

The Latin American novel is "one novel," albeit thousands of pages long

Carlos Fuentes on Politics, Language, and Literature

Carlos Fuentes, Mexico's former ambassador to France and famed novelist, short story writer, and essayist, spent the 1979-80 academic year teaching at Princeton. While Fuentes was visiting the University of Notre Dame at the invitation of the Spanish Department, José Anadón had the opportunity to ask him several questions, as did some of the students.

JOSE ANADÓN: Your book *La nueva novela hispanoamericana*, which is judged essential in defining your generation, was written over ten years ago. This so-called "boom" generation—particularly of Latin American novelists—used modern narrative techniques but still adhered to the living social and human realities of Latin America. How would you reevaluate today the contributions of your generation, which brought together such diverse writers as Miguel Angel Asturias, Alejo Carpentier, Julio Cortázar, José Donoso, Gabriel García Márquez, Juan Rulfo, and Mario Vargas Llosa?

CARLOS FUENTES: First, as you have pointed out, it is a rather odd generation, one that includes men like Carpentier, who is seventy-six, and younger ones like García Márquez and myself. It is a generation that is not a generation. In truth there was a profound coincidence at a certain moment in Latin American literature; it represents, I would say, a huge arc that starts with Jorge Luis Borges and has not yet ended. Even though the final consequences are still unseen, the works written roughly from 1950 to 1980 are not without context, nor have they sprung forth spontaneously. I believe, rather, that the literature of Borges, Juan Carlos Onetti, and Carpentier, continued by Juan Carlos Paz and Cortázar (both born in 1914 and both the great transmitters of the modern movement) and even younger writers, organized and gave prominence to an experience that was incubating for a very long time.

Although the term "boom" is common, the boom movement does not exist for me, and it has never existed. It is an invention of booksellers and some authors who thought it convenient. The movement felt a definite urgency to find expression at a certain time in history, to voice many lessons from the past. In novels such as Carpentier's *El siglo de las luces* [available in English as *Explosion in a Cathedral*], García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* [*One Hundred Years of Solitude*], or Donoso's *Coronación*, the intention is clearly to relieve the past and to cut away, so to speak, the dead matter so

that we can proceed with what is alive. In the case of Borges, I believe the purpose is broader: He attempts to create a second history—as he says in one of his short stories—by creating a parallel history that contains all of what Latin America has not yet become; this is suggested through an ideal library and, consequently, an ideal history. We have, then, a commitment on the part of contemporary writers to vitalize all aspects of the past that have not yet been expressed. All of these efforts are imbued with a vast tradition; authors and works, in turn, are establishing bridges for the tradition to continue for those writing in the future.

Which writers of the recent generation attract your greatest interest?

I believe that the Cuban Reinaldo Arenas, who must be around thirty years old, has written two splendid novels. One, *El mundo alucinante* [*Hallucinations* in the U.S. edition], is based on a great figure of the Latin American political picaresque, Friar Servando Teresa de Mier, a priest who lived during the latter part of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries and who participated in the Cádiz Congress, the Liberal Congress of Spain of 1812.* The other is Arenas's *Celestino antes del alba* [*Celestino Before the Sunrise*], one of the most beautiful novels about childhood, adolescence, and life in Cuba, written by a young man who lived there in the 1940s. There is also Gustavo Sainz, a Mexican writer who focuses primarily on the comic side of Mexico City. He shows many of the comic qualities of Anglo-Saxon literature, which he understands well; Sainz, for example, has assimilated Joseph Heller very well. José Agustín talks to "The Wave" generation, as we call it in Mexico, constituted by rock-and-rollers and drug addicts of the 1960s.

But what I see of positive value is that once again the relationship between poetry and the novel is clear and enriching. I believe that an enormous wealth of poetic expression preceded the group of novelists you have mentioned. We were nourished, as any novelist of the so-called "boom" will attest, by the poetry of Pablo Neruda, Gabriela Mistral, Vicente Huidobro, César Vallejo, Javier Villarrutia, López Velarde, Leopoldo Lugones. The task before us has always been to maintain and enrich the Spanish language by recognizing that, in the final analysis, the home and common ground of languages is poetry. In a manner resembling Antaeus,

*See Barry Levine's Excursus in this issue, which deals with Arenas's own picaresque leave-taking from Cuba.—Eds.

who regained his energies after having made contact with the earth, we too must first come into contact with poetry.

What is your impression of university studies in North America?

I think that a fundamental problem with North American education lies in its excessively pragmatic orientation. One of my daughters studied in France, and when she was ten years old she had read Molière, La Fontaine, Corneille, and knew the French language. I am under the impression that in the U.S. insufficient attention is placed on the study of language and literature as the basis for any activity in life. A medical doctor, an engineer, or a lawyer who does not know his language well is going to be a bad doctor, engineer, or lawyer. He will not know how to communicate or think well, because books are also read to learn how to think. A German professor friend once said to me, "We Germans make good soap because Kant wrote *The Critique of Pure Reason*." When literature is considered a marginal endeavor, a diversion for an élite, it becomes a lie.

I feel a type of saturation setting in with respect to what technology and the forms of mass communication can provide for all of us. It has been like being obsessed with a new gadget or a pretty Christmas gift. I believe there comes a time when all human beings need to be alone with a book, with that special type of communication a book alone provides, a time when one realizes that life is not simply a spectacle. The Western world has an absolutely delirious capacity to transform everything into entertainment. This is especially true in the U.S.—"everything is entertainment," even Eva Perón. If it has not already happened, I think the saturation point will eventually be reached.

STUDENTS' QUESTIONS

In much of your work you have criticized an élite class, the colonial class of Mexico, old and corrupt. Does this situation prevail in the present society?

It was not the colonial class, which was destroyed by the Mexican Revolution. It was a new class. You must understand that, the New World has never had any aristocracies. It has always been made up of the new rich. Mexico has been more fortunate than most Latin American countries. In places like Peru until very recently, in Colombia, or in any Central American nation, you have an élite class that has been there since the time of the *conquistadores*, a class which feels it has an absolute right to everything, even a *jus prima noctis*, in theory if not fact—in short, a feudal right to total appropriation. This class is white, does not mix with the Indian population, is proud of its heritage, and has lived there for centuries. In Mexico, however, the turn of events developed differently during the War of Independence. Most of the wars of independence, in such places as Venezuela, Colombia, and Argentina, were instigated by the Creole élite, that is, the Spaniards born on the American continent, who felt they were being dislodged or displaced by the Spaniards born in Spain and sent over to the colonies and who in effect dominated the principal government posts and commerce. In

Mexico there was a popular uprising staged by the Indians, the peasants, and led by a parish priest, Miguel Hidalgo. The revolution was eventually thwarted, however, by the late appearance of the Creoles, who overthrew Iturbide in 1823. This factor has dominated Mexican political life, in the sense that no élitist clique lasts too long; it is promptly overturned by a popular uprising that at least opens up the channels for rising expectations and for the chance to rise from one class to another. You see, in Mexico's modern history many of our presidents have been *mestizos* or Indians like Benito Juárez and Lázaro Cárdenas. White supremacy, the white élite, ceased to exist in Mexico long, long ago.

Although the élite in Mexico changes a great deal, there is nonetheless a group of very powerful impresarios, partisans, and millionaires that has been around for a long time and is almost like a gerontocracy. In spite of this, however, there are dynamics at work in that system, in that it recruits new members, changes them, and displaces old political cliques. It is in constant flux. Our Party of Revolutionary Institutions, the PRI, in fact, offers many more ideological options than your two-party system. This alternation you have in the United States between tweedledee and tweedledum is not really a political choice such as one has in France, Spain, or Italy.

In Mexico we have an almost one-party system, limited now by political reforms and also by the presence of the Communist party, the Mexican Workers party, etc. The PRI, in effect, has several wings within itself constantly battling it out, though unfortunately in a totally secret manner. Only the politicians know about this, if anyone does. People know there is a left wing of the party, a right wing, a center, that these factions battle it out, and that compromise is eventually reached. But there is no popular participation. I think in Mexico we should demand at least a democratization of the electoral process. If we had primaries and precandidates who would discuss public issues and establish priorities, this would be an enormous benefit to the country as a whole.

Could you comment on the Mexican "mask"—whether it is more influential among the élite, whether it is still there, and what forms it takes?

All Mexicans wear masks. The peasant who wants to defend himself from exploitation wears this absolutely immobile, expressionless, and impenetrable bronze mask. At all levels of society it is understood that everything said to you is not true, that you have to interpret it. Something is always hiding, even if it is a shade of the opposite. It is infinitely complicated. My novel *The Death of Artemio Cruz* is full of these political shenanigans. When they decide to murder or to leave one of the political chieftains and go to another, the half-words, looks, and insinuations entail such a baroque complexity that I for one grow weary of it. Cabrera Infante, the Cuban novelist, says that Spaniards invented envy and Latin Americans perfected it, and I would add that Mexicans added hypocrisy to the highest degree. The masks are everywhere, everywhere.

I think that hypocrisy exists, of course, in all societies. Stendhal spoke of the "*désir de paraître*," the wish

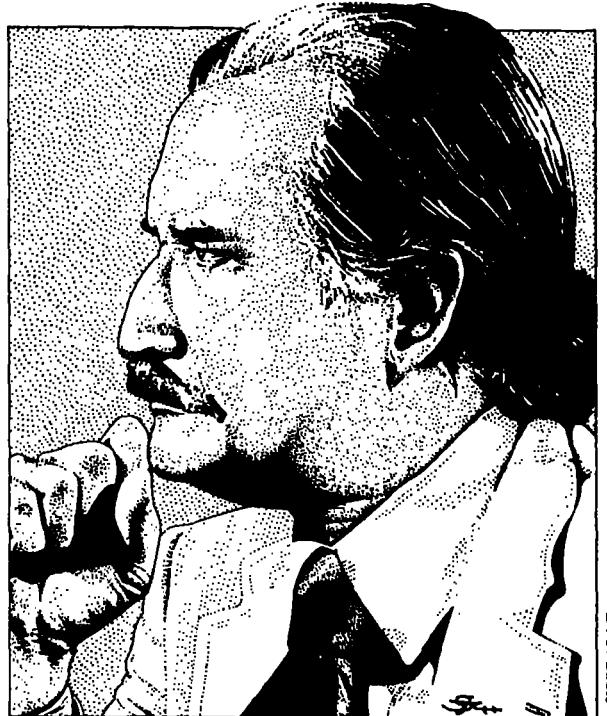
to appear, as a characteristic of Italians. That is why he sets his political novels in Italy. This "*désir de paraître*" assumes various forms: the character of Mosca in *The Charterhouse of Parma*; the paintings of Caravaggio, in which the beggars appear to be something else; the way Palladio built those beautiful classic villas for the Italian bourgeoisie of the classical period of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

I think that the real capital of Latin America is Rome, more than Madrid. We are much more Italian than Spanish. The Spaniards are more brutal and direct. The inflections of the Spanish language in Mexico reflect the Indian influence. The Indians speak like little birds. We speak Spanish in Mexico with a sing-song intonation derived from the Indians. The Spaniards speak loudly and trample hard. León Felipe, a wonderful old man who lived in exile in Mexico, was once asked: "Why do you talk so loud? You know this irritates us in Mexico very much." He replied: "We have a right to do it because we were the first to scream *Land!*" We identify much more with the Vatican, with the courts, with intrigues. This is much more Latin American. It has to do with what we are talking about—the mask, the "*désir de paraître*."

You often deal with political themes in your works. In your drama *Todos los gatos son pardos* the last scene takes place in the present, where the conquistadores, instead of being Spaniards, are North Americans. Do you think that Mexico fears the U.S.?

Of course. Mexico has oil. In his memoirs Kissinger states that the United States helped to overthrow the Allende government in Chile because it was not truly legitimate. It was elected, he said, by a simple plurality, and he convinced Washington that it would eventually prove to be a menace to the best interests of the United States. Assume for a moment that in the presidential elections here in the U.S. the Democratic party becomes totally divided and presents three candidates, Carter, Kennedy, and Brown, and that consequently Ronald Reagan wins the presidency by a 33 per cent majority vote. Then the Russians jump up and say that this situation is inimical to the best interests of the Soviet Union and plan immediately to overthrow Reagan. This is exactly what Kissinger did in Chile. So we ask ourselves: Why can't it be done in Mexico, where the interests at stake are much graver than those in Chile with the Popular Front? Chile had a democratic government up to the day of Salvador Allende's death, the most democratic government in Latin America. Newspapers were published unhindered; the political parties and the parliament were functioning. In the eyes of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, however, that government represented a threat to the United States. I also ask myself: What pretext can be created as an excuse and then proposed to the North American public to justify the seizure of 200 million barrels of Mexican oil? Many incidents can be invented—new *Maines* sunk, Pearl Harbors organized, Alamos created.

It is necessary here to distinguish my criticism of the manner in which U.S. foreign policy is conducted from the admiration I have for this country, its culture, its literature, if for no other reason than because I am a



writer. But we are talking about a concrete political method of exploitation and domination practiced by one of the greatest world powers. The only parallel I find with the destruction of Salvador Allende's government in Chile is the way the Soviet Union annihilated Alexander Dubcek's government in Czechoslovakia.

Which of your works satisfies you most?

None, of course. Satisfaction breeds stagnation. Besides, I think that, unconsciously, I expect imperfect works. It becomes a positive situation because imperfection enlarges the margin of risk to be taken. The element of risk—which for me is fundamental in literature—can only be taken from such a position. Thus, since I write novels that are imperfect and expect them to be that way, I open the door to writing other equally imperfect works, in which I can take newer risks.

Furthermore, I truly believe that I have in fact written only one continuous novel: a bit of Mexican comedy, a bit of Balzac, several chapters that contain different aspects, approximations of a larger theme, as in *La cabeza de la Hidra*, for example. In that novel I felt this was the only proper approach in dealing with the theme of oil and the transformations that as a result are coming about in Mexico. It is, however, very different from my previous novels, but similar to the case of Balzac, who wrote *Le Député d'Arsis*, a novel that deals strictly with French politics and is therefore different from *Louis Lambert*, a metaphysical novel, or *La Peau de chagrin*. Thus my novels are composite murals of many mosaics.

I would go further. García Márquez says that in essence only "one" novel has been written in Latin America, with a "chapter" written by Cortázar in Argentina, one by Carpentier in Cuba, another by Vargas Llosa in Peru, and so on. The works of these various authors thus constitute integral parts of but one vast novel, which must be read as such—one novel, albeit hundreds of thousands of pages long. **WV**