

New Mexico Quarterly

Volume 36 | Issue 1

Article 3

1966

Carlos Fuentes: Mexico's Metropolitan Eye

Luis Harss

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

Recommended Citation

Harss, Luis. "Carlos Fuentes: Mexico's Metropolitan Eye." *New Mexico Quarterly* 36, 1 (1966). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol36/iss1/3>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New Mexico Quarterly* by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

Carlos Fuentes
Mexico's Metropolitan Eye

BY LUIS HARSS

IN the past decade or so, the ravages and benefits of metropolitanism and its by-products have given a new look to Mexican literature, one of whose foremost representatives today, in the field of the novel, is Carlos Fuentes.

Modern Mexican literature, as most things in Mexico today, starts with the 1910 Revolution, an explosive force whose liberating influence was felt at every level of the country's life and culture. It was 1910 when a group of young enthusiasts under the leadership of José Vasconcelos, disgusted by Mexico's educational vacuum—the National University, though just reopened by Justo Serra after years of oblivion, was practically inoperative—got together to found the free-wheeling Ateneo de la Juventud (Atheneum of Youth). A few decades earlier, the apathetic Emperor Maximilian had been shot by Benito Juárez (1806-72), whose subsequent land-reform program was meant to disenfranchise the clergy and the colonial gentry under whose economic stranglehold the country had been stagnating since the days of the Spanish Conquest. But the confiscated properties Juárez put on public auction simply changed hands. Under his ironhanded successor, Porfirio Díaz, a new privileged class, the "Porfirian aristocracy," mercenary and positivistic, came into power. Its standards were commercial, its fashions European. It ruled through favoritism, monopoly and centralization. The Revolution, essentially middle-class in impulse, in spite of its anarchic peasant heroes, was the birth of national awareness, "a sudden immersion," says a shrewd commentator, Octavio Paz, "of Mexico in its true self." In the chaos that followed, there was no guiding light for the founders of the new state. They worked in the dark, heirs to distinct echoes of European liberalism blown in on the winds of change sweeping the country, but—

Copyright © 1966 by Luis Harss.

the Russian Revolution was still a thing of the future—without any direct ideological influence from abroad. Mexico had to be built on its own base. For the moment, it seemed to have been spontaneously generated. It had simply burst into existence—“dared to be,” as Paz says. A self-made country sprung into full bloom from unknown sources, it was forced to improvise as it went, choosing outlooks and philosophies at random. A natural first step was for it to turn in on itself in order to tap its own undiscovered resources. Fossilized under feudal structures, waiting to be revived, was a rich Indian past. Overnight, discarding its mask of Europeanism, Mexico became militantly “Mexicanista.” There was that inherited sense, so often described by another intelligent observer, Alfonso Reyes (1889-1959), that the American continent as a whole, and Mexico in particular, had not only been discovered, but invented. It had started as a European Utopia. Its essence or reality, as Paz says, echoing the theme, had consisted in being always a future plan, a projection. What defined it was not its first but its final cause. Its being was to become. And now, with the Revolution as catalyst, when the dust settled on the battlefields, there was a moment of almost premeditated creation that gave birth to national consciousness.

It was the age of Modernism—the Rubén Darío era. Mexico had produced its share of fine nineteenth-century poetry; the quiet sentiment and sensibility of Amado Nervo (1870-1919), the implacable Parnassianism of Gutiérrez Nájera (1857-95). But new manners were inspiring new melodies. Curiously, Modernism, though decidedly precious in tendency—its practitioners were aesthetes who borrowed from Spanish Baroque and French Symbolism—contributed indirectly, on the one hand, to the internationalization of art in America; on the other, to the discovery of local tradition. Toward 1905, the multiple Nicaraguan, Rubén Darío (1867-1916), had suddenly turned to celebrating Indian lore, in a somewhat mannered vein to be sure, mostly for purposes of myth and color. But, at the same time, his work was a proud assertion of Latin cultural values against the encroaching ways of the “Colossus of the North.” Years in Europe had opened his eyes to realities at home. To see evidence from afar was a typical process in our culture. The first Latin Americans to become aware of their cultural identity, as has often been pointed out, were those living in exile. In Paz’s words: “To come home, first you must take the risk of leaving. Only the prodigal son returns.” The facts speak for themselves. For generations, our shortest way home was around the world.

Sometimes the voyage was spiritual. One of Mexico's top revolutionary poets was López Velarde (1888-1921), whose somewhat strident lyricism—a Modernist tic—did not obscure a message that was a clarion call to nationality.

The call was soon taken up on all sides. The members of the Ateneo de la Juventud were the first to broadcast it far and wide. It was sometimes misinterpreted. Contemporary with the Revolution was Mexico's "generation of 1915," which included such prime movers as the Colonialistas, who looked back with misguided devotion on the relics of Mexico's colonial past. They were followed by the Contemporáneos and the Estridentistas, who experimented in various ways with combinations of modern form and revolutionary content. Meantime, in 1921 a period of enlightened educational reform was begun when Vasconcelos was named rector of the National University. Under his guidance, poets and academicians—Torres Bodet, Carlos Pellicer—joined hands in exploring the depths of the Mexican soul. They bore witness to confusion. Often they drew a desolate picture of spiritual displacement. Among them, in the Twenties and Thirties, were the "poets of solitude": José Gorostiza, Xavier Villaurrutia—both born around 1900—and, a bit later, Alí Chamucero and Octavio Paz.

Meantime, there had been a crop of "revolutionary" novelists: Mariano Azuela, author of dour documentaries—*Los de Abajo* (*The Underdogs*, 1928)—and Martín Luis Guzmán, whose huge canvases—placed under the sign of the eagle and the serpent, Mexico's emblems, and culminating with a biography of Guzmán's friend and comrade-in-arms, Pancho Villa—chronicled the whole revolutionary saga in a vein halfway between fiction and reportage. Both Azuela and Guzmán were Maderistas, partisans of Mexico's first revolutionary president, Madero, who was soon disposed of by assassination, and their work, much of it written in the heat of battle, reflects their disenchantment with the course of events after the fall of their leader. But they were too close to events to have any real perspective on them. Perhaps the first sign of a broader view were the novels of Agustín Yáñez, often made of childhood reminiscences that evoke the depressing landscapes of Yáñez's native province, Jalisco. Yáñez, a mythologist, pioneers ambitiously, if not too successfully, in the use of modern literary techniques borrowed from such models as Huxley's *Point Counterpoint* and Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer*. More incisive,

and less Platonic, has been the literature of social protest, characteristically Marxist in outlook, as in the bleak works of José Revueltas—*El Luto Humano* (*Human Mourning*)—a fine psychologist who in the Forties and Fifties moved his settings to the city, thus helping lay the groundwork for the urban novel.

At mid-century, its past and future in uncertain suspense, Mexico was still a country in search of a definition. With the Revolution fading into the background, the early Fifties were a moment of reappraisal. "The history of Mexico," Paz was writing at about this time, "is that of the man in search of his affiliation, his origin." Easy labels—Europeanism, nationalism—had become handicaps. The Mexican had begun to outgrow them. He was a hybrid product, but even that notion now seemed unsatisfactory. The tendency, says Paz, was for the Mexican to assert himself as a separate and distinct entity, descended neither from the Indians nor the Spaniards, autonomous, self-contained, "a child of the void." The return to the sources and the concomitant mestizo mystique that had nourished the postrevolutionary years, had ended in a sense of spiritual orphanage. Wrote Paz, summing up: "The Revolution has not been able to articulate its explosive saving force in a vision of the world, nor has the Mexican mind resolved the conflict between the insufficiency of our own tradition and our imperative need for universality." Therefore a central concern of Mexican thought at this time was to distill the "essence" of Mexicanism. Suddenly everyone seemed to be devoted to ontological investigation and cultural psychoanalysis. The theme soon became obsessive, and occasionally reached fatuous proportions, as in the work of Uranga—*Análisis del Ser del Mexicano* (*Analysis of Mexican Being*)—who declares flatly that a philosophy that does not take Mexicanism as its cardinal theme is un-Mexican, and doomed to fade as fast as a hothouse flower. Paz, a poet, is wiser. He constantly evokes the Mexican's feeling of solitude and isolation. But in that "labyrinth of solitude" he finds a form of communion. For him, Mexicanism is not a saturation campaign, but a sense of shared responsibilities. That seems to be the attitude with which Mexico has entered the Sixties. Perhaps today at last, relatively safe in his continuity, the Mexican can feel, as Alfonso Reyes foresaw he would long ago, that he is joined to his people not only by inherited genetic traits or collective interests, but the deeper community of spirit that comes from daily contact with common problems and experiences. His true identity, he has be-

gun to discover, is in his individuality. Which is another way of saying that to be a twentieth-century Mexican is to be a contemporary of all men.

NO ONE COULD BE BETTER FITTED for this role, by background, temperament and upbringing, than Carlos Fuentes, a handsome young man-about-town who is one of the most worldly names in our literature. He was born in Mexico City in 1929, but spent most of his childhood and early youth on the move between various American capitals—Santiago de Chile, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Quito, Washington—to which duty was assigned his father, a roving career diplomat with more than thirty years in the service, who is currently Mexican ambassador in Rome. Mounting the paternal family tree we find globe-trotting Germans and Canarians. There was a great-grandfather from Darmstadt, a Lasallian Socialist who exiled himself under the Bismarck regime and landed in Mexico to plant coffee in Veracruz. That was around 1875. His son became a banker and was later displaced from Veracruz by the Revolution and ended up in Mexico City. On the maternal side, Fuentes recalls a grandfather who was a merchant in the Pacific port of Mazatlán. His wife was a school inspector. “Typical petit bourgeois stock,” Fuentes says cheerfully of his pedigree.

No doubt he has had to live it down. But at the same time he has enjoyed its advantages. He received a polished education in some of the best schools of the continent, including Chile's thoroughbred Grange. He is multilingual. He learned English when he was four, in Washington. French, a less fluent language for him, he picked up in 1950 reading Balzac's *Peau de Chagrin* with a dictionary on a boat trip to Europe. He was on his way to study international law in Geneva. By then, like his father, he was in the diplomatic service. The year he spent in Geneva, he was a member of the Mexican delegation to the International Labor Office, as well as cultural attaché to the Embassy. Back in Mexico, he held several bureaucratic posts at the University, was eventually named head of the Foreign Affairs Ministry's Department of Cultural Relations. By the time he was out of law school in 1955, he was already launched on his literary career. He was a founder of the prestigious *Revista Mexicana de Literatura* (Mexican Review of Literature). Its editorial principles reflected his conviction that art was passion and discipline, and that “a culture can be profitably national only when it is generously universal.”

In a continent where literary activity closely reflects economic conditions, a sign of modern Mexico's enterprising spirit is the fact that Fuentes, for several years now a successful young executive in the world of letters, lives entirely from his writing. He commands a wide range, from fiction to essays, articles—some written directly in English, for such magazines as *Monthly Review* and *Holiday*—and movie scripts. A good part of his income comes from his movie work. He has collaborated with Abby Mann on a film version of *The Children of Sánchez*, and worked with Luis Buñuel on a cinematic adaptation of Carpentier's novelette, *El Acoso*. Recently, with a group of restless young artists, among them the versatile illustrator, José Luis Cuevas, he has been active in experimental cinema, a new movement in Mexico, backed by a team of imaginative technicians in rebellion against the notorious commercial tyranny of the monopolistic Producers' Syndicate. He has contributed scripts, a couple of them derived from his own stories. They have helped spread his reputation, both at home and abroad. He is one of the most widely read of our serious novelists. He has been translated into thirteen languages. Financial independence has helped him maintain his freedom of movement. Like almost all men of conscience in Latin America, he is left in politics—a friend of Mailer, a great admirer of C. Wright Mills, the “true voice of the U.S.”; affiliations that have cost him more than one visa to the U.S.—but as a freethinker, not a hatchet man or salesman for any particular faith. He is equally unselfconscious about his nationality. He takes a civilized view of his constant hedgehopping trips to near and far places. If his travels eventually all take him back to Mexico, it is, he says with a charming smile that must scandalize some of his flag-waving countrymen, because he finds peace to work there. “After all, it's cheap, the climate is good, and there's privacy. It's easy to isolate yourself in Mexico.”

Being as much in demand as he is, he has to. The solution has been a large, rambling house “straight out of an Emily Brontë novel” in a shady residential suburb, San Ángel Inn, where lovers of colonial architecture have set themselves up among iron grills, tiled patios, wooden beams and other discards rescued from surrounding demolition sites. A pleasantly solid, if basically makeshift, style distinguishes the area, which combines modern convenience with a sort of patrician grace. There are winding streets leading to dead ends and fragrant gardens with swimming pools and playgrounds. Cabs, the only reliable means of local transportation, invariably lose their way coming off the

freeway from downtown. Indian laborers and their families squat over their open fires at lunchtime, with their backs to the street, where affluence thunders by in flashy sports cars.

The Fuentes home is up a quiet blind alley. He receives us at the cool carriage entrance, in an open blue shirt, jaunty white slacks and tennis shoes. He has a smooth charm and quick wit that immediately set one at ease. He is also disarmingly candid about himself. He speaks of his work, his achievements and interests in an offhand way that would seem almost glib if it were not so completely straightforward and sincere. He has a sportsman's bounce and vitality that reflect his youthful and dynamic outlook on life. But perhaps the most striking thing about him is his urbanity. It comes naturally to him. With his glamorous wife, the actress Rita Macero, a celebrated beauty, he is often in the limelight. There could be no kinder host. "Ask me anything you want. I'm a talking machine," he tells us with a wave of his arm, as he leads us through an ample courtyard from where we catch a glimpse of a big garden with swings and flowerbeds, into a shadowy sitting room with heavy sofas and high ceilings. We follow him up the stairs into another tall room featuring a huge fireplace surrounded by stratospheric bookshelves. Patches of wall between the woodwork are studded with Picasso prints and abstract paintings. Plump cushioned settees, statuettes on stands and tortured scrap iron figurines complete the sprawling décor. There is a work desk in a windowed nook in a corner, its wide surface piled high with papers, and a flat coffee table in the middle of the room, in front of the fireplace, where there are stacks of up-to-date magazines and recent books by American authors, notably Mailer and Flannery O'Connor. Chatting, we settle to a sociable drink. Fuentes, in an outgoing mood, sits on the floor, his legs spread out, then gathered under him, chain-smoking.

He describes himself as a hypochondriac at work. "I write with the nerves of my stomach, and pay for it with a duodenal ulcer and a chronic colic." A manner of speaking it might be, but for the anointed, who pull more than their weight, the road to Paradise leads through Hell. "Because I intuit that, I write novels," he told an audience not long ago, in a conference à la Mailer which, he says, turned into a sort of public strip-tease. He lives as he writes, he said, "out of excess and insufficiency, will and will-lessness, love and hate." He quoted Mailer, the man with a thousand chips on his shoulder: "One writes with everything that lives for one: love, violence, sex, drugs, loss, the family,

work, defeat. But, above all, with something that concerns nobody but the writer." What that is—the frogman croaking at the bottom of the pond—need not be named. It dates from way back with him.

"I WAS ALREADY WRITING as a child. I published things in Chile, for instance, when I was twelve or thirteen years old; stories that appeared in the Bulletin of the Chilean National Institute, in the Grange magazine, when I was studying there, and so on." But his official entry into the public domain was in 1954. That year, a Mexican writer, Juan José Arreola, founded a publishing house for young writers called Los Presentes (Here and Now). "So all those of us with an itch started to write like mad for the publishing house."

The result, for Fuentes, was his first book of stories, *Los Días Enmascarados* (*Masked Days*), written in some haste, "with a series of themes I'd been carrying around inside. I sat down and got the book out in a month, to have it in time for the 1954 Book Fair." Its elements of mythology were a nod to Mexico's Indian past.

Perhaps the choice of themes was inevitable. The past, in Mexico, says Fuentes, "weighs heavily, because although the conquerors, the Spaniards, carried the day, Mexico, because of its particular political and historical makeup, has given the final victory to the conquered. That's what the statue of Cuauhtémoc means. In Lima you have the statue of Pizarro, in Santiago, that of Valdivia. Here the defeated have been glorified. Why? Because Mexico is a country where only the dead are heroes. If Francisco Madero, Emilliano Zapata or Pancho Villa were alive today, with his finger in profiteering and graft, he wouldn't be a hero anymore, would he? Our heroes are heroes because they were sacrificed. In Mexico the only saving fate is sacrifice. . . . The nostalgia for the past in Mexico is a direct result of the original defeat. Of the fact that Mexico was a country that lost its tongue, its customs, its power, everything. It became a nation of slaves. The Spanish we speak in Mexico is a Spanish of slaves, made entirely of circumlocutions. But there's another factor to consider. If a typical neo-capitalist country, such as France or the United States, can be governed without revolutionary rhetoric, Mexico hasn't reached that level yet. It isn't prosperous enough. When there's an abundance of goods to be distributed, you can forget about rhetoric. In Mexico the government has to justify itself with a series of myths. We all know it was the middle class that led the Revolution to triumph in Mexico. But this middle class presents itself wrapped in myths. In other words,

the ruling class, alias the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, alias the President of the Republic, equals: the nation, the Revolution, the glories of the past, the Aztecs, everything. So they have to promote a revolutionary rhetoric that strikes deep chords in Mexico, because it is at the source of political power."

In *Los Días Enmascarados*, which belongs to a germinal stage in his work, Fuentes at once exploits and castigates some of the ancient formulas and primitive modes of life that survive in modern Mexico.

"The best story in the book," he says, "can still be obtained, because it was included in the *Antología del Cuento Mexicano* (*Anthology of the Mexican Short Story*). It's called 'Chac Mool.'" Chac Mool, he reminds us, was the god of rain in the Aztec pantheon. Modern civilization does not seem to have dimmed his powers. Proof of this is an anecdote Fuentes tells us. In 1952, when the god's sculpted image was shipped off on a European tour as part of a Mexican art exhibit, there were storms on the high seas. Rain followed it wherever it went.

"It became famous as a rainmaker. For instance, peasants in certain valleys of Spain where it hadn't rained in living memory, would mail a few pesetas to the Palais de Chaillot. The money was put on the god's stomach, and after fifty years, rain fell in those valleys. When Chac Mool crossed the English Channel, there were the worst storms anyone could remember. . . . That was what gave me the idea for the story. It's about a little clerk. In the Lagunilla (Mexico's slummy downtown flea market) he finds a replica of Chac Mool. He puts it in his basement. The basement mysteriously floods. Chac Mool sweats out a coat of slime. He starts to take on a certain fleshiness and flexibility, and suddenly he appears to the protagonist in his bedroom and gains complete control over him, but in an equivocal way, chasing him out of his house to meet his death in Acapulco. When a friend brings the corpse home, he finds a strange greenish Indian occupying the dead man's place in the house, wearing his dressing gown, all decked out, perfumed, made up. . . . In the end, the owner replaces the god in the flea market."

MANY OF THE LOOSE IDEAS roughly sketched out in *Los Días Enmascarados*, says Fuentes, were incorporated in a more full-bodied form into *La Región Más Transparente*.

La Región Más Transparente (*Where The Air Is Clear*, 1959)—the Spanish title alludes to a phrase quoted by Alfonso Reyes in *Visión de Anáhuac*, originally attributable to Humboldt, who applied

it to the high Valley of Mexico—was the book that established Fuentes. To call it a novel would be to give only a limited idea of its scope. A “biography of a city,” Fuentes calls it; and “a synthesis of present-day Mexico.” Which does not overstate the case. Fuentes has done some comprehensive research into Mexican life and mores. The product of his efforts is a survey and complete accounting of the state of Mexico in the early Fifties, an attempt at a definition and a search for an identity. The social atmosphere of Mexico City is portrayed at all levels, from the upper-middle class, the new industrial caste and the blighted remains of the old feudal aristocracy, to the eternally downtrodden proletariat, with special emphasis on the classes in flux, the upstarts and parvenus, social climbers and opportunists. The general impression we have is that of a country born of a revolutionary fervor that soon betrayed its cause as time sedimented and institutionalized it and the rebels of the past installed themselves at the top of the pile as heads of banks and industries. Though some of the old reforms have prevailed, Mexico is shown as living a period of restoration. The main action of the novel takes place in 1951, but branches back into the revolutionary era to trace the ascending or descending course of its protagonists. It is a bitter chronicle of corruption and egoism. The technique is cinematic: quick scenes reel by, hard to focus on, blurred especially in opening chapters, which deal with the gaudy club-and-cocktail-party set, but later falling into a clear pattern as the spotlight centers on the human prototypes that embody modern Mexico.

In a society of displaced persons, each man hangs on where he can. The lack of a common philosophy, a national purpose, a sense of unity and solidarity, sacrifices the weak to the strong, the principled to the pragmatic. Such is the picture Fuentes draws. He sees a world in turmoil, with constantly shifting values, racked by struggles for supremacy, balanced on the edge of destruction. It is a fluid world of unstable norms, still in the making, where the underdogs of today become the precariously privileged of tomorrow. Every life is a boom and bust. In Mexico, says Fuentes, things happen quickly; a lot of mileage can be burned in a very short time. Progress is a bright comet that drags a long dusty tail after it. Just below the modern habit is the old tribal gesture. With heavy irony, Fuentes counterpoints the atavic strain in Mexican life with the modern cult of the efficient and the effective. Each attitude has its representative in the schemes. There are throwbacks, like *Ixca Cienfuegos*, made of residual elements,

and bandwagon riders like Librado Ibarra, a dowdy turncoat become a crooked labor lawyer, or Roberto Régules, also a high-powered shyster lawyer, both mouthpieces for a class sprung out of nowhere that claims to have created its own values, and therefore considers itself entitled to exercise its rights and prerogatives at will in the surrounding vacuum. There are also victims of the system: the old syndicalist in decline, who is shot in the back; the prostitute and wet-back cast to the fringes of society by exploitation and unemployment; and the rich man's plaything: the blind mistress-concubine, sensual and pathetic in her role as an object of her master's greedy passion for luxury items. Towering above considerations of humanity, or even common decency, are the universal symbols of power: social acceptance, political influence and material possessions that include mansions, yachts, automobiles and people.

Spokesman par excellence for the dubious forces of evolution is the self-made banker, Federico Robles, whose spectacular rise, via ruthless expediency, from a humble sharecropper background to the heights of unscrupulous wheeler-dealerism in some sense typifies modern functional and utilitarian Mexico. Robles is a builder, and is proud of it. His standards are those of the status-seeker. To complement his financial empire he has purchased himself a beautiful mundane wife, Norma Larragoiti, who shares his ambition, with a special knack for turning frivolity into a form of high protocol. She lives feverishly, with a contemptuous laugh at critics who accuse her of being a snob and a nouveau riche. Her position is the product of her talent, she says. Name and money, and the benefits derived from them, support her claim that she, a child of shopkeepers, has, through sheer guts, become the best the country has to offer. And, in a way, she is right. Her thirst for power and prestige is in the nature of a primordial force. Success, for those who wield it with a flourish, has its own dangers and splendors. Thus, Robles, who uses her as she uses him, willingly admits that he belongs to "those who have dirtied their hands." And why not? "Without me, without the handful of Robles who have built the country in the last thirty years, there would be nothing. Without us, without our minimum circle of power, I suspect everything would have been lost in our people's traditional apathy." He is not ashamed to represent the voice of big business. The end justifies the means. The best argument in his favor are his achievements. They are clear evidence of the fact that "here there is only one truth that counts: either we build a prosperous country, or we starve. The only

choice offered us is between wealth and indigence. And to attain wealth, our main concern, to which all others should be subordinated, must be to hasten the march toward capitalism." If the prescription seems a bit simple, the fact, in hard practice, is that it works.

Not everyone shares his point of view, to the contrary. But those who contest it, wondering about the rightness of the country's course, all too often have nothing better to offer in exchange. They are doodlers, not doers. Such is the case of the perpetually hesitant, ineffectual and puritanical journalist and poet, Zamacona, a moral crusader who wastes his time in soul-searching speculations on the subject of Mexican "eccentricity." His thesis—the term is used etymologically—is that Mexico has lost its identity in its pathological aping of foreign cultures and customs. It has become a sort of dustbin for whatever the tide brings in from other parts of the world. Though a world radically alien to Europe, it has accepted "the fatality of total European penetration." At the same time, it has remained outside all logical patterns: "a cloister, with its back to the world." It has been raped, not enriched. Therefore, in search of its lost purity, it has confused origins with originality. There is no pure element in a mestizo country like Mexico, where the basic mixture is not only ethnic but spiritual. Mexico ought to define itself, not backward, but forward. "Rather than being born original, we become it. . . . We have to create both our origin and our originality." The solution is for Mexico to strike a balance between what it is and always will be, and what, without travesty itself, it can become. Meantime, Zamacona sees grim prospects ahead. The hardships of Mexican reality, he says, perhaps with a touch of poetic license, are sterner even than life in the European concentration camps, because "the most terrible experience, Dachau or Buchenwald, only underlined the principles at stake: liberty, human dignity," whereas in Mexico nothing can justify "the destruction of the Indian world, our defeat in the war with the U.S. . . . our hunger, our barren fields, our plagues, our murders, our violence." What positive results have come out of it all? In the end, with a fervent belief in Mexico's saving mission, which he conceives of in Messianic, almost Dostoevskian, terms, he argues for a sort of Christian humanitarianism in social affairs, in which each man, as Christ, would assume the pain and blame of his fellow men and offer himself in personal atonement for them. He compares Mexico to the figure of Lazarus, dead only to be reborn, shouldering his fate. Thus, he represents the somewhat unfounded claim of passive individualism in a depersonalized society.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the belligerent, half-mythical figure of Ixca Cienfuegos, a personification of the lingering presence of Mexico's aboriginal past with its pre-Columbian rites and ancient blood feuds. Ixca, a ubiquitous retributory shadow threaded into almost every scene, functions as a sort of seeing eye in the book, at once a symbol and a gadfly. He is the voice in the back of everyone's conscience. He has access into every social milieu: "official circles, the parlors of high life," the business world, at one moment passing for "some banker's magic brain," the next for a gigolo or a simple street peddler. We never know for sure who he is, but his role is clear. He is the witness, the man who knows the truth about everyone, reads their secret desires, sees through them, urging them to plunge into the depths of themselves, where they will find their ultimate reality. "Be yourself," is his battle cry. He is the devil whispering backstage, a god of ancestral sacrifice prompting the characters of the drama to their downfall. For him, Mexico signed its death sentence when it severed the umbilical cord that joined it to its primitive rites and rhythms. "The first decision is the last." The primeval impulse gone astray, the country's pulse stopped. Zamacona's notions of personal responsibility make no sense to him, because the whole thesis leans on a concept of personality "capable of receiving, and generating, sin, redemption, etc." But there is no such personality in the "nameless tumult," the "twisted mass of bone, stone and rancor" that is Mexico—"a country where there are no people." Ixca's world is that of depersonalization—traditionalist, collectivist. The "be yourself" he slips into the ears of his victims, says Fuentes, is nothing but a "moral snare." He echoes their own thoughts, to delude, mislead, and finally sink them. Because Mexico, preset in its course from the beginning, is "incapable of evolution," it will inevitably be claimed by its past, its dead heroes, its lost memories. The rest is masks and appearances, a sheer optical illusion, disguising the decay of a land that has lost its soul and spirit of solidarity. As his companion in witchcraft, the widow Teódula, says: "We are approaching the parting of the waters." The currents have begun to flow upstream, and the present will vanish in the backwash. And so it happens in the book, that in a drastic series of natural and man-made disasters, everyone meets his fate, in ruin or death. As Ixca, their Nemesis, in a last metamorphosis, fades into thin air down a nameless street, dissolved in the "vast and anonymous" city, there is a final holocaust in which masks fall away to reveal the "true" face behind them.

The desperate search for the "true face" of Mexico is the subject of the book. The various points of view propounded by the different characters are its dialectical poles. The action swings back and forth between them, never quite becoming drama. Usurping the center of the stage is a "symbolic play" that the author, with clear hindsight, calls "too obvious." *La Región Más Transparente* is a talky book. Its compulsive preoccupation with "Mexicanism" has dated it.

Fuentes says as much. But it must be seen in its context: that special moment that was felt to be a crossroads in Mexican history.

In prerevolutionary days, under Porfirio Díaz, says Fuentes, there had been "a sort of extra-logical imitation" of foreign forms in Mexican culture that "had kept the Mexican past completely suffocated." With the Revolution, the pendulum swung in the opposite direction. It was a triumph of the popular spirit.

"The Revolution discovered colors, flavors, forms, sounds that perhaps reached their maximum expression in pictorial art, in the muralist movement, though also in the music of Carlos Chávez, of *Revueltas*, in the novels of Azuela, of Guzmán, etc. But after the first stage of discovery was over, there was the need for a second stage: a recapitulation. A balance had to be made. The dead weight had to be canceled out. Symbols had to be sifted and condensed. Representative of this more discriminating attitude was the movement born in 1950 under Octavia Paz and the Hyperion group—Zea, Portilla, Villoro, etc.—around the problem of 'Mexicanism.' But 'Mexicanism' in itself is an abstraction. There is no Mexicanism. There are Mexicans. That was the next step. So, on the one hand, revolutionary art, officially canonized, wore itself out in repetitions, till it became sheer caricature. The imitators of Siqueiros and Rivera in the end produced nothing but a sort of revolutionary pop art. On the other hand, the whole movement formed around the discussion of 'Mexicanism' also fell into a series of abstractions that it tried to install as general laws, at the expense of the individual differences of live Mexicans." The lines of battle had been overdrawn. "I think at the time there was a widespread theoretical absolutism in Mexico that seems antiquated when seen from the perspective of 1965, but was nevertheless real enough in 1950 when the book was written. The ideological alternatives were clear-cut. One of them was the possibility represented by the government of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940): that of a popular regime, a type of Mexican Socialism built from the bottom up with popular participation and the full weight of Marxist thought present in every act of government. The

other was the political thesis of Miguel Alemán, which came as a counterrevolutionary reaction in 1946, armed with the precepts of Hamiltonism: wealth accumulates on top, then gradually filters downward. Politically and economically, those were the alternatives available."

La Región Más Transparente in some sense was designed to provide a forum for the conflicting opinions of the day. All seem equally authoritative. None is definitive. A typical character is Zamacona, with his anguished doubts and Messianic complex. As a sounding board, he affords opportunities for gleeful satire.

"Zamacona," says Fuentes, with a shrug of amusement, "is a composite portrait of many Mexican intellectuals. Many recognized themselves in him. They protested, they attacked me in the street, they tried to set my house on fire. So there must have been some truth in the portrait. Because, at bottom, in the whole 'Mexicanist' movement, there was that redemptorist attitude. . . . So I think *La Región Más Transparente* reflected—intentionally, of course, though without any attempt to expound personal theories—the excessive and somewhat mythical preoccupation over nationality, ancestry and patrimony rampant at the time in Mexico. At the same time, it aspired to give a critical report on the Revolution, at a moment when it could be seen in perspective, as it couldn't have been by the documentary novelists who wrote in the saddle, riding to battle with Pancho Villa." Which is why *La Región Más Transparente*—a book that inaugurates a new mood in Mexican literature—has been called "the other novel of the Revolution." It takes stock, tallies up credits and debits, assets and liabilities, to reach a summation. It had to be written long after the facts, says Fuentes, "just as the novel of the French Revolution wasn't written on the spot by Chateaubriand, but by Balzac and Stendahl, forty or fifty years later."

At times more like a memorandum than a mural, the book has its glaring defects. It is random and disjointed: a montage made of loose slides, occasionally as gaudy as poster art. It squanders its resources. It is transparent in its methods, over-explicit, often dazzled by its own virtuosity. The characterizations tend to be flat, the dialectics tendentious. There is almost no discernible plot line, only a semblance of dramatic progression. Too much is articulated in long speeches, frequently monologues that fall into the happy category of deep talk, with people wondering solemnly who they are, where they are going, what is Mexico, etc. The satirical intent of many episodes is under-

mined by ponderous mannerisms—such as endless cigarette smoking—that turn people into postures. Exchanges and confrontations, instead of being acted out, tend to remain verbal. There are intriguing but basically unconvincing figures like Ixca Cienfuegos, and catastrophic events not inevitable enough to seem more than gratuitous. But when all is said and done, something fundamentally solid remains. The lushness and beauty of the prose, that often make a virtue out of apparent carelessness, reveal the sure hand of a brilliant alchemist. There are memorable scenes in the life of Federico Robles, probably the best-realized, or least-idealized, character, and that of his proud and willful wife, Norma, whose truculence gives her an almost tragic stature as she flouts conventions with insolent abandon and goes down fighting her way through a torrid love affair. Then there is the passionate death and transfiguration of Ixca Cienfuegos. Fuentes is not only an excellent literary wordsman. He also has a fine ear for the rhythm of street talk. Some of his best touches are in humorous or pathetic popular scenes. Nor does Fuentes shy away from bravura passages of glowing rhetoric, among which is one of the high points of the book: a succulent description enumerative of the sexual organs of prostitutes, as rabid and rapturous as Melville's song to the whiteness of the whale.

The wonder is that Fuentes, who borrows freely, with uncanny facility, from some of the most elaborate techniques of the U.S. novel, got away with as much as he did. We take the point up with him, noting obvious influences, especially of Dos Passos, in his use of seeing eyes, flashbacks, headlines, time breaks, forced contrasts and other devices which might well seem stale to a U.S. reader long familiar with such filigreed refinements of the narrative idiom.

Fuentes yields gracefully to our objection. But he sees nothing to apologize for. For one thing, the Latin American novelist, traditionally derivative, perhaps out of a sense of cultural inferiority, has always felt free to shop abroad for his forms of expression. The reason, paradoxically, may be isolation. Mainstream literatures do not directly imitate one another; an attribute of universality is the awareness that what has been done in one language has been done for all time in all languages. Distance, on the other hand—eccentricity—fosters a back-water mentality. It is only recently that our works have been translated into other languages; therefore our writer feels very little responsibility toward culture as a whole. He thinks in terms of contributing something, not to the world, but only to his own local tradition. This has been an important limiting factor in our arts. We take without giving,

less in an attempt to do something new than to prove we can do what others have done.

There are clear remnants of this attitude in Fuentes. "The dark angel of *le temps perdu* hovers over everything in Latin America," he wrote in a recent article for *Book Week*. The result, in our art, as in other areas of our life, is "an unnatural and exciting process of growth, an impatient telescoping of stages that were leisurely arrived at in Europe and the United States. . . ." The scramble to catch up will sometimes mean slapping the most unlikely bedfellows together. Thus, in *La Región Más Transparente*, we will find some of the disciples of Joyce presiding over the children of Sánchez. It can fairly be said that the book reflects—and sometimes parrots—most of the literary habits prevalent in the U.S. between 1920 and 1940. It could almost be called a pastiche.

Dos Passos, Faulkner and—to our surprise—D. H. Lawrence, are the authors Fuentes singles out for special mention.

He says: "I was interested in time play, and their different ways of looking at time were helpful to me. Apart from whatever tendency a first novel may have to be a showcase of literary parentage, I was reading Dos Passos a lot, looking for a way to build dead time into a novel. In Dos Passos everything is in the past tense. Even when he places his action in the present, we know it is past. In Faulkner, everything is in the chronic present. Even the remotest past is present. And in D. H. Lawrence what you find is a tone of prophetic imminence. He is always on the brink of the future; it is always there, latent. So I very consciously drew on those three influences, three aspects of time I wanted to counterpoint and overlap in *La Región Más Transparente*."

The particular influence, often remarked, of Dos Passos on Latin American literature as a whole, Fuentes ascribes to "obvious reasons. Because Latin America is caught in a perpetual cultural lag of at least forty or fifty years, forms reach it with delay. The substance of Latin American experience itself is in perpetual delay. Now the moment has arrived when it finds a very adequate form of expression in the kind of literature John Dos Passos was producing forty years ago."

Somehow this does not seem to account for the fact that it is almost as long since our writers started imitating this literature. In any case, it is a tribute to Fuentes' talent that imitation does not stifle *La Región Más Transparente*. There are errors in the book, "some of them seri-

ous," he admits, but on the whole it is well paced and consistent with itself. The diversity of styles, says Fuentes, was dictated by the subject matter, that of a heterogeneous city spreading amorphously amid violent contrasts and dislocations. The language, a product as much of instinct as reflection, had to be broad enough to embrace the whole spectrum without atomizing it.

VERY DIFFERENT IN TONE AND PROCEDURE is Fuentes' second novel, *Las Buenas Conciencias* (*Clear Consciences*, 1959) the first of a cycle, therefore intended as a firm base for the future edifice. By contrast with *La Región Más Transparente*, *Las Buenas Conciencias* is an orderly, measured and sober little book, austere structured and efficiently engineered. The setting is no longer Mexico City, but Guanajuato, a colonial town that Fuentes describes as the epitome of provincial conservatism. The Independence movement was born there, and its aristocratic inhabitants—proud traditionalists, haughty guardians of the quintessence of the old Spanish style, founders of Mexico's most venerable Jesuit university—regard themselves as representing "the summit of the spirit of Central Mexico." In fact, they personify obscurantism and hypocrisy.

A favorite son of theirs is young Jaime Ceballos, the protagonist, of a family of shopkeepers made good, now leaders of the community, who awakens to social realities with sexuality in a moment of adolescent crisis. We recognize the traditional Spanish theme, consecrated by García Lorca, of religious fervor as a precipitate of sensual stirring. Family pharisaism and social injustice are felt as passionate physical torments by Jaime, for whom revolt becomes a high calling. It leads inevitably to a crisis of faith. He seeks the true Christian path, not in the false piety of church ceremony, but within himself. Like Zamacona in *La Región Más Transparente*, he feels fated for martyrdom, destined to assume the blame for the ills of humanity. Coming out of the throes of puberty, he has found not only a vocation for social action, but also his separateness, his individual worth.

Jaime catches his first glimpse of the lighted road to salvation in a childhood memory. He had once—in a scene reminiscent of the opening pages of Dickens' *Great Expectations*—hidden a refugee from justice in his barn. In the man's tortured face—he was being persecuted for trying to organize a cooperative—he had seen an image of heroism and dedication. The fact that he had not been able to prevent the man's final arrest and imprisonment had been a source of shame and

guilt to him ever since. His scruples are sharpened in conversations with his mestizo friend, Lorenzo, a young firebrand touchingly devoted to becoming a labor lawyer in the capital. Then there is Jaime's poor mother, Adelina, long snubbed by the family because of her low birth, now reduced to misery and prostitution. Adelina, unprotected by Jaime's weak father, Rodolfo, was kicked out of the house shortly after giving birth to Jaime, who was brought up in an atmosphere of rigorous puritanism by Rodolfo's sister, aunt Asunción, and her husband, the bastion of conservatism, Jorge Balcárcel. It is in the destitution of those sacrificed to the sanctimonious respectability of his elders that Jaime finds the strength to rebel.

But the true road is difficult. In the background, wrapped in his immutable false dignity, is the stiff graying figure of Balcárcel, reigning inexorably over the family, hand across his chest, with his sententious moral pronouncements; the frustrated Asunción, childless because of her husband's sterility—she is an embodiment of the loneliness of people who spend a lifetime suffering in silence, constitutionally unable to raise their voice to mention unpleasant truths—finding her only fulfillment in the possession and domination of her adopted child. Then there is the saddest nonentity of them all, Rodolfo, reduced to the status of a poor relation in the household, spinelessly selling clothes behind the counter in the old family store. Rodolfo, Balcárcel, Asunción, are all lives swept under the carpet. Each, in his own way, has paid his price for a spurious peace of mind.

Against these odds, there is little Jaime can do. Opening his eyes is not enough. When the time comes for him to meet the crucial test, he fails. The climax of the novel is reached in the scene where Rodolfo, in a moment of redeeming courage, rising out of the ruins of his broken life, suddenly speaks his mind. "How different we are . . . from what we could be," he announces to the family over the dinner table. A shocked silence follows these unutterable words. For once, an issue has not been evaporated. At that moment, Rodolfo wins Jaime's heart. A gesture is expected from Jaime. He has his cue. But Jaime is silent. He lets the moment blow over, and everything returns to normal. Shortly after that, Rodolfo dies, abandoned by the son from whom he had hoped to hear a word of forgiveness. As the family confessor tells Jaime: "He expected nothing out of life but your love. . . . But you sentenced him to die in pain and despair. You're a coward. . . ." Jaime bows his head. He realizes he is too weak to fight. Having come to a parting of the ways with his true-believer

friend, Lorenzo, he runs up into the seclusion of the attic to beg God to make him be like everybody else, to spare him the extremities of "love and pride, crime and sacrifice. . . ." As he confessed to Lorenzo: "I couldn't be what I wanted to be. I couldn't be a Christian. I can't face my failure alone; I couldn't stand it; I have to lean on something. The only thing I can lean on is my aunt and uncle, the life they've prepared for me, the life I inherited from my ancestors." He falls into line. He resigns—capitulates. Recognizing his failure, Fuentes tells us, is "an act of honesty, paradoxically the one act of honesty he has in the novel. The only time he is absolutely sincere with himself. The one time he admits the truth."

We have divided feelings about *Las Buenas Conciencias*. The lines of the drama are clear and strong; the horrors of hypocritical moral righteousness are eloquently described. The style is firm and muscular. There is a leisurely elegance about the book that is one of its most engaging features. The measured pace, says Fuentes, is conscious and deliberate. "For a very simple reason, which will be clear when I finish the tetralogy the book introduces. I needed that kind of a stylistic and thematic base for the tetralogy. The idea was later to leave the world of Guanajuato, with its nineteenth-centuryish, Balzacian, Pérez Galdosian forms, to take the protagonist"—who has already appeared in a minor role in *La Región Más Transparente*—"to Mexico City. With the change of setting, there would be a change of style and rhythm. In other words, the style of *Las Buenas Conciencias* is going to be destroyed by the novels that follow it. Its function within the whole picture is to provide a sort of ironic comment." A Jamesian omniscient author enhances this effect. At the same time, the muted display limits the tonal range. As usual in Fuentes, the central problem dealt with is that of "individual responsibility in an evolving community." The search for a personal base, outside caste and family, is a classic theme perhaps best served by distance and objectivity.

But it is precisely in these requirements that *Las Buenas Conciencias* seems to fall short of the mark. The author is not entirely free of the moral righteousness he criticizes. There is an implicit judgment of Jaime on every page, which acts as a constant interference in the mind of the reader. To prove a point Fuentes in fact gives it away. At moments he weighs in so heavily that he verges on didacticism. The characterizations are too conventional, the issues too obvious, the progress of the story too predictable. Again, as in *La Región Más Transparente*, though the chattiness is gone, too much is resolved

verbally. In reality, *Las Buenas Conciencias* reads as a sort of exemplar, contrived to teach a lesson and deliver a message. Which may well be an unsurmountable obstacle for any book. It is weakest at its most crucial point: the ending, which seems pat. Jaime, a purely figurative convert to prejudice, reasons out his change of heart without living it. The author hovers at his shoulder, rationalizing it. "Bad writing," says Fuentes with a smile. He intends to remedy that in the next edition.

Meantime we are left with some powerful images: the barren Asunción, fresh out of bed in the morning after a sleepless night, inspecting her unused breasts and wilted belly in the mirror, then, with a proud toss of her head, clasping her robe tight at the throat, as she stalks out of the room to start the day; the paragon of virtue, Balcárcel, caught with his pants down, half drunk in a whorehouse; Jaime on his knees, devoutly raising the skirt of Christ in church to inspect His anatomy, then, as he awaits the divine sign that will single him out forever, fervently kissing His "crucified feet"; again, Jaime, a hermit in sackcloth and ashes, whipping himself raw with thorns, and later, prostrate under the weight of his bloodied conscience, with a sudden streak of sadism, stoning a cat to death in the street.

IN A MORE EXPANSIVE vein is *La Muerte de Artemio Cruz* (*The Death of Artemio Cruz*, 1962), started during a stay in Cuba in 1960, therefore presumably written from the perspective of the Cuban revolution, for which Fuentes' sympathies are well known. Not that it grinds any political axes. It is not artificially topical. But it reflects Fuentes' strong commitment to the cause of social reform. Like *La Región Más Transparente*, its view is panoramic. But the panorama is mental. The camera has been turned inward, to focus on the mind of the protagonist, who relives his life and, by extension, that of modern Mexico, on his deathbed.

Artemio's story, which ranges far and wide in space and time, is that of the Mexican Revolution. He grew up with it, flourished and declined with it. He fought as a rebel leader in its early heady days, saw it spread its titanic promise, only to dwindle and finally come to a complete standstill. Like Robles in *La Región Más Transparente*, he has known love, loyalty and courage, but compromised, treacherously trading them in for the cynicism and disillusionment of empty material success. His loss is Mexico's. Thus, in his tortured memory, a youthful love affair that returns to haunt him coincides with the

euphoria of his revolutionary days; his loveless marriage of comfort and convenience, with the Revolution's hollow aftermath, when it became institutionalized. In his middle age, an adoring mistress offers him the possibility of a spiritual rehabilitation. But he has already gone down the river of no return. Once more, the revolutionary ideal momentarily flares up in him when his son goes off with flaming eyes to fight in the Spanish Civil War. This coincides with the period of the leftist government of Cárdenas in Mexico. But the fitful hope soon vanishes again. Lorenzo is killed in Spain; Artemio, broken-hearted, loses his last ray of light. He is what his life has made him. All he can do now is continue to live off the fat of the land, accumulating riches, tormenting himself and those around him, and counting his days, which are numbered. His death closes a chapter in Mexican history.

As a portrait of moral disintegration, *La Muerte de Artemio Cruz* has some remarkable moments. Its strength is in its concentration. It is a drama of conscience. To a considerable extent, Fuentes has achieved the complexity of characterization needed to give Artemio specific weight and gravity. He has avoided the dangers of caricature. Artemio Cruz, the prototype of the Mexican caudillo, is a type of personality, he says, that "given our tendency in Mexico to see things in black and white, is easily classifiable as black. My intention, which became increasingly evident to me as the character developed, was to show there's no such thing as black and white. Artemio Cruz is at once the book's hero and anti-hero."

A measure of Fuentes' maturing skill as a novelist, in *Artemio Cruz*, is his ability to shift his focus to show the different sides of a matter and draw rounded portraits. Artemio grows in the course of his adventures. True, his life circumscribes him. But in the end, though deteriorated, in a sense he is a bigger man than when he started out. He has learned. He knows. Filling his pockets and buttering palms are not the whole of him. He can be, in turn, humorous, shrewd, hardheaded, cruel, endearing, taciturn, admirable, pitiable. He can barrel on stage, slapping backs, like a politician on the stump, but he is also capable of reflection. He cheats, but catches himself at it. He sees himself as he is. Which is not an unmixed blessing. But it gives his experiences meaning and resonance. Besides, like the feather-headed Norma in *La Región Más Transparente*, he is life-size because he loves life. This is at once his redeeming feature and his cross. For once, in a type of literature usually made of paper dolls and paste-

board cutouts, we are above slogan and panacea. There is a depth of penetration that humanizes. Tragedy, Fuentes realizes, is consciousness.

Dramatically, with its memorable scenes of revolutionary campaigns drawn in a vigorous and colorful prose, *Artemio Cruz* represents a notable advance over Fuentes' previous work. There is a prodigal abundance without diffuseness. Less impressive are some of the techniques resorted to, often mere cosmetics. As in *La Región Más Transparente*, Fuentes is concerned with time play. To overlap different periods in time, he uses interior monologues, flashbacks, and a curiously incongruous device consisting in a kind of voice of conscience that addresses the protagonist in the second person and the future tense, a disembodied accusative that tortures the syntax and disrupts the action. Methods that seemed fresh and spontaneous in *La Región Más Transparente* have become automatic reflexes. Fuentes is at his best in "straight" narration. The most effective passages in *Artemio Cruz* are linear. Elsewhere, he tends to get lost in fireworks. His great enemy is facility. In *Artemio Cruz*, many otherwise dense and subtle pages are loaded down with a mechanical dead weight that seems expert but superficial.

A DIFFERENT REPROACH can be leveled against *Aura* (1962), an unconvincing little mystery novelette that raises the problem of personal identity. The setting, inevitably, is an ancient cobwebbed mansion inhabited by an eccentric old lady—who seems to have read the *Aspern Papers*—and her double, a fantasy-embodiment of her childhood self whom she conjures up by an act of the will in the person of a young girl called *Aura*. A scholarly lodger employed in the house falls in love with *Aura*, the enchanted maiden who awaits her gallant rescuer, and is absorbed into the prevailing trance. When he emerges from bondage, older and wiser, he has discovered *Woman as Sorceress*.

Aura takes its cue from a quote attributed to Jules Michelet: "Man hunts and battles. Woman plots and dreams; she is the mother of fantasy. . . ." It never overcomes its literary premise. The elusive *Aura* seems only mildly spellbound. The trouble is structural. For a meaning to be revealed, first it must be withheld. Here it is handed to us almost from the beginning. In a story that proceeds on two levels, the second depends on the first. To be a parable, *Aura* must first hold up as a ghost story. But this is where it collapses, to become a mere fairy tale, without suspense or illusion. Even the writing seems lax

and tenuous. Everything works out too easily. Yet, curiously, Fuentes has a high opinion of *Aura*. The reason may be its frontal attack on the theme of personal identity, a constant—and characteristically Mexican—preoccupation in all his work. It is carefully programmed into *Artemio Cruz*, and raised to the national level in *La Región Más Transparente*. In *Aura* it appears in its most distilled form. The book is written in, or addressed to, a second person, whose identity—he is at once actor and spectator, protagonist and reader—remains ambiguous throughout. Though remote from “social” reality, it reflects, or refracts, a vision of human nature. After all, says Fuentes, “every story is written with a ghost at your shoulder.” The ghost, in *Aura*, is Woman, “the keeper of secret knowledge, which is true knowledge, general knowledge, universal knowledge.” Carnal contact with her is one of the archetypal forms of initiation into the mysteries of the world.

A more successful venture into the realm of “secret knowledge” is *Cantar de Ciegos* (*Tales of the Blind*, 1964), a collection of stories that contains some of Fuentes’ best work. Fuentes is one of the very few Latin American writers who have mastered the disciplines of the short story form. Perhaps because of his close acquaintance with U.S. literature? He says readily: “I love the form. I like the neat, rounded structure of the short story.” Here the temptation toward slickness seems to work to his advantage. He can pull a fast switch or wrap up a tidy plot as well as anyone writing today.

The title of his collection is an allusion to the ancient belief that the blind are seers, authorized to read the hidden truths in men’s hearts and reveal their secret crimes. There were the blind bards of antiquity, and the blind oracles. There is also a tradition of blind street performers in Spain, who recite woeful tales during the fairs, usually with the aid of a child with a pointer, who marks off the gory episodes on a series of illustrative tableaux propped in chronological order on a scaffolding. The result is something like a cross between gospel singing and grand guignol. The emphasis is on the abysmal and the bizarre.

So, in *Cantar de Ciegos*, which satirizes regressiveness, posturing, faddism and banality in Mexico, Fuentes rolls out family skeletons and washes dirty laundries in public. There is the arty Elena in “Las dos Elenas” (The Two Helens), who after seeing the film, *Jules et Jim*, proclaims herself an emancipated believer in the ménage à trois, in which she imagines she will be fully “complemented,” unaware of

the fact that her triangular plans are being torpedoed by her husband, who is having an affair with her mother. There is a mysterious moral assassination in the "compounded fable" called "Un alma pura" (A Pure Soul), a story of brother-sister incest that exposes the morbidities of "machismo" and leads its heroes through pregnancy, abortion and suicide. Then there is "A la víbora de la mar" (Into The Serpent Of The Sea), which revisits—and revises—the Daisy Miller theme. A dowdy middle-aged spinster who runs a gift shop in Mexico City has saved up for a vacation cruise on board an English boat, where she falls in love with a man with an Oxford accent who passes himself off as the scion of a wealthy Philadelphia family, but turns out to be a homosexual gigolo. In "La muñeca reina" (The Queen Doll) a nostalgic narrator on a poignant search for a childhood playmate finds a recluse whose crippled deformity has been kept out of sight in a shuttered house by her parents, a necrolatrous couple enshrined in memories of better days, who worship her image in the shape of a wax doll. "Vieja moralidad" (Old Morality) deals with the corruption of innocence. A child lives with an obscene grandfather who sleeps with his housekeeper and hurls insults at the priests that go by in the street. Old aunts obtain a court order to remove the child to safer surroundings. But it is a change from bad to worse. The lecherous grandfather is a saint next to the frustrated dowager who adopts the child only to seduce him. "El costo de la vida" (The Cost of Life) is about a knifing in an alley, and "Fortuna lo que ha querido" (Fortune Was What He Wanted) shows us a fashionable pop painter whose prowesses with the fast crowd and fame among the cultists do not prevent him from discovering his incapacity, or unwillingness, to love. An epigraph quoted from Raymond Radiguet clinches Fuentes' point. Mexico is young and old. There is already a strain of decadence in its sophistication. But the old way of life is still present. The new Mexico thrives on intricacies. It has begun to live dangerously.

TIMES HAVE CHANGED since the days of *La Región Más Transparente*, says Fuentes. Options and alternatives are no longer as clear-cut as they used to be.

"What has happened? That the world itself has moved at a different pace, erasing many of the ideological differences. We've had the whole phenomenon of neo-capitalism and the increasing similarity between Eastern statism and the capitalist structures of the West. And Mexico has a very intelligent, very shrewd governing elite that

has caught on to the way neo-capitalism is going and started to apply its principles in Mexico. In a country that has reached the stage of what Walt Whitman Rostov would call the take-off, the Mexican government, especially the government of Díaz Ordaz, the present government, has started to introduce the theories and practices of neo-capitalism into Mexican life. So the whole picture has changed. Culturally what has happened is that there has been a great reaction against chauvinism, against obsessive 'Mexicanism.' The elite above all, the intelligentsia, the young people, the students no longer stand in front of a mirror wondering what it means to be Mexican. All the new movement in art, headed, let's say, by José Luis Cuevas, the new writers, the new film-makers—they all take their Mexicanism for granted. The problem is to be a man, isn't it? So their art reflects this new personalization and ambiguity."

Also reflected in Mexican art today is the growing isolation of the Mexican artist, which, says Fuentes, "is due to something quite clear, I think. Traditionally in Latin America, starting with independence, there was a sharp division that Sarmiento pinpointed, even used as the subtitle of one of his works (*Facundo*): Civilization versus Barbarism. Obviously the intellectual elite of the semifederal Latin American world was invariably on the side of civilization against barbarism. The choice was easy then. You were with the cultivated elements in your society, who all supported civilization's great saving project, inspired in the French Revolution and the constitution of the U.S., against the feudal remnants of the Spanish inheritance. . . . I think today if there are writers like Vargas-Llosa, like Cortázar, like myself, it is largely because that choice is no longer so simple. In other words, the modern world has come to Latin America. Through a series of developments: the arrival of U.S. capitalism, the rise of a purchasing class, new goods and services, consumer industries, television, mass entertainment—all this has contributed to modernizing life in the big Latin American cities. So the choice is no longer between civilization and barbarism. Civilization is here to stay. So the writer who was part of a small elite that extended from the left wing to the right wing of the ruling oligarchy, ignored by that same oligarchy, which regarded it with supreme indifference, but nevertheless with more chance of effective action and a greater influence over events, has suddenly found himself submerged in the petite bourgeoisie. The epic choice that produced an epic literature: *Doña Bárbara*, *La Vorágine*, *Don Segundo Sombra*—has therefore given way to a literature by nature more equi-

vocal, more critical, with a certain strain of anguish and ambiguity, produced by people displaced from their traditional positions, faced with the need to create forms that are more personal, more highly elaborated and much more solitary. Where this first happened, I think, was in Mexico, because of the Revolution. One of the aspects of the Porfirio Díaz dictatorship it fought against was the notion of the intelligentsia as an elite. The birth of popular art in Mexico, demagogic as this art was at times, nevertheless, among other achievements, contributed to this trend in that it destroyed the possibility for the artist or writer to act as the member of an elite. He was relegated to the level of the rising middle class. And we all know what the artist's problems are within the middle class. Especially the Latin American artist, who has a sort of nostalgia for the elite days, who always yearns a little for that golden age, doesn't he?"

This yearning is no doubt at least partly due to the fact that, cast to the sidelines by the march of events, he has begun to feel extraneous and irrelevant. The elite writer, in a sense, was a mainstream writer. In countries chronically swinging between dictatorship and anarchy, "bereft of democratic channels of communication, lacking a free press, a responsible Congress, independent labor unions. . . ," as Fuentes wrote in his article for *Book Week*, "the individual novelist was compelled to be, at once, legislator and reporter, revolutionist and thinker." He was the nation's conscience, in charge of evaluating and assessing, as well as maintaining "a continuity of relationship between social manifestation and literary imagination." He was a sort of minister without portfolio, who, Fuentes says to us now, expanding on the subject, "played the role of a redeemer, extended a helping hand to the oppressed Indian, the exploited peasant. That's the attitude at the root of all Latin American literature. It was a literature of protest in which the writer supplied all the means of communication that were missing in Latin America."

By contrast, nowadays he is trapped within a class whose values he is constantly forced to reject. His work is an outlet for inconformity and rebellion. A problematic situation which, nevertheless, has its advantages.

"Because it's evident," says Fuentes, "that the novel as such was born as a form of opposition, of rebellion on the part of the writer, on the part of life itself, as expressed by the writer, against the rigidity of social patterns. In other words, without alienation there would be no novelist. Alienation is at the source of the novel. So it seems quite

natural to me to be within the middle class and at the same time fighting it. I may even go so far as to say—perhaps a bit cynically—that it's the only way to write good novels. . . . And I don't in the least," he adds genially, "share the illusion that we're on the way to a better society where alienation will disappear. We can see that clearly in Soviet society: the new structures of the Socialist state create their own alienations—alienations from the new system. And once again the novelist is channeling the forces of life against paralysis and stratification. That's the ambiguity of the novel: in the face of a custom-tailored art made of fixed patterns, the novel arose as a revolt against established order. But when the order the novel was advocating became a fact, the novel found itself in the paradoxical position of having to criticize what it had defended. I think this is equally valid in relation to Socialist order. That's why it's so important for us today to have novels like those of Cortázar and Vargas-Llosa, which show that the novelist of the left in Latin America has lost his original innocence. For instance, in a novel like *La Ciudad y Los Perros*, obviously there's a tragic vision of the world, which contradicts, but at the same time includes, the author's sense of justice. In other words, justice, in Vargas-Llosa, is no longer the naive concept it was in a Gallegos. It is part of a more complex vision that envelops and dramatizes it: the tragic vision. In Vargas-Llosa the tragic vision has been completely assimilated. Vargas-Llosa does not flatter himself that the battles of the pen, or even those of the battlefield, are going to bring about a utopic change. Not in the least. In the perfect society, children will still die. . . ."

As for our fluorescent society, Fuentes regards its increasing dehumanization and spiritual bankruptcy with somber pessimism. For the intellectual, he says, there is always the possibility of forming his own moral code and cultivating the sensibility that leisure and education have granted him. But that is "a false possibility. It's of no interest to anybody." The modern *Candide*, locked out of his back yard, roams the streets, becomes a face in the crowd.

"Islands of echoless monologues," Gorostiza has called his countrymen. His contemporary, Villaurrutia, in quiet anguish, evokes the "endless silence" around him, in which voices are "a mute appeal that remains unanswered."

Mexico's urban novelists particularly—José Revueltas, the popular Luis Spota, Fuentes himself—reiterate this theme. It shadows the fantasies of Fernando Benítez, and colors the work of younger authors,

whether poets—Marco Antonio Montes de Oca—or novelists: Sergio Galindo, Tomás Mojarro, Fernando del Paso.

Fuentes has published excerpts of a new work, as yet untitled, where he weaves a delicate counterpoint between modern life in a historic village in central Mexico, and life in that same village in the days of Cortés. The contrasts, sharply drawn, open chasms on every page.

But even deeper, perhaps, will be the chasms in the second novel of the *Buenas Conciencias* cycle, a work now in progress: *Galatea*. Faithful to its namesake, it portrays a girl who is the victim of a series of Pygmalions, or rather, Svengalis, who instead of shaping her, destroy her.

"It's a totally personal novel," Fuentes tells us. "It's about a girl in Mexico City, about the difficulties of growing up in the city, but completely unrelated in theme to *Las Buenas Conciencias*. It's an isolated, inner life, where corruption becomes something of a synonym of innocence. You can only live sticking your neck out, dirtying your fingers, exposing yourself."

Fuentes is not alone in his new subjective emphasis. The young Mexican novelist, influenced less by his predecessors in the genre than by such introspective poets as Pellicer, Gorostiza, Octavio Paz, is bound for "personalization: the novel of inner life."

"Above all," says Fuentes, "I believe that, in contrast to the old tendency of writers to form schools and movements, to overstate their position, today, precisely because of the ambiguities of Mexican life, the trend is in the direction of a series of very individual manifestations on the part of each writer. There are no common labels any more." The general tone is one of intimacy. In this there has been a clean break with the past.

Fuentes himself has never attached himself to any literary movement that would merit the name. The *Revista Mexicana de Literatura*, with which he is still associated, is an independent venture. Literarily speaking, he says, since its founding in 1956, it has always stood for "a rejection of localism, of the picturesque, of chauvinism and the parochialism of Mexican literature." Politically, it stands for "a rejection of every ideological a priori, an interest in the tiers monde, freedom of judgment in regard to the United States as well as the Soviet Union."

Open-mindedness, however, is no synonym of disengagement. Fuentes, who refuses "the newly minted cliché of the crisis or decadence

of the novel," feels close to such postwar U.S. novelists as Styron, Mailer and Bellow. With Mailer, he says, he shares a predicament: entrapment in the middle class, and a reaction, in the form of "many existential, even nihilistic, attitudes. If I have anything in common with Mailer, it's the conviction that a new anarchic left is forming within the neo-capitalist countries, and that this current offers us new literary modes and characters." Proof of this is *El Sueño*, which is "narrated by an aging nihilist, a middle-aged beatnik, a rebel without a cause who is pushing forty." If Mailer speaks of "infinitely broadening human possibilities," Fuentes, taking an equally long view of his art, says: "Whatever the society he lives in, the writer must always come up with a new heresy to renew that aspiration to liberty which is, perhaps, the closest we can come to liberty itself."

The possibility of falling into marginalism does not bother Fuentes. "One wonders," he says, "whether the novelist is not doomed to become increasingly marginal as the neo-capitalist phenomenon of social and economic pluralization develops in our countries. But always with a transcendent and Messianic purpose." Because, as he firmly believes, "in a perpetually unfinished world, there is always something that can be said and added only through the art of fiction."

TRANSLATIONS IN ENGLISH

Aura, New York, 1965

The Death of Artemio Cruz, New York, 1964

The Good Conscience, New York, 1961

Where the Air is Clear, New York, 1960

(Distributed by Farrar, Straus & Giroux)

✿ LUIS HARSS has been translating his book of essays on contemporary Latin American writers into Spanish for publication in his native Argentina. *Ten in Their Times*, the tentative title of the volume, will be issued in English by Harper & Row some time this year. Mr. Harss is also finishing his third novel. His first two novels, *The Blind* and *The Little Men*, are available in this country from Atheneum. This essay is the second one to be published in *NMQ*; his essay on Juan Rulfo appeared in the last issue.