both artistic material and protagonist. Campbell offers a linguistic rendition whereby *écriture* becomes the sole subject; Samperio interweaves multiple levels of discourse to create an uncanny sense of existence. Hugo Hirart creates in *Cuadernos de gofa* (1981), much in the manner of Borges's "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Terius" or Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, a fictional world as an alternative to our own supposed world, according to Duncan.

In short, Duncan's almost exclusive preference for the experimental prose of younger Mexican writers is apparent. At the same time, she demonstrates familiarity with many of Mexico's more established writers, although one might prefer additional comparison and contrast between "boom" and "post-boom" narrative. In contrast, Brushwood's extensive experience with Mexico, its people, and literature leads him to identify with the broader spectrum evoked by contemporary narrative. Thus the two scholars evince distinct, although complementary, objectives and approaches. At the same time, an essential feature that unites their attitude toward contemporary Mexican narrative is a preoccupation with language. Duncan accents a centrifugal movement away from baroque pyrotechnics and totalizing literature toward experimentation. Brushwood emphasizes the omnipresence of Tlatelolco and a return in the past few years to relatively straightforward storytelling. Over the long run, both critics stress exploring language as the medium of the printed page and how it can create vague and ambiguous moods capable of altering the reader's mind-set.

Language, the Supreme Mediator

Fuentes, in his essay cited above, sets for Latin American writers a task that could well apply to all Third World intellectuals: to profane and contaminate the "sacred rhetoric" embedded in the politico-socio-economic system since the conquest and colonialization, that is, to "invent a language" (p. 30). Whether or not Spanish American literature will be totalizing in the future, Fuentes's critique must be all-embracing, commensurate with what Paz calls in *Posdata* a "critique of the pyramid" (pp. 103–55). Spanish America's "long history of lies, silence, rhetoric and academic complicities" must be opened to view (Fuentes, p. 30). How is this monumental task to be accomplished? By language's availing itself of its most penetrating artifices—multiple ambiguity, humor with a massive dose of irony, outlandish juxtapositions—in order to generate fresh mind-sets (p. 31). Spanish America's literature must "manifest disorder; that is, a possible order, in contrast to the actual order" (p. 32). In other words, Fuentes calls for an end to the structural-

ist concept of language paralysis, arguing that the language of Spanish American fiction must recapture what is the essence of its nature: ongoing semiosis, rather than the stolid, static rhetoric of the past.

Interestingly enough, some readers would complain that Fuentes is not given his share of the spotlight in either of the books under review. Although Duncan does not brand Fuentes a fossil, she makes little more than passing comments on his work, generally citing it as illustrative of the waning of totalizing literature. Brushwood targets the importance of Fuentes's *Cambio de piel* during the pivotal year of 1967 but pays this internationally renowned writer little regard in other respects, perhaps partly because Fuentes's later works do not reveal the preoccupation with Tlatelolco found in writings by other authors. Nonetheless, Fuentes's collection of essays, published a scant year after Tlatelolco, presents intriguing implications in view of the works of Brushwood and Duncan.

I would submit that much Mexican narrative of late coheres with the "textualist" leanings of "poststructuralism," including that of Fuentes, who practices what he preaches.⁴ Brushwood suggests that this self-reflective, polysemic, and occasionally radically indeterminate narrative is analogous to the works of Mark Rothko and Günther Gerzso: they are self-referentially and self-sufficiently "actual" rather than "virtual"—as would be a painting referring "by extension" to, say, a pile of fruit. This conclusion is indeed a provocative and very current notion. It not only entails rejecting the so-called referential fallacy but also bears on the dictum that the text is all, both of which are commensurate with "poststructuralism."

In this regard, Brushwood appropriately proposes that in the final analysis, themes in the self-reflexive work are technique and vice versa. In addition, the alienating effect of such a technique should be considered in conjunction with another facet of social change that was more visibly expressed—the 1968 turmoil ending with Tlatelolco. Both manifestations "reveal specifically Mexican traits, of course, but, in addition they participate in a broader movement of Western society" (p. 105).

Although it is presumable that "serious" literature, whose moral aspirations and attacks on institutions evince an abiding faith in realism, continues to be written in Mexico and Spanish America at large, "poststructuralist" texts (or perhaps we could say "postmodernist" texts) are increasingly taking the front seat. They forcibly remind the reader that "realities" are made, not found, that they should not be construed as chunks of real life experiences nor are they privileged over any other kind of text. They simply *are*, which implies a gravitation away from totalizing novels that is documented in both the works under review. As Brushwood implies, both the effect of Tlatelolco and the

doubting, vacillating, undecidable nature of much recent Mexican fiction has resulted in the search for "an opening in the wall of convention" (p. 106). I would conjecture further that wherever the peephole in that wall is made (it will not be found), increasing expectations might suggest that there will be nothing to see in the beyond, or better, perhaps the beyond will be whatever one can make of it.

NOTES

1. Carlos Fuentes, *La nueva novela hispanoamericana* (Mexico City: Joaquín Mortiz, 1969), 17 (my translation).
2. Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad* (Mexico City: Cuadernos Americanos, 1950), and *Posdata* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1970).
3. John Barth, *The Literature of Exhaustion* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1974).
4. See Richard Rorty, "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism," *The Monist*, no. 114 (1981):155–75.