Determinations

Essays on Theory, Narrative and Nation in the Americas

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For Emma Luna

... and in memory of Michael Sprinker
(1949–1999)

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Rulfo and the Transcultural: A Revised View

The fiction of Juan Rulfo has enjoyed canonical stature for what is now more than a generation, not only in Mexico and Latin American but in the North American and European literary and academic world as well. For some literary figures such stature has become grounds for suspicion and—even worse—for neglect; but this seems not to be the case with Rulfo. This may in part be due to the fact that Rulfo’s fiction, like that of Borges, shows no obvious debt to intellectual or cultural fashion prevalent at the time of its writing and thus migrates more easily into the new “counter-canons” linked to theoretical trends such as postmodernism or cultural studies. Many other Latin American oeuvres associated with the “boom”—those of Cortázar and Fuentes, for example, whose “experimental” and nouveau roman pretensions are now precisely what make them seem so dated (see chapter 7)—have had much greater difficulty in making such transitions. And Rulfo’s legendary silences and avoidance of publicity have obviously done him no harm here.

But Rulfo continues to engross even those readers who—like many of my students, for example—are merely obliged to read him. And I think this is because, in ways that remain to be fully understood, his best fictions continue to produce, in its nearly pure state and with a seemingly perfect economy of artistic means, a literary or narrative effect that finds a deep and persistent confirmation in contemporary historical experience, especially but not exclusively in Mexico and Latin America. I shall return shortly to this “effect” in greater detail.

I speak here as a reader and critic who has himself voiced strong suspicions of Rulfo for precisely the “counter-canonical” motives alluded to above. In Modernism and Hegemony, a study published in 1990, I raised certain questions about a still common predisposition to interpret the salient literary features of Rulfian fiction as a product of its “transcultural” genesis. The concept of “transculturation,” coined by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in response to Malinowski’s concept of “neoculturation” and turned, brilliantly, to literary critical purposes by Ángel Rama, challenges the assumption that the clash of cultures experienced in
the process of colonization leads, necessarily, to the assimilation of one by the other. This holds true whether, as in the case of the fall of the ancient Roman empire to tribal invaders, the more “primitive” is formally subordinated to the more highly “civilized” culture of the conquered political entity, or whether, as in the case of most modern imperialist colonization of tribal and other pre-capitalist societies in Asia, Africa and Latin America, it is the cultures of the latter that appear to give way. Ortiz pointed to the strong and clearly living, self-reproducing presence of African cultural practices at practically all levels of Cuban society as grounds for concluding that politically or historically opposed cultures do nevertheless combine to produce new, syncretic or “transcultural” forms. In Transculturación narrativa en América Latina Rama argued in similar terms that the “neo-regionalist” fiction of, for instance, an Arguedas, needed to be read as the literary equivalent of such syncretic cultural forms—as fictions in which the modern, “civilizing” discourse of, to use Rama’s later terminology, the “ciudad letrada” (the “literate city” and its “cultured speech” or “lengua culta”) itself became the object of a cultural trans-coding undertaken by the discoursing subject of a “lengua popular.” And although Rama did not explicitly apply this thesis to Rulfo, it requires little imagination to link the sharp difference between Rulfo and the earlier, still essentially naturalist narrative of, say, a Mariano Azuela, to the stronger, more poetically formative presence in El llano en llamas and Pedro Páramo of “lengua popular.” Recall Rulfo’s much cited claim in his interview with Luis Harss to “escribir como se habla,” to “write as you speak.”

The objection I voiced in Modernism and Hegemony to this mode of interpretation was that, while convincing as a description of certain of the formal aspects of Rulfo’s narrative, it could furnish no grounds for concluding that El llano en llamas and Pedro Páramo were themselves the narrative embodiment, the authentic “voice” of the regional culture whose language they had adopted. In fact, it might be just as convincingly be argued that such a “transcultural” principle of narration served precisely to disguise, in a kind of populist masquerade, a deeper, reactionary and pathologizing representation of rural, peasant culture, placing Rulfo securely within the naturalizing ideology that stretches from Sarmiento down to the positivist ideologies of the porfirio. At best, the “transcultural” reading of Rulfo left this question in a condition of undecidability. Two terms—country and city, the oral and the written—were clearly being mediated. But which was mediating the other?

But it now strikes me that, whether invoked in defense of Rulfo or in a more critical spirit, the concept of transculturation effectively leaves untouched and unilluminated those literary or narrative qualities—what Alfonso Reyes once simply termed his “style”—that make Rulfo’s fiction so starkly emphatic and so apparently irresistible to most readers. The revised thesis I wish briefly to argue here, bluntly stated, is that Rulfo’s style owes, in the end, little or nothing to questions of cultural experience and nearly everything to those of historical experience. These are fictions about history before they are about culture, about time before they are about space.

But to understand why this is so we need to return again briefly to the theory of transculturation, at least in relation to the underlying problem to which it proposes (in my view) an abstract, mystificatory and thus false solution. This is the problem of the extreme social duality characterizing most Latin American (and indeed, “postcolonial”) national formations. But such duality subsists not only in the empirical fact of the deep divisions separating rich and poor, city and country, elite and popular culture, etc., in societies such as Brazil or Mexico but in a historico-ontological condition that fundamentally alters the social ground of national and regional experience itself. We recall here again how, in essays such as “Misplaced Ideas” and “Nationalism by Elimination,” Roberto Schwarz has argued that the seeming paradox of the Brazilian cultural and intellectual elite’s historical compulsion to discover its own national-cultural essence without, however, ceasing to import its ideas and fashions from the imperial metropolis can itself only be explained as a result of that elite’s near-total social and cultural alienation from the “Brazilian” masses. With its very social existence resting on forms of exploitation so extreme that the possibility of a shared or reciprocal national-cultural existence tends to zero—forms of exploitation that are the objective result of colonial and neo-colonial dependency—this class must experience its own national-cultural identity as a sort of desire incapable either of fulfillment or of extinction.

The essential point here, as argued earlier in the conclusion to chapter 6, is to grasp the cultural duality that separates rich and poor, city and country, etc. as a problem that cannot be solved on its own cultural terms. Its solution must be social, historical—and ultimately political. Thus, while transculturation may enable a more precise, empirical description of cultural life on its most immediate level in Latin America, it cannot give even the slightest indication of how to resolve the social dualities that are and continue to be the historically inevitable result of colonization and a persistently enforced neo-colonial relation to the global economic order. The very historical forces that have produced the deep cultural divisions reflected—more objectively than before, no doubt—in transcultural theory continuously reproduce these same divisions even as the spontaneous tendency to transculturation blunts their edges.

Now, if the historically determined forms of extreme social inequality that afflict national societies in Latin America can give rise to an experience of cultural duality, they might clearly generate much the same effect in the national or collective experience of historical time itself—especially in relation to the idea of modernity. It has now in fact become something of an intellectual commonplace to remark on the distinctly Latin American and perhaps generally “postcolonial” sense of being both modern and
within earshot of Juan Preciado, the full story can be told.) In the course of sporadic beginnings, but it is only now that, with Susana San Juan’s grave awakens Juan Preciado, now dead and buried, in their shared grave. (The Paramo will vividly recall, not just that he speaks only with the dead, but Pedro Paramo, a past that, in this precise sense, becomes its own present.

Putting aside the more abstract debate for now, however, we might at least agree on a description of this social experience of a split or dualistic modernity as, more simply, the experience of the present as non-self-contemporary. And it is precisely this historical experience of the non-self-contemporary that, I now think, lies at the root of Rulfo’s fictional style and that elicits a constant intensity of literary effect in El llano en llamas and Pedro Páramo. Rulfoian narrative does not depict or evoke this experience directly, however, but by means of a very simple, but ingenious twist: instead of a historical present that cannot shake off the past, we are told the story of its under-, or flip-side: of a past that, paradoxically, has no awareness of, no connection to the present from which it is re-experienced, a past that, in this precise sense, becomes its own present.

Consider, for example, the harrowing and uncanny chain of episodes in Pedro Páramo, from the beginning of the novel to the moment Dorotea re-awakens Juan Preciado, now dead and buried, in their shared grave. (The parallel narrative of Pedro Páramo himself has of course already had its sporadic beginnings, but it is only now that, with Susana San Juan’s grave within earshot of Juan Preciado, the full story can be told.) In the course of this narrative prelude, Juan Preciado discovers, as all readers of Pedro Páramo will vividly recall, not just that he speaks only with the dead, but that he himself—at precisely which moment seems infinitely debatable—has become one of them. What makes this particular instance of reversal or Aristotelian peripeteia especially unusual, however, is that the moment of recognition (anagnorisis) that accompanies it occurs not once but repeatedly: first when Eduviges Dyada tells Juan Preciado she has learned from his dead mother of his impending arrival; again when Damiana Cisneros informs him that Eduviges died years ago; yet again when Damiana herself vanishes as Juan Preciado suspects her as well of being an apparition, etc. The endless interpretive disputes as to whether the incestuous couple (Donis and his unnamed “sister”) that shelters Juan Preciado before his re-awakening in a grave are Comala’s only living inhabitants are in the end immaterial to the achieved, overall effect of this narrative device. This is the continuous barring or pre-emption of what the peripeteia in its classic form is designed, from a temporal perspective, to reproduce: namely, a sense of destiny or fate as the transparent linkage of past and present, as, for example, in Oedipus’ final discovery, after causing the death of his parents, of the truth of his own birth. In Pedro Páramo this sense of destiny, this formal, underlying unity of present and past takes the seemingly monstrous form of a reversal-cum-recognition that forces its heroic subject to lose sight of his own location or point of departure in the present. The hero’s fate is not only dark; it likewise fails to complete and therefore to redeem the past, to purge the present of past crimes and irrationalities. In Comala the dead literally bury the dead, and yet in doing so they deny this as a right or a capacity of the living. Juan Preciado comes to Comala, not, in Oedipal fashion, to discover the mystery of his birth and then to meet his downfall, but rather to discover that having been born is in itself no proof of living in the present.

Many of the shorter and, in some ways, more formally perfected narratives of El llano en llamas render this same effect less aggressively, but no less unequivocally. To return, for example, to “La Cuesta de las Comadres,” the focus of my earlier remarks on Rulfo in Modernism and Hegemony, we can note the same, so to speak, negative principle of peripeteia in the narrator’s abrupt confession that it is he who has killed Remigio Torrico. Recall that Remigio, together with his brother Odilón, had operated as the local cacique in the small village named in the title until after the land reform or “reparto,” when the villagers, still unable to break the hold of the Torricos, began abandoning the place. With no one left on whom to prey, the Torricos take to brigandage, forcing the unnamed narrator of “La Cuesta de las Comadres” to act as their henchman. Thus when the narrator, as the last remaining inhabitant of the village, confesses to having killed Remigio (after he is first accused by him of murdering Odilón) there is a strong predisposition on the reader’s part to treat this murder as a destined, poetically justified end. But this reading would in turn require, in accordance with the same poetic law, that the narrator too now leave the village, crossing over the same, mysterious horizon beyond which should lie—as we somehow instinctively know—the modern, the city, the fullness of history as the contemporary. Because he stays, however—ending his tale only with a vivid and gruesome description of his careful disposal of Remigio’s corpse—this expectant sense of a destiny about to be fulfilled is drastically altered. The horizon of the modern, of the present as self-contemporary, remains un-crossed, allowing the past in all its seeming irrationality and “barbaric” to prolong itself infinitely and irredeemably. Although not in so literal a fashion as with Juan Preciado, the hero of “La Cuesta de las Comadres” too is fated neither to live nor to die, but rather to be buried alive.

This is, in itself, a terribly grim perspective on the world. But it works brilliantly as a device for giving concrete narrative and poetic form to an experience of the modern as non-self-contemporary—an experience that
has innumerable means for ideological self-obfuscation at its disposal. It would be the gravest injustice to Rulfo to accuse him here of simply giving vent to a nostalgia for a lost past, in the style, say, of Jorge Isaac’s *Maria* or of *Gone with the Wind*. Such forms of nostalgia are themselves premised on an absolute assurance of the modern as present in relation to this “lost” past. The loss of the past is complete and irrecoverable because the present appears to have already closed off all the avenues that lead back to it. For political and social motives that may in the end be questioned, Rulfo refuses to believe in this ideologized present, and it is this negativity that gives his writing its profound artistic truth.

One must of course be careful not to exaggerate the scope of Rulfo’s narrative ingenuity in this respect. His fictions can, finally, do no more than produce the aesthetic effect of the non-self-contemporary as a kind of pervasive mood or atmosphere. That is why the shorter narratives of *El llano en llamas* often show greater formal integrity than *Pedro Páramo*, a “novel” lacking any real, overall unity of action. The Rulfian practice of “negative peripeteia” can, after all, only work as a kind of atmospheric catalyst. It cannot take the narrative that leads up to it any further than itself, and for this reason its novelistic or epic deployment can only take the form of a repetition. Still, the constant evocation of this unique historical atmosphere is sufficient to retain for Rulfo’s fictions their own readerly contemporaneity. Rulfo’s ghosts and fantasms are, *pace* magical realism, not real, but the spectral modernity from against whose backdrop they are conjured most certainly is. As the social and political crisis of this modernity assumes catastrophic proportions in Mexico and across the globe, Rulfo’s forays into a past both immediate and yet infinitely remote enact a form of historical desire that, if anything, has gained in intensity. His mastery as an ethnographic medium, together with an admittedly unequalled ear and eye for regional idiolects and customs, would not arouse the slightest interest were it not for Rulfo’s instinctive grasp of popular culture as a negative principle in relation to modernity’s false invocations of destiny. However intimate its narrative positioning, it is not merely a cultural landscape that Rulfo shows us. It is “culture” in its uncanny, temporal aspect as a past that has forgotten the present, a past that goes on speaking.