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THE NEW WORLD AND THE OLD NOVEL*

Michael Wood

People have been talking about the death of the novel ever since it was born, and such talk is perhaps simply a recurring sign of life. Yet there is a perspective in which the novel, now and on half a dozen other occasions in its history, really seems to die, and what we hold in our hands becomes the hefty ghost of one of several yesterdays. Most books in this category are either bad books or mere echoes, but there have also been masterpieces: the novels of Proust and Thomas Mann, for instance, which carefully prolong an old pace into a new time. Carlos Fuentes' *Terra Nostra* is neither a bad book nor an echo nor a masterpiece, but it is so evidently a response to the condition of the novel as a genre that it is hard to know what to make of it. Is it a last taking of the moribund patient's pulse? A large act of defiance of the very notion of decline? An epitaph?

Fuentes has good reasons for believing in the life of the novel, since he is surrounded by writers like Cortázar, García Márquez, Donoso, Vargas Llosa and Sarduy, architects of a glittering age in Latin American fiction. Fuentes' new work places him closest to Donoso, and there has clearly been a beneficial mutual influence between the two men. Donoso has said that his *Obscene Bird of Night* owed a lot to Fuentes, and Fuentes was no doubt heartened by the success of that brilliant and difficult book. What almost all of these Latin American writers have in common is a devotion to fiction as phantasmagoria, to what is perhaps the major discovery of the New Novel in Latin America: fantasy given the dense texture of reality both frees the writer from a narrow naturalism and speaks to an authentic, shared sense of the world as proliferating nightmare.

Yet Fuentes, like Vargas Llosa, remains an Old Novelist in many ways, dedicated to the patient elaboration of a reliable world. It is true that *Terra Nostra* begins in a wonderful hallucination of Paris in the year 1999, the millenium on the doorstep, the Louvre turned to crystal and the Arc de Triomphe turned to sand, executions in Saint-Sulpice and women-in-childbirth sprawled along the boulevards, flagellants parading day after day, and figures from famous novels and plays roaming the city: Jean Valjean up from the sewer, the hero of Balzac's *Peau de Chagrin* clutching his piece of

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skin, Marguerite Gauthier, from *La Dame aux Camélias*, coughing quietly above the panic. But then a young man named Polio Phoibee, after a line in a poem of Pound's, falls into the boiling Seine and is washed back through time to sixteenth-century Spain, where the rest of the novel, apart from trips to Renaissance Venice, Alexandria and a newly-discovered America, and apart from occasional flashes forward into later times, is firmly set. *Terra Nostra* settles down, that is, where it seems as if it ought to be taking off.

Fuentes is not pedantic or timid about historical accuracy—he marries Philip II to Elizabeth Tudor instead of Mary, and converts that somber king's grandparents, Philip the Fair and Juana the Mad, into his parents. He writes well, and he invents brilliant details and juxtapositions. The time-traveling hero discovers in Spain that he is one of three identical brothers, each having twelve toes and twelve fingers and a blood-red cross ingrained in the flesh of his back. He is also the half-brother of Philip II, grimly engaged in the construction of the Escorial, his despairing defense against change and time and heresy. All this is vivid, and elegantly done, and very well translated by Margaret Sayers Peden, as the book is throughout. And there is more.

There is a queen conjuring the devil and turning herself into a bat; a mourning royal wife roaming the highways of Spain with the embalmed corpse of her husband; Cervantes at the battle of Lepanto, and later, about to start work on *Don Quixote*; Don Quixote himself; Don Juan. There are magi, monks, cabalists; bottles thrown into the sea (one of which contains a narrative from Tiberius' Rome, and another Kafka's 'Metamorphosis.' There is a man in Venice who has created what he calls the Theater of Memory, a place where the spectator stands on the stage and sees in the auditorium a shifting set of images which represent everything that might have been but wasn't: Odysseus dead in the wooden horse, a baby girl born in a manger.

But in spite of all this, and in many ways impossible to illustrate in brief (or even in fairly lengthy) quotation, *Terra Nostra* really is an Old Novel. Nightmare or not, Fuentes' Spain is too scrupulously fixed and predictable. If Donoso and García Márquez are like Dostoyevsky, say, writers in a fever, seeking to catch us up in a plausible hysteria, then Fuentes and Vargas Llosa are like the Flaubert of *Salammbô*, naturalists of the dream, so that Fuentes' sixteenth century Spain becomes less fantastic than Fuentes' modern Paris, and the Peru of Vargas Llosa's novels is merely everyday Peru broken up by technique.

This is intentional, of course, an artistic and no doubt a temperamental choice. But it does turn the writer back toward that always dying animal, the novel grounded in the seen world and public experience. All good stories are slow stories, Thomas Mann said, but one of the implicit rules of phantasmagoria seems to be that it must move fast, however long it takes. *Terra Nostra* moves like a pavane. And when phantasmagoria reproduces not the

feel of material reality but only its remorselessly stable appearance, then the liberation proposed by the new novel has been rejected, and we are back sleeping in the nightmare within which, at least, it had seemed possible to be awake. History, that is, can be confronted or evaded, but there is very little to be said for converting an evasion into a prison more confining than the one you've just got out of.

But this, in the end, is Fuentes' point. *Terra Nostra* is about escapes which can only be longed for, about a new world which is merely a grimace of the old, about flights into time which are simply flights into predetermination. Philip of Spain lives on into the twentieth century only to awake in Franco's Valley of the Fallen; a man in a dream kills his brother in Tenochtitlan, the ancient lake-capital of the Aztecs, only to have to kill him again in another time, or another dream, in the modern Mexico City.

Insistently, throughout the book, through speakers in the jungle of Vera Cruz and the ghetto of Toledo, Fuentes insists on the promising properties of the number three, which will save us from the strife represented by the number two. Yesterday, today and tomorrow are more than mere past and present; life, death and memory (for which another name might be fiction) are more than living and dying. The city founded by triplets will be spared the devastations that come upon cities founded by twins. And in anticipation, perhaps, Fuentes has divided his book into three parts: the old world, the new world, the other world. But the book, like reality, keeps sliding back into warring pairs: then and now, old and new, men and women, memory and oblivion. And it is the solidity of these pairs, the purely wishful quality of the liberating trinities, that gives the novel its final flatness, as well as its moving last chapter. It is flat not because Fuentes can't imagine a way out of time and history, and not because history congeals to such thickness in his hands, but because Fuentes, in spite of his own good intentions, really does seem to prefer the tidiness of despair to the disorder of faint hope.

The last chapter is extremely moving because there Pollo Phoibee, who has already turned into Cervantes and now sits in Paris playing cards with characters from the novels of contemporary Latin American writers, finally turns into Fuentes himself and confesses the last sad truth about then and now. This novel's long sojourn in the Spanish past has not led us away from the present but only revealed to us how completely the present may be swamped by memory. If Philip the Fair's four sons dominate the book, it is because Spain, even now, dominates much of Fuentes' moral universe; Spain, as he says, "this land, land of Vespers, Spain, Terra Nostra." And at this point, Fuentes' pavane for the death of the novel seems to have become a Mexican novel of death. Juana the Mad speaks of Spain's legacy as "the image of death as an inexhaustible and consuming luxury," and among Latin Americans perhaps only a Mexican would have enough gloom in his character and culture to be drawn to this inheritance, either in reality or as a

subject for an ambitious book. And only a Mexican, perhaps, would experience the past as such a crippling and irresistible burden, an old world which simply eclipses all new and next worlds.