

The Holocaust in Mexican Literature

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Even though none of the recent reference works on Holocaust literature mentions the Mexican output on this topic, there exists a substantial tradition of literary works in Mexico that address the Holocaust. This essay offers a survey of this tradition, with a focus on how the authors of these works relate the Holocaust to the Mexican context from which they are writing. I argue that most of the Mexican authors I study treat the Holocaust as part of a shared history, rather than a history towards which they adopt an outsider's perspective.

The Holocaust has not received much attention in Latin America, especially when compared with Europe and the United States. Latin America's distance from the events, and the burden of the continent's own difficult history, may account for this dearth of interest.¹ It would be wrong to claim, however, that Latin American writers have ignored the Nazi genocide. It is worth recalling that Jorge Luis Borges wrote 'Deutsches Requiem', a powerful meditation on the Holocaust, shortly after the end of the Second World War. Indeed, with one of the largest Jewish populations in the world outside of Israel, Argentina has seen considerable interest in the Holocaust among its writers. Similarly, in Mexico the destruction of the European Jews has not remained invisible in the literary realm. Although there is only one Mexican novel – José Emilio Pacheco's *You Will Die in a Distant Land* (*Morirás lejos*, 1967) – that takes the Holocaust as its principal subject matter, there are other Mexican works that include episodes related to this event, or make reference to it. When one surveys these works, what ends up being surprising is not how little has been written about the Nazi genocide in Mexico, but rather the fact that none of the major reference works published during the past decade on the topic of literary representations of the Holocaust mentions the Mexican output on this topic.² In what follows, I will try to fill this gap in our understanding of the literature of the Holocaust. The focus of my survey of Mexican literary responses to the Holocaust will be on the relationship between these responses and the Mexican context out of which they emerged.

An early reflection on the Holocaust appears in Octavio Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (*El laberinto de la soledad*), an essay on Mexican national identity first published in Mexico City in 1950. In contrasting Mexico with the world's 'advanced'

nations, Paz puts forward a remarkably negative view of the modern world. The Mexican poet suggests that concentration camps are a key emblem of modernity, noting that '[t]he century of health, hygiene and contraceptives, miracle drugs and synthetic foods, is also the century of the concentration camp and the police state, Hiroshima and the murder story'.³ In other words, the seeming benefits of modernity cannot be dissociated from the horrors of the twentieth century. A few pages later, Paz takes a step further in proposing that these horrors are in fact the direct outcome of a modern world-view: 'It might be added that modern technical skills and the popularity of crime stories are like concentration camps and collective extermination, the results of an optimistic and unilateral conception of existence' (Ref. 3, p. 60). The philosophy of progress – one of the ideological cornerstones of the modern era – leads not to the dreamed-of utopia, but to the terror of the concentration camps. In associating concentration camps with modernity, Paz can be seen as a forerunner of thinkers such as Zygmunt Bauman, who argues that the Holocaust is a product of modernity, not a deviation from it.⁴

Like Paz, Carlos Fuentes was drawn to reflect on the Holocaust in a work whose principal theme was the problem of Mexican identity. One of the main characters in *Where the Air is Clear* (*La región más transparente*, 1958), Fuentes's first novel, is an intellectual named Manuel Zamacona who engages in lengthy reflections on Mexican culture and history, often involving comparisons with Europe. In one of his monologues about Mexico, Zamacona uses the Holocaust to define what is unique about his country. He argues that whereas Europe's intellectual traditions make the disasters that have occurred there intelligible, Mexican history defeats any attempt to make sense of it:

The most terrible of experiences, Dachau or Buchenwald, simply made the ideal under attack – freedom, the dignity of man, or whatever you want to call it – stand out more clearly [...]. But there are no such formulas to justify Mexico's suffering. What can possibly justify the destruction of the indigenous world? Or our humiliation before the United States? Or the deaths of Hidalgo and Madero? What can possibly justify the hunger, the droughts, the plagues, the assassinations, the rapes? On the altar of what great idea can they be borne?⁵

Zamacona's rhetorical questions imply that the catastrophes of Mexican history cannot be placed within a larger narrative that might make these events comprehensible. Such a viewpoint offers a striking departure from dominant literary approaches to the Holocaust. It has frequently been argued that the Holocaust was such an extreme event that it exists in a realm beyond ordinary human understanding. Theodor Adorno famously contended that after Auschwitz, it was no longer possible to write poetry.⁶ The idea that literature has been at a loss to discover an appropriate response to Nazi crimes against Europe's Jewish population – given the unspeakable nature of these crimes – is a central theme in much commentary on Holocaust literature.⁷ Zamacona calmly refutes this assumption, claiming that it is not the Holocaust that defies comprehension, but the calamities that make up Mexican history.

Fuentes tackles the Holocaust at greater length in *A Change of Skin* (*Cambio de piel*, 1967). The novel concerns a road-trip two couples take from Mexico City to

Veracruz. The trip stalls when their car breaks down, and they are forced to spend the night in a hotel in the provincial town of Cholula. From here, the narrative begins to explore the past lives of the characters. One of them, a Sudeten German man named Franz Jelinek, is a former Nazi. Before the war, Franz is an architecture student in Prague and, among other things, a lover of classical music. When we next see him, in the middle of the Second World War, he is employed as an architect at the Theresienstadt concentration camp, where, among other things, he builds a crematorium. After the war, Franz flees to Mexico, where in the novel's present – the year 1965 – he runs a Volkswagen dealership. Through the character of Franz, Fuentes alludes to the idea of the Nazi as an ordinary person,⁸ and – by means of the numerous references to German classical music – to the question of how an appreciation of high culture could coexist with Nazi barbarism.⁹ But how does the story of Franz connect with the numerous other stories in *A Change of Skin*? Given the novel's structure, with its multiple parallel narratives, each story must be interpreted in relation to the other threads in the text. In *A Change of Skin*, the Holocaust is not treated in isolation from other cultural and historical phenomena; on the contrary, Fuentes seems intent on situating it in a broader context.

What ties together the different segments of the narrative in *A Change of Skin* is the motif of violence. Fuentes portrays the extreme violence of the Holocaust as part of a general phenomenon appearing in different eras, places, and situations. The opening pages of the novel alternate between the description of the arrival of the four main characters in Cholula on Sunday April 11, 1965, and an account of the massacre perpetrated in Cholula in October 1519 by the Spanish conquistadors and their Tlaxcalan allies. Contemporary Mexico, too, is rife with violence. One character describes Mexico as 'a country with a tiger asleep inside it', and the country's capital as a city 'always on the edge of violence'.¹⁰ But the novel presents violence as a fact of life everywhere, not just Mexico. The novel's narrator – a shadowy figure named Freddy Lambert – spends much of his time reading newspaper reports describing crimes and accidents occurring in different places around the world. The narrator sees violence not only in people's everyday lives; he identifies it as the main thread tying together the principal events of twentieth-century history. In one of his disquisitions about the contemporary condition, he observes the following: 'Look what we have come to. Candy, Lolita, torture, the crematorium, the Moscow trials, Trotsky's assassination, the Bay of Pigs, police dogs let loose against the black citizens of Montgomery' (Ref. 10, p. 310). Historians have frequently debated whether the Holocaust was unique; Fuentes's emphasis in *A Change of Skin* on recurring patterns of violence in human affairs contradicts that sense of uniqueness, making the Holocaust resemble other crimes, whether political or individual. No doubt this helps to explain why the Mexican novelist chose to write about Theresienstadt, which was more of an 'assembly camp' than 'strictly a concentration camp', and therefore a less horrific locale within the Nazi universe than, for example, Auschwitz.¹¹ Although 33,000 people died in Theresienstadt, there were no gas chambers in the camp. In this way, the unspeakable nature of Nazi crimes is not confronted as directly as might have been the case if the Nazi character in the novel had worked in an extermination camp.

Carlos Fuentes has written about the Holocaust in his non-fiction as well as his fiction. In *This I Believe (En esto creo, 2002)*, a collection of essays on a variety of personal, political, and cultural topics, Fuentes includes a series of meditations on twentieth-century history. References to Hitler and the Nazi genocide abound in these sections; indeed, it is clear that Fuentes's reading of the twentieth century is profoundly shaped by the Holocaust. Two broad themes emerge from his reflections on this topic. In the first place, Fuentes equates Nazism with absolute evil. 'Never before has evil emerged in such a horrifying and specific incarnation as that of the Nazi regime', he comments at one point.¹² He goes on to explain what makes Nazi crimes unique: 'Never before in history had evil proclaimed itself as such, so openly and without any kind of aesthetic justification' (Ref. 12, p. 195). Fuentes regularly mentions the Gulag alongside the Holocaust, but argues that Stalin's crimes were different because they were masked behind an emancipatory ideology, whereas Hitler openly embraced evil. The second theme in the Mexican author's reflections on the Holocaust is the idea that the Nazi genocide is linked to certain intellectual and philosophical trends central to modernity. Fuentes believes that the modern world's belief in progress created an opening for Nazi crimes. He relates the faith in progress to a turning away from a previously-held tragic understanding of the world, a turning away which, in a process that is described in a somewhat murky fashion, produces the genocidal behaviour of Hitler and his followers: 'the Western world, by expelling tragedy from its history, allowed crime to take its place. Instead of the inevitable and cheerful progress heralded by the Enlightenment and its successor, the Industrial Revolution, the twentieth century became the century of historical horror' (Ref. 12, p. 94). Similar to Paz in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Fuentes uses the Holocaust to highlight the failures of Western modernity.

A Change of Skin was not the only novel with a Holocaust theme that appeared in Mexico in 1967. In that same year, José Emilio Pacheco published *You Will Die in a Distant Land*, a novel that folds a powerful presentation of the horrors of the Holocaust into a highly self-reflexive narrative. The most striking example of narrative self-consciousness appears in a series of passages in which the narrator explicitly addresses the question of why a Mexican author should choose to write about the Holocaust. Troubled by the sympathy – even veneration – for Adolf Hitler he observes around him in Mexico City, the narrator submits articles about the Holocaust to a number of local publications. The articles are invariably rejected. The narrative lists the 'courteous or cutting replies' he receives to his submissions,¹³ ranging from denials that what he recounts ever took place to claims that the events of the Second World War are either no longer of interest or that they deflect attention from Mexico's own problems. 'Why don't you write about the Mexican Indians?' is one of the comments the narrator receives (Ref. 13, p. 58). The negative responses to his writings about the Holocaust merely redouble his determination to bring attention to the topic. When a different interlocutor questions the narrator's decision to write about the Holocaust with the argument that only someone with first-hand experience of the camps can do so, the narrator responds by acknowledging the point, but insists nevertheless that the magnitude of the events is such that one has an obligation to

return to them again and again. ‘It still wouldn’t be enough, even if we repeated it a billion times’, he states (Ref. 13, p. 87). Elsewhere in the novel, the narrator describes the Holocaust as ‘a calamity that gestated over centuries and whose consequences will prevail until the end of time’ (Ref. 13, p. 106). In this way, Pacheco’s self-reflexive narrative strategy, which on one level comes across as a self-critical and relativizing gesture, ends up providing the author with a platform from which to defend – rather than question – his artistic choices. In the final account, Pacheco insists in *You Will Die* on the need for a universal recognition of Nazi atrocities against the Jews. This does not mean, however, that the novel presents the Holocaust as an isolated event. On the contrary, *You Will Die* includes a lengthy account of the siege and destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 at the hands of the Romans, as if to remind the reader of the centuries-long persecution suffered by the Jews. The narrator notes that atrocities are perpetrated in the present, too: ‘The slaughter continues, germs and poison gases take their effect, bombs flatten hospitals and leper colonies, napalm falls more frequently on civilians (primarily on children) than on the elusive guerrillas hidden in ricefields and underground passageways, bursts of shrapnel pierce the skin of newborns, entire towns burn to the ground’ (Ref. 13, p. 60). The reference here is to the Vietnam War, which appears as part of an ongoing pattern of aggression and destruction: ‘because the hatred and scorn are the same, the ambition does not change, the dream of planetary conquest is unwavering’ (Ref. 13, p. 61). The global perspective that the author insists upon in these passages obviously includes Mexico; at the same time, it makes the Mexican context of the novel less decisive.

References to the Holocaust appear regularly in works by Jewish Mexican authors. Salomón Laiter’s novel *David* (1976) is set in the years immediately following the Second World War. It tells the story of a Jewish boy in Mexico City who suffers a severe injury to his arm, and travels to New York for reconstructive surgery.¹⁴ His experiences are narrated against the backdrop of his family history, which includes numerous relatives who perished in the Nazi concentration camps, as well as a few who survived and reached Mexico after the war. The novel paints a highly critical picture of the United States, depicting it as a nation veering towards fascism with its reckless use of the atomic bomb at the end of the Second World War, and its anti-Communist paranoia in the post-war period. The narratives of Nazi genocide and of political persecution in the United States merge at the end of the novel to create an apocalyptic vision of universal violence. Esther Seligson’s *La morada del tiempo* (*The dwelling of time*, 1981) develops a dense, poetic meditation – in large part based on rewritings of Biblical narratives – tracing the history of the Jewish people and their relationship to God. The Nazi concentration camps are mentioned on several occasions, suggesting the absence of the divinity from the world. As one of the narrative voices puts it, addressing God: ‘When I, your suffering servant, called out to you, you did not answer, and you will not answer when I cry out again from the ovens’.¹⁵ The sense of guilt experienced by Jews who survived the camps, or who were spared that horrific experience, is raised in Margo Glantz’s memoir *Genealogías* (*Genealogies*, 1998). Glantz recalls seeing documentaries when she was growing up in which girls who resembled Glantz were led into a concentration camp and then into a

crematorium. ‘Those images,’ she comments, ‘have left a sense of everyday guilt clinging to my skin’.¹⁶ For these Jewish Mexican writers, the Holocaust is part of their past as Jews and Mexicans; from their perspective, Mexican history comprises the Nazi genocide.

The cosmopolitan tradition in Mexican literature received a new boost in the 1990s with the emergence of the literary movement known as ‘el crack’. The ‘crack’ authors advocated writing that was technically complex, and defended the right of Mexican authors to treat non-Mexican themes. In their search for such themes, two members of the group, Jorge Volpi in *In Search of Klingsor* (*En busca de Klingsor*, 1999) and Ignacio Padilla in *Amphitryon* (2000), were drawn to write about the Second World War and the Holocaust. *Klingsor* centres on the search immediately after the end of the Second World War for the man supposedly in charge of scientific research in Nazi Germany.¹⁷ This research included experiments designed to demonstrate the inferiority of the Jewish race, as well as efforts to develop an atomic bomb. The man running the investigation is a young American physicist named Francis Bacon who has left academia in order to work for the intelligence services of the United States government. In the course of his search for Klingsor, Bacon interviews a number of real-life German scientists, including Werner Heisenberg, Max Planck, and Erwin Schrödinger. These interviews allow Volpi to explore the possible complicity with Nazi crimes of prominent scientists working at the cutting edge of research in physics. Unlike Fuentes or Pacheco, Volpi does not try to describe what happened in the Nazi concentration camps. Still, there are numerous references to the Holocaust in *Klingsor*, and it is clear that Nazi atrocities are the backdrop to the action of the novel. Just as Adorno had wondered whether it was possible to continue writing poetry after Auschwitz, there is a character in Volpi’s novel who questions the very possibility of doing mathematics after Auschwitz. Although the novel presents a range of responses to the question of how the latest scientific discoveries might be related to social and ethical considerations, and to the issue of the scientists’ responsibility to the political realm, one senses a condemnation on Volpi’s part of scientists whose work was driven by vanity, that is, by a desire to gain fame and glory for themselves, regardless of the consequences of their discoveries, or who pretended that their research had no political implications. *Klingsor* makes no reference whatsoever to Mexico; nevertheless, one hears echoes of the longstanding Latin American debate on the writer’s responsibility to society in the novel’s examination of the role of German scientists in the Nazi regime. Paradoxically – given Volpi’s conspicuous rejection of local concerns in his writing – the case of German science and the Holocaust suggests that intellectuals must remain conscious of the social, ethical and political ramifications of their work.

Padilla’s *Amphitryon* focuses on an apparent plot during the Second World War to create a small army of doubles who can stand in for the leaders of the Nazi regime.¹⁸ At first, the idea is to provide protection for the Nazi leadership. However, at a certain point in the novel, the plot, for which *Amphitryon* is the code-word, turns from a Nazi project into an anti-Nazi conspiracy. The man at the centre of this initiative – known successively as Richard Schley, Thadeus Dreyer, and Baron

Woyzec Blok-Cissewsky – begins to think of the substitution of Nazi leaders with doubles as a way of thwarting the regime. Specifically, he hopes that he can prevent the extermination of Europe's Jews at the hands of the Nazis by replacing Adolf Eichmann with one of his own assistants, who will presumably block the implementation of the 'final solution'. However, the plot is uncovered, and its leader flees abroad. This appears to suggest that the conspiracy against the Nazi regime collapses, and that Eichmann and other Nazi leaders can move ahead with the genocide of the Jews. Nevertheless, as the narrative moves forward into the post-war era, we learn that there is a strong possibility that the Eichmann captured in Argentina in 1960 in order to be placed on trial in Israel is not the real Eichmann, but a double. Did the plot to replace Nazi leaders with doubles go forward after all with the original intention of protecting these leaders? The reader never finds out. In fact, nothing surrounding the play of identities in *Amphitryon* is ever resolved, and the novel concludes in an atmosphere of doubt and ambiguity. It is this theme of uncertainty – both in the realm of identity and in our knowledge of the past – that is Padilla's real concern, rather than the Holocaust and the problem of how to represent it. The Nazi period acts more than anything else as a backdrop to the action of the novel. As for the Mexican background of the author of *Amphitryon*, it is not an overt concern in the novel. It seems likely, however, that the enigmas surrounding key events in the Mexico of the 1990s – such as the still unresolved matter of the assassination in 1994 of presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio – helped shape Padilla's reading of the Second World War and its aftermath.

In *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Michael Rothberg argues for a new approach to the question of how the collective memories of different ethnic and/or national groups relate to each other.¹⁹ Instead of a 'competitive' model, in which the memories of various groups jostle for space in the public arena, and the attention paid to one group's suffering impedes the recognition of a different group's victimisation, Rothberg proposes a 'multidirectional' concept of remembrance, whereby the histories of different communities are placed in dialogue with each other, and an understanding of the traumas suffered by one group can help one grasp the injustice endured by others. Rothberg explores his notion of multidirectionality by examining the productive interactions between Holocaust remembrance, on the one hand, and both the memory of colonialism and the struggle for decolonization in the post-war period, on the other. The question I wish to pose is whether this notion of multidirectionality can help us understand how the Mexican authors I have examined in this essay approach the memory of the Holocaust. Let me begin by pointing out that the concept of multidirectionality promotes dialogue between communities, but presumes an initial separation between these communities prior to the initiation of the dialogue. Applied to the Mexican context, you would have the history of the Holocaust, which belongs to the Jewish community, and is part of Western history, on the one hand, and Mexican history, on the other. The multidirectional dimension emerges once you place these different histories in conversation with each other. However, the conclusion to be drawn from my survey of Mexican literary works dealing with the Holocaust is that the differentiation between two distinct historical experiences cannot be consistently

maintained in this particular context. This is most obviously the case for the Jewish Mexican writers, for whom the Holocaust is emphatically not someone else's history. But even the non-Jewish writers I have discussed inhabit the memory of the Holocaust in a way that makes this event an element of their own history, rather than an occurrence viewed from an external perspective. They treat the Holocaust as part of a history in which they too participate, whether one calls it Western history or global history. We have, of course, seen instances in these works of the comparative thinking that Rothberg associates with multidirectionality, in which Mexican history is explicitly placed in counterpoint to the history of the Holocaust. But these instances are relatively rare. Overall, the Mexican context is not nearly as forceful a presence in these works as one might expect. This context registers only implicitly in the novels by Volpi and Padilla. And even in the works by Fuentes and Pacheco it is less visible than one might have anticipated. From the perspective of the cosmopolitan tradition in Mexican literature, the relative weakness of the Mexican presence in these texts is not surprising, since writers belonging to this tradition typically see their work as falling within the broad scope of Western literature. In sum, if most of the texts I have examined in this essay display a low level of multidirectionality, it is not because they offer a competitive model instead, but rather because they see Western history and Mexican history as overlapping rather than separate entities. Overall, they write about the Nazi genocide, not in order to contrast it with the Mexican historical experience, nor in order to place these two series of events in a mutually illuminating relationship. Instead, they write about the Holocaust because they regard it as part of the historical and cultural legacy with which they, as authors belonging to the Western tradition, must come to terms.

References and Notes

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