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**THE *FUENTES* OF FUENTES AND THE AURA OF AURA:
CARLOS FUENTES' UP-DATING OF A CERVANTEAN THEME**

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It is a familiar paradox that the figure we now think of as Cervantes was the gradual invention of all the later novelists, such as Fielding and Sterne, who have collectively taught us how to read him. In his own day, even Cervantes saw *Don Quixote* as something of a sport as compared to *Persiles and Sigismunda* and it was only with the English eighteenth-century reworkings of the Quixotic theme that the modern perception began to be formed. Cervantes is perhaps the most striking example of T. S. Eliot's principle in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' that great authors recreate the tradition out of which they grow. He remade tradition and has in his turn been remade by it.

In this process of creating the past it is creative writers, rather than critics, who have usually led the way. It is therefore appropriate that among Borges' several variations on the theme of Cervantes and tradition, the abortive project of Pierre Menard arises from a deliberate conception undertaken by a scholarly rather than a novelistic temperament. For the significant recreation of an earlier author is usually an implicit process arising from present creative concerns. The function of the critic has usually been to understand and articulate this although since the modern development of full-time professional scholarship the two processes are more in parallel.

I believe that Carlos Fuentes early novella *Aura* is a recent instance of such an unselfconscious recreation of 'Cervantes'. My point, in other words, is not that Fuentes was actively seeking to rehearse Cervantean themes; rather the reverse. He did so because his conscious attention was so firmly focused on his own modern historical and national concerns. Meanwhile it is a modern critic, Elena Percas de Ponseti, who best articulates

the perception of Cervantes which is in question. Her reading makes explicit a thematic pattern which can then be seen as an unconscious substratum of Fuentes' novela.

At first glance it seems unlikely that anything in Carlos Fuentes could be unconscious. He is the most ostentatiously allusive of writers and his sense of the inner or psychic dimension of history leads him to embody it in its successive literary manifestations. Hence his fiction constantly digests previous literature as part of its own historical consciousness and in the case of *Aura* he himself has written on its sources and allusions. It is striking that although critics have followed Fuentes' lead in noting the presence of many authors, including Dickens, Hawthorne, Poe, Henry James and Michelet, in *Aura*, so far as I am aware, no one mentions Cervantes.¹ Nor does Fuentes, in his own essay, include Cervantes among the many authors to whom he refers. Yet Fuentes' deep interest in Cervantes was later to be spelled out in his book length study *Cervantes y la crítica de la lectura* (1976) and it may be indicative that a shorter English version of this book is reprinted in the collection *Myself With Others* immediately following the essay on *Aura*.² The Cervantes study focuses, of course, on the act of reading as does *Aura* through the figure of Felipe, the fictitious reader, to whom this story is addressed. The Cervantes and *Aura* essays in this volume stand, therefore, teasingly adjacent but untouched, like parallels. On being asked directly, Fuentes affirmed that any Cervantean echo in the novella was unconscious on his part but then in the same breath he went on to refer to a school boy exercise in which he wrote an apocryphal chapter of *Don Quixote*.³ This fifteen year old's *tarea* is indeed a precocious piece of work and testifies to the deep, formative level at which he absorbed Cervantes.

It may be that the Cervantean example is so pervasive in modern Latin-American literature as to be on occasion the least visible of its resources. He is often present as a tutelary spirit rather than as a specific allusion. Whether or not the composition of *Aura* involved for Fuentes some deep-lying personal memory of Cervantes, the important point is that the novella reworks a Cervantean theme, with a Cervantean technique, and in doing so is part of a specifically twentieth century perception, or recovery, of Cervantes. In suggesting, therefore, that *Aura* is an unconscious reworking of Cervantes, I am thinking not so much at the level of personal unconsciousness as of an unconscious creativity within the tradition itself. The Cervantean echo is the working out of an implicit logic in the literary and historical theme of the novella.

Aura concerns an act of deception amounting to seduction. Felipe, the young historian, is drawn into an emotional illusion as he falls in love with Aura who turns out to be the conjured youthful self of his aged employer, Consuelo. It has always been recognized that this deception, in so far as it involves the use of an emotionally compelling verisimilitude, also raises

artistic questions; questions about the seductive power of fiction and the ethical or emotional meaning of literary mimesis.

Given Cervantes' classic treatment of these themes it is strange for us not to think of him or for it not to have stirred some subliminal memory in Fuentes. If we don't immediately think of Cervantes in this connection that is partly because the story is so closely focused on its modern theme. The most significant 'influence' may be the one that is most completely absorbed and therefore not visible. But a further reason for the invisibility may be that the 'Cervantes' in question here is one who has himself to be understood through an appropriate lens. A modern reading of Cervantes that parallels the thematics of the novella may be found in Elena Percas de Ponseti's *Cervantes y su concepto del arte*.⁴ Published some fifteen years after *Aura*, this is a persuasive but fresh reading of Cervantes' view of art as thematized within his fiction. In the present context, her account highlights the familiar literary-historical paradox whereby the 'original' historical meaning is recovered by an 'original' modern reading.

The Cervantean episode which best serves to focus this critical paradox and to pose the creative parallel with *Aura* is Master Pedro's puppet show from the second part of *Don Quixote*.⁵ Some years ago, George Haley wrote an illuminating discussion of this episode in which he pointed out, in some detail, how the puppet show is an effective microcosm of the book itself.⁶ When the episode is viewed in this way, Don Quixote's inappropriately literalistic response of attacking the puppets to rescue the princess from her Moorish pursuers becomes a figure for inappropriate responses to Cervantes' own work and to fiction at large. Haley was pointing out in detail what many readers had, no doubt, roughly perceived. But Ponseti assimilates Haley's point in such a way as to invert it.⁷ The puppet show, she demonstrates, is indeed a microcosm of *Don Quixote* but it is a microcosm in reverse. Since the puppet play lacks the artistic spirit and purpose of Cervantes' own fiction, the real joke is that Don Quixote's literalistic response is actually the most appropriate one. His practical vengeance on the puppet actors is an act of practical criticism with a vengeance.

To make her point Ponseti has to read the episode with some closeness but this reflects not a need for special pleading on her part so much as the almost subliminal delicacy with which Cervantes incorporates a complex theme within an apparently knockabout action. For, as is often the way with Cervantes, the full significance of the episode depends on its contextualizing both locally and within the book at large. Cervantes seems to want his meanings to be subtly emergent as if from the inner logic of the material. In view of the characteristic indirection of Cervantes' method, it will be necessary briefly to summarize here the significant context pointed out by Ponseti. Yet this is hardly a digression from the discussion of Fuentes since it will become evident that the elements in this summary are echoed point

for point in *Aura* while at the same time the indirection of Cervantes provides a significant point of contrast with Fuentes.

Ponseti first points out the general significance of the color green in *Don Quixote*. It is, she says, sometimes an emblem of libidinousness but it is constantly used in contexts of deception. On this reading, for example, Don Diego de Miranda, the gentleman in the green coat, becomes someone whose complacent social sanity should be viewed with care. The Duchess who is to be party to so many of the tricks played on Don Quixote, first appears wearing a green riding costume. Dorothea, when she disguises herself as the Princess Micomicon, likewise wears green. In this general context it is significant that Master Pedro, who eventually turns out to be the criminal Ginés de Pasamonte, should be disguised by a green eye patch; the patch itself being an image of his moral myopia.

Ponseti then goes on to show how, in a typically Cervantean way, the incident of the puppet show is significantly embedded within another episode: that of the two towns whose populations have come to blows over braying. In the first part of this framing episode we hear of the two aldermen whose imitations of an ass's bray were so perfect that they failed to discover the real ass they were seeking. The incident has excited the ridicule of neighboring towns and after the puppet show the braying episode continues with Don Quixote's attempt to prevent a general fight between the towns. Unfortunately, Sancho interrupts to demonstrate his own ability to bray whereupon the two sets of townspeople, assuming mockery on Sancho's part, set upon both him and Don Quixote.

The whole braying episode turns on the Cervantean theme of imitation. As an artistic means, imitation has for Cervantes no simple value. For although imitation is an intrinsic aspect of fiction, a too perfect imitation would actually undermine the purpose of fiction which is to communicate understanding. On this view, the theoretically maximal point of imitation, the point at which it would become indistinguishable from reality, is also the degree zero of fictional meaning. It may indeed take great skill to achieve a perfect imitation of anything but that only highlights the pointlessness of the endeavor and exacerbates the underlying confusion of purpose. If a human being, with all the faculties that should imply, takes the trouble to achieve the perfect imitation of an ass, then he is perhaps something of an ass indeed. As Joyce Cary's Gully Jimson remarked of aesthetic purpose more generally, you could learn to fart Annie Laurie through a key-hole but would it be worth it?

Hence the whole episode of the puppet show is embedded within another episode turning on imitation and illusionism in the course of which human beings have placed themselves on a footing with the ass; an animal emblematic of stupidity and brute phallicism. And then, even before the puppet show starts, Master Pedro gives a further edge to this combined

theme and reinforces the link between the two narrative threads. He has a supposedly talking ape which reverses the motif of the braying alderman. The ape is an animal known for its vacuous imitation, or unwitting parody, of the human. On arriving in each new town, Master Pedro gleans local gossip which he then uses to pretend that the chattering ape is telling him personal details about members of the audience. That is why he refuses to let the ape actually foretell the future although it is significant that the audience, and the narrative itself signaled in the chapter heading, persistently think of the ape as prophesying. At this point, the illusion theme takes on a more serious Cervantean dimension. If the ape were indeed prophesying the future, it would be intruding on a divine prerogative. It would be transcending the limitations of human time and knowledge. Imitation, that is to say, may be more than merely asinine, it may be blasphemous or demonic. The maximal point of imitation is not only the degree zero of fictional meaning, it may be in blasphemous competition with divine creation. Cervantes seems to enforce this thematic implication despite, and indeed through, Master Pedro's practical caution in avoiding prophesy.

This double context of the braying aldermen and the talking ape governs the meaning of the puppet show. For the puppets are reduced models of the real which lack an artistic purpose. The point is enforced in the running narration of the boy assistant who encourages the audience, including Don Quixote, to respond to the puppets as if they were real. This is in contrast to Cervantes' own narrative intermediary, Cide Hamete Benengeli, whose function is to make the narrative more self-conscious rather than naive. Of course, only Don Quixote would mistake the puppet show for reality and Cervantes' emphasis has slightly shifted here. The target is not now a perfect imitation, as with the asses, so much as a witless imitation. It is the lack of artistic purpose which is now in question and which leaves a vacuum of meaning for Don Quixote to enter. In Cervantes' view, as outlined by Ponseti and following Martín de Riquer, true artistry is a modest but authentic echo of divine creation because it affirms meaning rather than merely reproducing appearances. Illusionism, by contrast, is an absence of such meaning while blasphemously competing with, or confusing, reality. Cervantes points up this theological implication by means of the candles which are used to light the puppet show but which thereby bring out the secondary implications of the word 'retablo' as meaning 'altar' as well as 'theatre'. So too the remains of the puppets are referred to 'reliquias', or relics.

All these Cervantean features of false art understood as a seductive and demonic verisimilitude reappear in *Aura*. But among the several differences in Fuentes' handling of the theme, the most striking is his placing it in much bolder relief. Ponseti, after all, has had to work hard at belatedly digging out these implications. It is as if Fuentes had met this difficulty in advance by

highlighting the theme more strongly in his narrative.

So for example, Master Pedro's green eye patch would mean nothing within the Cervantean episode if taken in isolation. In Fuentes, by contrast, the color green is heavily underlined throughout. Consuelo's green eyes, replicated in Aura's, were the cause of the original 'perdition' of general Llorente in whose path Felipe is unwittingly following.⁸ The same color is echoed in the eyes of the cats, Aura's clothes, the curtains and even in the leather of the writing desk in Felipe's room; the latter detail, of course, serving to link this sinister color to the act of writing. So too Consuelo's witchcraft involves a more evidently sinister reduction to the animalistic than was figured in the comic use of the ass and the ape. Apart from her witchlike association with cats, Consuelo is herself twice seen as moving on all fours or, as the Spanish phrase has it, 'a gatas' (*Aura* pp. 32, 40). Even the puppets, as a mechanical rather than animal reduction of the human, have a more extreme equivalent in Consuelo's ancient doll. Aura herself turns out to be a superior kind of doll just as Consuelo has effectively shrunk into being one. At one point when Felipe takes hold of Consuelo this is ambiguously expressed as his holding 'la muñeca de la mujer' (*Aura* p. 45). He holds literally 'the woman's wrist' and, more suggestively, 'this doll of a woman'.

Fuentes' story, then, is conceived throughout in a bolder thematic relief than Cervantes' episode, and this points to three significant aspects in which the theme has had to be updated: the use of gothic rather than theological allusions; the changed relation of fiction and history; and the different modes of mimesis by which the theme is figured within the narrative. I will discuss each of these aspects in turn.

In a post religious age Fuentes cannot draw on a background of shared theological terms, and he therefore exploits the sensationalistic demonism of the gothic to invest Consuelo's illusionistic 'creation' of Aura with an equivalent significance. The myriad candles in Consuelo's room are, like those of the puppet show, suggestive of religious observance but in the first instance they are simply blinding; they rob Felipe of moral and spiritual vision. It would seem that Fuentes has had to play up the melodramatic element of black magic to compensate for the lack of a shared theological, and aesthetic, inheritance. But a further difference figured in Fuentes' use of the gothic is a shift from Cervantes' broadly aesthetic and philosophical purview to an intensive study of unconscious emotional structures. The gothic is pre-eminently a psychic, rather than a metaphysical, symbolism. Cervantes' pervasive humor constantly suggests that behind the obsessions of his characters there is commonly an intellectual error which is always, for that very reason, capable of correction. Don Quixote's madness is not only curable in the event, it is intellectually comprehensible throughout. By contrast, the way Felipe, and through him the reader, is drawn into the trap of the book figures a condition which may be comprehended in the abstract

but is emotionally overwhelming and inescapable for the participants. These characters are emotionally seduced irrespective of their intellectual understanding.

Just as Fuentes' use of the gothic updates and modifies Cervantes' theme, so his urgent and specific sense of Mexican history requires a similar modification of Cervantes' pervasive play on the relations of history and fiction. The possibilities, and responsibilities, of both fiction and history have changed since Cervantes' day. As Borges suggests in his story 'Pierre Menard: autor del *Quijote*', Cervantes' conception of historical truth now reads as merely a rhetorical extravagance:

... truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counsellor.

The phases are as incredible as the conception of history which they reflect: 'History, the mother of truth: the idea is astounding.'⁹ Borges is himself exaggerating, of course, but even so he is right that for Cervantes, as for Shakespeare, historical and fictional 'truth' were still deeply and properly allied in having a common purpose of wisdom. Indeed, this was why Cervantes was seeking to distinguish the positive claims of fiction. Hence his Moorish historian, Cide Hamete, despite the way in which his reliability is constantly impugned as with the joke about Moors being liars, proves in the event to be a wise and effective source for a fiction whose status as history is ultimately unimportant. Fuentes' young historian, of course, is at the other extreme. He is on the receiving end of the narrative, its addressee rather than its author, and he proves to be the unwitting dupe of both fiction and history.

In Fuentes' world, where the purposes of history and fiction have become more distinct, a greater burden falls on their respective truth values; and there is a correspondingly greater need to avoid confusion between the two orders of truth. Whereas Don Quixote was temporarily lost in a renaissance maze, his modern equivalent seems to be trapped for ever in a Latin American labyrinth. Fuentes' historian uses the thread of historical records, general Llorente's memoirs, to follow a labyrinthine trail at the end of which he discovers the lurking beast to be the historian himself now exposed as merely a conjured fiction. History, we may reflect, can save us from our fictions, but history itself repeatedly proves to be a mirror reflecting our own fictional faces. And indeed the clinching moment of discovery for Felipe comes when he sees his own face along with Aura's in the ancient photograph of general Llorente and Consuelo.

This leads to the third aspect of Fuentes' updating of Cervantes. For photographs are not only an invaluable historical evidence, they also raise the illusionism theme to a new power. The camera image, which was not

available to Cervantes, has an important significance for both modern history and modern narrative. For the historian it may provide an invaluable resource by freezing and preserving an instant in time. But for the creator of fiction, particularly if fiction is understood in Cervantean terms, it raises artistic problems which are at least as great as the new opportunities it provides. It can mechanically create an image with complete verisimilitude but without necessarily exercising artistic skill or purpose. And in comparison with painting or statuary, the photographic image is peculiarly lacking in density of being within its own medium. These qualities are figured in Aura herself. She has the vivid insubstantiality of a filmed image or even, as one might now have to say, of a hologram.

In calling her 'Aura', Fuentes has immediately stressed her insubstantiality, her being conjured out of thin air, but the Italianate form of her name also links her more specifically to the photograph theme. At one point, Felipe is made to seek Aura's bedroom: 'Empujas la puerta y entras a esa recámara, también oscura, de paredes enjalbegadas...' (*Aura* p. 37). By not quite allowing the key words to come together here as a complete phrase, Fuentes embeds the expression 'cámara oscura' in a sentence that simultaneously dissolves it back to its original sense of a dark room. Darkness and the bed, or demonism and sexuality, are the indeed the elements from which the figure of Aura is conjured. But Aura's emotional meaning, whether we take her as the psychic projection of Consuelo or as the desired object for Felipe, is given a peculiarly modern inflection through the photographic image.

Walter Benjamin has memorably discussed the nature of photographic and filmic images from a similar point of view. In his essay 'On the Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' he speaks of what he calls the 'aura' of any authentically unique product.¹⁰ Because it is made by an individual, such an object retains some of the value properly accorded to individual beings. But where that legitimate aura of individuality is missing it will often be replaced by a false aura. And the false aura, precisely because it is no longer anchored in a concretely individual reality, is susceptible of an almost indefinite inflation. In the world of commercial mass production, in which price value varies not with the actual cost of the object but with its desirability, the aura can take the form of consumer fetishism. There is no 'natural' limit to the value of a designer label.

And the same principle applies, Benjamin argues, to human individuals when placed in a comparable context. He points out that the different modes of production of theatre and film give their respective actors a correspondingly different mode of presence. In theatre, the actors have to produce the performance continuously from their literal social presence whereas film performance is assembled retrospectively and the actors are no longer present when the film is actually received by the audience. This is why, he

suggests, even apart from all the other social and commercial factors, film has lent itself so overwhelmingly to the inflationary mystique of the film star 'personality'. Whether or not one accepts Benjamin's account in its entirety, his analysis of fake aura seems highly germane to the conjured figure of Aura. Aura is the compelling aura of Consuelo's youthful photograph.

At this point it is worth stressing that Fuentes uses a photograph rather than a film. A moving film is highly organized and creates its own dramatic time. A snapshot, on the other hand, is relatively passive and stands in unmediated contrast to historical time. Intrinsic to the aura of the still photograph is the pathos of mortality. This is crucial to Fuentes' story. I have so far emphasized the diagnostic aspect, the critique of Consuelo and by implication of Felipe who allows himself to be seduced. But as Fuentes makes clear in his own essay on the novella, the creative germ lay in the pathos of time and this emphasis retains its proper, if qualified, weight in the impact of the finished work.

It is part of the usefulness of Benjamin's essay to supply a principled recognition of Consuelo's attitude to time and mortality. By the same token, having recourse to his subtle and maverick intellect reflects the pervasive and deeply rooted nature of the emotional mystification which Consuelo symbolizes. For although she is in herself an extreme and fantastic instance, this is partly because what she symbolizes is otherwise so normalized, so unaware of itself as any sort of radical error, that an extreme image, a gothic excess, is needed to expose it. And this sense of a common predicament is surely the important underlying note of the tale.

At an immediate dramatic level, the inescapable link between Aura and Consuelo prevents the combined figure being too simply distanced by the reader as evil. Aura herself always feels innocent to the reader and thereby represents a certain innocence in Consuelo. The gothic, as an essentially secular body of psychological symbolism, embodies here a pathetic condition rather than an evil one. In this way, the evil power of Consuelo is in constant tension with the pathos of her mortality. Of course, as her witch-like nature is progressively revealed, we are made to participate in the seduction of Felipe and we are thereby made to feel Consuelo's sinister power. But precisely within this seductive process we can also see, with Felipe, how her desire to assume the powers of a witch has arisen from, and remains limited to, a quite familiar pathos.

Consuelo's inability to accept time, and her consequent making of herself into a permanently youthful, doll-like substitute for the actual experience of life in time, is strongly reminiscent of those familiar doll-like images of face-lifted former film stars, most commonly encountered in photographs or on screens, whose features deny the possession of mature experience yet without recovering more than an empty simulacrum of youth.

At a more allegorical level, of course, Fuentes wishes to suggest some comparable fixation within the Mexican national psyche, its inability fully to enter modern history. And on the literary historical plane it has always been recognized that Fuentes' tale is an allegory about the nature of fiction and that it is one of the inaugural texts for a whole phase of Latin American fiction which departs quite self-consciously from realist conventions. Like several later works of 'magical realism', *Aura* warns against magic as well as against a too literalistic realism. But these broader meanings rest on the way the novella embodies a common contemporary mode of emotional mystification for which the gothic form and the photographic image provide ingeniously appropriate, popular and up-to-date emblems. If we can also see the ghostly lineaments of a Cervantine episode behind the story, this helps to throw both its modernity and its meaning into sharper relief.

NOTES

- 1 See Ana María Alban de Viqueira, 'Estudio sobre las fuentes de *Aura*, de Carlos Fuentes,' *Comunidad* (II, 8, Agosto, 1967) pp. 396-402. Susan F. Levine and Stuart Levine, 'Poe and Fuentes: The Reader's Prerogatives', *Comparative Literature* XXXVI, 1984, 34-53. Celso de Oliviera, 'Carlos Fuentes and Henry James: The Sense of the Past', *Arizona Quarterly* XXXVI, 1981, 237-44. Gerald Peterson, 'Two Literary Parallels: "La Cena" by Alfonso Reyes and *Aura* by Carlos Fuentes', *Romance Notes* XII, 1970, 41-44. Lois Parkinson Zamora, 'A Garden Enclosed: Fuentes' *Aura*, Hawthorne's and Paz's "Rappacini's Daughter", and Uyeda's *Ugetsu Monogatari*', *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* XV, 1984, 321-34.
- 2 London, Andre Deutsch, 1988.
- 3 Personal conversation with Carlos Fuentes at the University of Warwick, June 1992. A copy of the exercise to which Fuentes referred was graciously supplied by Julio Ortega in advance of publication in his forthcoming collection.
- 4 *Cervantes y su concepto del arte* (Madrid, Gredos, 1975).
- 5 *Don Quijote Part II* Chapters 25-27.
- 6 'The Narrator in *Don Quijote*: Maese Pedro's Puppet Show', *MLN*, LXXX, 1965, 145-65.
- 7 Ponseti, pp. 585-602.
- 8 *Aura*, ed. Peter Standish (University of Durham Press, 1986) p. 38. Subsequent references are to this edition.
- 9 *Ficciones* (Madrid, Alianza Editorial 1971) p. 57.
- 10 *Illuminations*, trans. Hannah Arendt (London, Fontana, 1973) pp. 219-253.