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Henry Cohen

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**CULTURAL DEPENDENCY AND SOCIAL ACTION: KRASNODAR
QUINTANA'S *COMO PIEDRA RODANTE***

Henry Cohen
Kalamazoo College

When, in July 1979, the Sandinista Revolution swept away an outmoded socio-economic order, finally permitting Nicaragua to emerge into the twentieth century, many writers gave vent to a literary expression that had been pent up during the dictatorship. Although this surge was fueled chiefly by experienced authors whose unpublished work had been accumulating, a few younger writers discovered in Somoza's fall an impetus to the beginning of their literary careers. In this latter category is Krasnodar Quintana, whose novel *Como piedra rodante* appeared two years after *el triunfo*. This political *Bildungsroman* centers on the existential crisis of a *petit bourgeois* aesthete who struggles against cultural alienation and social anomie in the final days of the Somoza era. Bruno is initially drawn into an urban guerrilla cell almost accidentally, but he gradually commits himself to the Sandinista struggle after experiencing solidarity and analyzing how his personal development and his people's well-being are stymied by that blend of *caudillismo* and neo-colonialism known as *somocismo*.

While the novel was published by the Sandinista Front's Propaganda and Political Education Department, it is free of the leftist rhetoric, doctrinaire political analysis and Soviet-style social realism that crept into the Cuban and Vietnamese literatures after those countries' revolutions.¹ Rather, its aesthetic lineage is that of the experimental Latin American narrative of the *boom*, with its narrative innovations, its juxtaposition of non-analogous types of discourse, and its stunning mixture of references to a wide range of world culture.

In the present study I will discuss how Quintana's analysis of his hero's political trajectory from the traditional Marxist mold, how Bruno's personal crisis is perceived as, at one and the same time, cultural and political, and how intertextuality is used by the novelist to elucidate our understanding of the protagonist in his historical context.

It is particularly interesting that Quintana's hero belongs neither to the peasantry nor to the proletariat, the classes most commonly identified as revolutionary in Marxist theories. Nor is Bruno's political involvement the end product of a systematic analysis of the class system and his place in it. We are in the presence of an alienated *petit bourgeois* anti-hero whose work and private life have no meaning or satisfaction and hold no potential for personal growth. Most sociological theorizing about the lower middle class, be it Marxist or Weberian in its approach, centers around the development of this sub-class from the disintegration or splintering of the bourgeoisie in advanced capitalist societies, and therefore gives us few clues to understanding a Third-World character like Bruno. To be sure, he is a deskilled white-collar worker who has been proletarianised and who as such is pushed into a potentially more revolutionary position, but he scarcely seems aware of this and certainly does not articulate it. As we see him at the outset of the novel, Bruno recalls C. Wright Mills' classic portrait of the politically indifferent middle-class man:

Men who...assert that they can live without belief in a political world gone meaningless, but in which detached intellectual work is still possible. [...] Indifference frequently co-exists with a minimum sacrifice of time and self to some meaningless work, and for the rest, a private pursuit of activities that find their meanings in the immediate gratification of animal thrill, sensation, and fun. (Mills, 327)

Bruno hates his office job, seeks sex without love, drinks heavily, writes badly and muses endlessly for pleasure, and expects the world to make no sense.

The writer-protagonist's first problem is that he lives so vicariously through art (his own and others') that he himself acts very little. As is the case with one of Woody Allen's film heroes who imagines himself in a series

of Humphrey Bogart roles and constantly drifts between real-life situations and cinematic scenes, Bruno's imagination is triggered by certain personal episodes that remind him so much of American movies that he is uncontrollably drawn off into inauthentic fictional fantasies.

In one particularly clever episode, the dialogue of a U.S. Civil War movie on television is so closely interwoven with a conversation between Bruno and his girlfriend Yolanda that the reader is never sure who is speaking:

No comprendés amor, no comprendés — murmuró en el oído de ella, el gran Gary Cooper, enfundado en su uniforme de mayor del ejército norteno —. Has hecho mal en haber venido sin avisarme. Tenés que regresar; luego habrá tiempo para explicaciones.

— ¿Explicaciones?... ¿Pero qué explicaciones podés darme? La realidad es que anoche te fuiste de parranda nuevamente, y no me mentás porque en la cara se te nota el desvelo, las señales de la degeneración. Y encima no fuiste a trabajar —, terminó Yolanda ya enojada [...]

Gary Cooper vio a Phil Carey que se quedaba de último, con el sombrero en la mano, limpiando con el dorso.

— Y bien, ¿por qué te quedaste?

— Me quedé porque quería hablar con vos antes de irme. Mirá... No me puedo ir sabiendo que te quedás pensando cosas horribles de mí, ¿no?

— Ay, Bruno — dijo Yolanda riendo. (63-64, 67)

The net effect is comic, since the synchronization of such widely divergent situations to which the same snippets of dialogue might equally well apply, and the fact that one is "art" while the other is "reality", provoke laughter. A serious purpose underlies this humor, however: the idea that Bruno's relationship with Yolanda is just as phony as the movie because he devalues her feelings by his petty lies and deceptions. The cultural allusion thus serves to shed light on the alienated protagonist's devaluation of any kind of personal commitment in the novel's first half. Indeed, one of the mechanisms of Bruno's integration into revolutionary activity may be its adventurous, episodic and voyeuristic character. His chief obstacle is that he must learn to take himself seriously, as a historical rather than a literary character.

Another of Bruno's problems is his inability to come to grips with the concrete situation that he and his society are experiencing. The opening scene of the novel reveals his mindset, as he likens himself to a *rolling stone* and expresses his alienation by proclaiming himself linked to the transcendental: *Parte de la creación, soy algo celestial. Consubstancia del creador y de lo creado* (15). His friend Mariana urges him to renounce his *divinity* and accuses him of parasitism. The protagonist, however, is unwilling to even try; he remains aggressively passive: *Yo quisiera pero no*

puedo. [...] Eso es algo que está fuera de mis posibilidades, es algo que me ha sido impuesto (15). With his customary bad faith he claims that his nature is already so fixed that he cannot direct his own life. The protagonist not only evades responsibility, but also ridicules his friend's attempt to act responsibly, deprecating her own committed life in an act of utter bad taste and near disdain.

Aquí está el problema ¿ves? Hay que hacer un análisis profundo del asunto para encontrarle una solución. Tal vez con tu mentalidad de marxista convencida me das una manita porque yo, como el poeta, no sé de dónde vengo ni para dónde voy—, finalizó Bruno riendo. (15-16)

Mariana understands that his passivity is a conscious choice to avoid a responsibility of which he already has a glimmer of understanding. *Eso que has dicho es algo bastante existencial, pero no te creo. Quizá no sepas de dónde venís ni para dónde vas; pero sí sabés para dónde NO vas ¿Verdad?* Even when Bruno commits himself to cooperating in revolutionary action, he mitigates his involvement with a sarcastic reference to a Spanish Civil War film, as if he were a fictional character acting out a role in a historically real situation; he staves off reality with a mediating artistic shield: *En broma, con aire solemne, suspendió la llave sobre la mano extendida de Mariana: Un epígrafe de película que viene al caso: Nunca preguntes por quién doblan las campanas... Dejó caer la llave.* Plop (21). After passing a clandestine message to Mariana in a bar one day, however, Bruno notices a Somocista agent following her. Putting his own life in danger, he rushes to warn her, thus committing himself in an existential choice. His values emerge from how he acts in crisis situations. Just prior to his act of commitment, he has passed through a self-examination process in which he imagines himself to be altogether different from "real" Sandinistas:

Por lo menos ellos creen en eso, están seguros de lo que quieren, hasta morir por eso. Pero vos Brunildo querido, qué Sandinista por capilaridad, por pura amistad. [...] Existía un abismo entre esas mentes decididas y la vacilante de él. (95)

Bruno has not yet understood the mechanism of solidarization by which affinity groups with deep personal ties bind with other such groups to form a network of trust and efficiency. He continues to believe in the fiction of the detached Marxist ideologue who commits himself upon objectively analyzing a political situation. He does not yet know that his vacillating revolutionary impulses — *a ratos [...] verdaderos y otras veces no* — are

typical of the processes by which people gradually commit themselves to group action.

Bruno eventually participates in a bank robbery and transmits other secret messages. After an imaginary conversation about the insignificance of a life of evasion, near the end of the novel the protagonist decides to help the FSLN. His initial expression of adherence is low-key and couched in vague, idealistic language: *He estado pensando...no sé. He vivido deseando una vida mejor, pero sin hacer nada para lograrlo. [...] Necesito ordenar mis pensamientos, orientar mi vida... Estar seguro* (154). His conversion is handled delicately, even tentatively, allowing for the characteristic fluctuations of his thought and for further uncertainties with respect to the pace of his involvement.

Certainly nothing in the above story coincides with a classical Marxist explanation of the raising of political consciousness. There is no rational class-identification, no statement of the illegitimacy of another class's interests, and no articulation of the ideas of furthering of one's class interests through collective political action.

In order to properly analyse the alienation of a Third World *petit bourgeois* aesthete such as Bruno then, it may be useful to examine the relationship between social consciousness and culture from another angle. A disconcerting and at first apparently meaningless interruption in the primary narrative is a fifteen-page quotation from a short story by Bruno that is being read by a young guerrilla who is hiding out in Bruno's rented room. This interpolation, beginning as it does a mere nine pages into the novel, leaves the reader wondering which of the two texts — the frame text or the short story — is the primary one. Even more disquieting is the fact that Bruno's story is a boring, meandering narrative that turns out to be autobiographical, reflecting in its dullness and pointlessness his own existence. The fact that he calls himself a poet is ironic, since a more prosaic life is scarcely imaginable. Every aspect of the writer's experience is mirrored in that of his protagonist: his lack of ambition, his dislike of his boss at the office, his drinking bouts with friends, the monotonous routines, his squalid room, the fact that nearly everything reminds him of American movies, his difficulty in communicating with women because of his chronic lack of commitment, his obsession with his physical health. This device of the *mise en abyme* demonstrates what his life would be if he were not integrating himself — however tentatively — into the revolutionary process, and if he were not able to fantasize and reflect upon art. He would resemble the Mersault of Camus's *L'Etranger*, to whom passing reference is made elsewhere in the novel. Indeed, Bruno's story reads much like Camus's from the very opening sentence, which parallels the first sentence of *L'Etranger*, minus the shocking reference to Mme. Mersault's death: *Ayer terminaron mis vacaciones*. Both Bruno's dreadfully written story and

its French model stand in an intertextual relationship to the primary narrative as lives/texts to be avoided.

As a Frenchman living in Algeria, Mersault personally identifies with the dominant group in a colonial context, which cuts him off from the majority (dominated) culture. In much the same way, but on a cultural level, Bruno admires the civilizations of Western Europe and the United States, which stand in a dominant economic and cultural relation to Nicaragua, rather than appreciating his own national culture. Yet it may be properly said that if Bruno is drawing an analogy between himself and the *piéd noir*, that analogy is a false one, since — unlike Mersault — he is in fact an object rather than an agent of domination. The Nicaraguan protagonist will eventually decide not to be another Mersault, not to participate unconsciously in the continued oppression of his own economically and culturally dependent people. As he writes the text of his own life, Bruno will reject colonial domination in its contemporary form, *somocismo*.

While Franz Fanon's *Les damnés de la terre* addresses the process of decolonization in the sense of ridding the homeland of a foreign occupier, what he says about the evolution of the colonized intellectual is instructive when applied to the case of Bruno, for the latter is such an individual insofar as he is culturally dependent. His life is a derivative collage of pastiches, a patchwork of extracts imitated from European and American films and literature. The novel is intended for a reader sophisticated enough to understand its prolific references to American movies and songs, U.S. and European consumer goods, nineteenth-century French poetry and painting, Parisian geography, Poe, Cortázar, Marx, Spanish poetry, the Bible, and the history of Western science. Personal experience is validated for Bruno only when it matches some swatch cut from the cloth of the dominant culture.

It is when Bruno involves himself in the armed struggle for national liberation that he frees himself from the cultural domination which has made him identify totally with non-Nicaraguan creativity. Up to this point he has been *'intellectuel [qui] se jette frénétiquement dans l'acquisition forcénée de la culture de l'occupant en prenant soin de caractériser péjorativement sa culture nationale...* (Fanon, 166-167). According to Fanon, Bruno's consciousness of his own alienation — however embryonic it may be — is the next logical step in the process of liberation.³ Finally, the choice of revolutionary action over imitative writing must be construed as an authentically nationalistic act:

L'homme de culture colonisé ne doit pas se préoccuper de choisir le niveau de son combat; le secteur où il décide de livrer le combat national, c'est d'abord se battre pour la libération de la nation, matrice maternelle à partir de

laquelle la culture devient possible. Il n'y a pas un combat culturel qui se développerait latéralement au combat populaire. (Fanon, 162-163)

Paradoxically, Bruno becomes a true man of culture in the revolutionary sense only when he begins to lay the basis for the development of a *bona fide* national culture:

C'est d'abord le combat pour l'existence nationale qui débloque la culture, lui ouvre les portes de la création. [...] La nation réunit à l'intention de la culture les différents éléments indispensables et qui seuls peuvent lui conférer crédibilité, validité, dynamisme, créativité. (Fanon, 172-173)

This description of the process of the evolution of the colonized artist from cultural dependency to authentic cultural expression seems adequate to explain the dramatic evolution of the novel's protagonist.

Midway through the novel, a brief chapter on how to make a sheet of plain paper into a drinking cup appears at first to be non-sequitur. Written in the stark, precise style of technical instructions, it is nevertheless emblematic of the conversion of an absurd and inconsequential existence such as Bruno's into a full and useful one. His becoming fully human is figured by the sentence *y por arte de magia digital, una figura prácticamente bidimensional desemboca en una tridimensionalidad* (70). The passage ends with a Biblical reference that might seem ironic because Bruno is unreligious (although not irreverent): *Bebed que éste es mi cáliz* (70).⁴ This recollection of the Last Supper where Christ distributed to his disciples bread and wine symbolic of his body and blood, and where Judas is identified as the traitor *par excellence* of human history, situates Bruno's personal political choice in a serious light indeed. He can either betray the Revolution or transform himself by participating in heroic and redemptive collective action.

Unbecoming a sheet of paper also symbolizes his overcoming his *tabula rasa* passivity. He makes of himself a chalice into which he will pour a genuine existence and from which he will draw true sustenance. The paper also harkens back to his short story by means of negative reference: he will actively write his own life rather than being a blank sheet written upon by the stylus of random historical chance.

Como piedra rodante bodes well for the climate of literary creativity in post-Somoza Nicaragua. Its author has demonstrated in this first novel an extraordinary mastery of narrative technique, has managed to penetrate with perspicacity the psychology of a particular sort of young Nicaraguan intellectual, has related an encouraging story of self-awareness and consciousness-raising while avoiding preachiness, and has used his awareness of literary antecedents for the purpose of elucidating his

protagonist's story. Together with the historical novelist Jorge Arellano (*Timbucos y Calandracas*, 1982), the autobiographer Omar Cabezas (*La montaña es algo más que una inmensa estepa verde*, 1982) and poets such as Rosario Murillo, Pablo Centeno-Gómez, Daisy Zamora and Ciro Molina, Krasnodar Quintana is participating in a literary explosion of serious proportions after many years of cultural dormancy and repression.

NOTES

In his preface to Quintana's novel, revolutionary *comandante* Bayardo Arce enunciated two basic principles of Sandinista cultural policy: the avoidance of "politically correct" bad art and the use of literature as a consciousness raiser: *Habrà que evitar caer en la excesiva politización a costa de sacrificar el arte, tanto como hay que huir del recreo artístico alejado de la realidad político social y económica de la Revolución* (Quintana, 5). This novelist has succeeded in striking a balance between the competing demands of artistic quality and social utility.

2 In [Mill's] view, the objective structural position of the middle class is coming closer to that of the working class in respect of income, propertylessness and levels of skill. In this sense the white-collar worker is becoming proletarianised, and this is reflected in some political ways. (Abercrombie and Urry, 17).

3 *Oui, le premier devoir du poète colonisé est de déterminer clairement le sujet peuple de sa création. On ne peut avancer résoument qui si l'on prend d'abord conscience de son aliénation.* (Fancn, 157)

4 Matthew XXVI:27, Mark:23-24, Luke XXII:20.

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