



Illustration based on a photograph of the Multidisciplinary Brigade of Support to the Communities of Mexico.

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Proper Names in “The Day of the Collapse”

The short story “El día del derrumbe” (The Day of the Collapse) turns one of the natural disasters most common in entire swathes of Mexico into a theme, making good use of Juan Rulfo’s tragicomic vein. The author always included hints of humor in his work, from black humor to irony, the paradoxical or unheard of situation with traces of sarcasm. Despite the painful undertone of a human tragedy caused by the battering dispensed by the earth, “El día del derrumbe” could be his lightest text, even lighter than the one that would be suggested to young readers as the doorway to the work of this author, born in Jalisco in 1917 and who died in 1986. This apparent paradox is achieved with the aid of several factors, among them, the names of both characters and places.

In principle, it should be said that “El día del derrumbe” could be a title for our writer’s entire oeuvre, since, like the rest of Rulfo’s corpus, it emphasizes one of the four specific situations or basic factors of any narration, whether oral or written, everyday or literary: who, to whom, where, and when. (In the end, this is a markedly situational text, in the sense that it deals with very specific moments in very concrete places, with rapidly identified characters easily distinguished and traced at all times.)¹ Then, it summarizes a story whose deeper structure coincides with almost all of Rulfo’s other works because it features dispossession, abandonment, a misfortune that becomes a tragedy.² And lastly, it explicitly mentions the notion of collapse, which is decisive for his entire work.³

It has been said that “El día del derrumbe” is the world upside down, typical of the carnival and carnivalization.⁴ Do the proper names both of characters and places reflect this hypothesis? In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle studies the

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kinds of questions and the different effects of the relationship between questions and affirmations and even possible variations of either in literary, oratorical, or philosophical texts.⁵ The beginning of “El día del derrumbe” reiterates the situational nature of the story and, characteristically, of Rulfo’s entire narrative: “This happened in September. Not in September of this year, but last year. Or was it the year before last, Melitón?”⁶

The story is constructed based on questions from the unnamed narrator with an imperfect memory and thanks to Melitón with his sharper memory. These questions are not rhetorical, but rather requesting information. The initial question is related to the proper name. The story contributes one or two suggestive traits to the onomastics of literature. Meanwhile, the first mention of a proper name teaches us here a stark strategy: linking a question to a name in a few brief opening lines, which, precisely because they are brief, makes all the elements stand out.

Melitón’s etymology may suggest that we are in an upside-down world: “Melitón” means “sweet like honey.” An early father of the Church, Melito of Sardis, from the second century, was a bishop and prolific author. Rulfo’s Melitón is not equally sweet, much less a theologian, although neither is he the antithesis of these: he is neither bitter nor acid nor satanic nor anything like these. Thus, in a first approach, we are not in the presence of a name that directly characterizes —like Pedro Páramo does— nor one that ironically characterizes —like that of the despised Juan Preciado).⁷

Now, all the names in Rulfo are characteristic even when they do not seem to characterize; in other words, they combine with the place, the era, the rural character, the Christian onomastic tradition that all served as the basis for the world narrated in each text, even when they do not all seem to have a more or less clear underlying meaning, whether direct or ironic. In other stories, names have been discovered with meanings that were not so clear, but after some analysis, are suggestive, like Macario and Felipa.

“El día del derrumbe” is almost identical to the story “Macario,” in which there is only one proper name: Melitón in the first, Felipa in the second. The only other anthroponyms in “El día del derrumbe” are “Liborio, the Keeper of the Seal” (tax collector) and the national heroes Benito Juárez, Miguel Hidalgo, and Venustiano Carranza, in addition to Merencio, a mere function at the end of the story, as the newborn son of the unnamed narrator, a son who does nothing but be born, because that way, the abandonment of the wife seems more reprehensible to the reader.

“Macario” and “El día del derrumbe” contrast in that the former is a monologue and the second is a discourse constructed through a dialogue that tentatively and sometimes precariously reconstructs an event.

Also, the governor’s speech gives rise to certain reflections: prediction is non-existent in the world of “El día del derrumbe,” and the military man himself reveals that in his doubly revealing words: he does not imagine that an earthquake can be predicted; nor does he imagine that, while a specific earthquake cannot be predicted, it is possible to anticipate the fact that, sooner or later, there will be an earthquake.

In terms of onomastics, one difference with flesh-and-blood people consists of the fact that in the real world, the name of the governing person is often that person’s identifier, while in the story, there are only two perspectives about that character and none of the two include a proper name: “the governor” and “my general.” Here, we confirm a clear tendency in the Jalisco-born author: if the political office is important, the reader will not be told the character’s proper name, since his function is more important.⁸ A second tendency is that the first-person narrator can remain nameless, as happens in “Nos han dado la tierra” (They Gave Us the Land), “La cuesta de las comadres” (The Hill of the Comadres), and “Es que somos muy pobres” (We’re Very Poor). In this case it is due, as we will see further along, not only to the fact that not mentioning the name emphasizes the nature of the story, which is a chat between acquaintances, but to the fact that the narrator behaves like the mass of people in the town, while Melitón is the only center that remains a center, without de-centering or eccentricity.

My general hypothesis is that Rulfo’s characters have points in common with us, even if they are from another time and if they live in tiny little villages or hamlets.

“El día del derrumbe” speaks to us not only because earthquakes are common in our country, just like the floods in “Es que somos muy pobres,” the droughts in “¡Diles que no me maten!” (Tell Them Not to Kill Me!), and the barren land in “Nos han dado la tierra.” It speaks to us because events are reconstructed, like what happens to us in reality, gradually, tentatively, and sometimes precariously. And it speaks to us because earthquakes become narrative: they are the source of stories that, days and hours after each quake, become the single and even inevitable topic no matter what efforts are made to the contrary.

After the September 7 and 19, 2017 earthquakes, even in December holiday gatherings, stories abounded about what each person had done, where he or she had been, how he/she had reacted, and what his/her relatives and acquaintances had done. The government response was the central issue in these stories, just as it was, in effect, a decisive factor in the events. With his habitual sharp eye, Rulfo captured the core of the problem when facing an earthquake, and in general, when facing a misfortune that should not turn it into a tragedy as described above: the relationship between those in government and the governed. The governor’s speech in “El día del derrumbe” mentions protection, but it is precisely protection that is nowhere to be found. What does appear are new kinds and examples of violence, separate from the natural violence of the earth; these kinds and examples are the fruit of the drunkenness portrayed in “La Cuesta de las Comadres” and that would reappear in a couple of passages from *Pedro Páramo*.

Naturally, the entire fiesta, the feast, breaks with the seriousness of the moment and leaves us with several lessons: how rituals hinder action during emergencies, how protocols are imposed on people. Up until this point, the reasoning is valid; however, it is routine. An observation by philosopher Emilio Uranga based on a sixteenth-century anecdote from Dominican historian Diego Durán allows us to enrich the link between earthquake and fiesta. José Manuel Cuéllar Moreno writes,

[Durán] once questioned an indigenous man who threw away his money on drunkenness and fiestas for the whole town, but the indigenous not only rejected the religious’s accusations, but made a very simple argument against them. . . : “Father, do not take fright . . . , we are still *nepantla*.” *Nepantla* is a Nahuatl term that . . . means

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“center, in the center, in the middle.” For example, in Tlanepantla (“place in the middle of the earth”) or San Miguel Nepantla, where Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was born. According to Emilio Uranga, this term also means, 1) being uprooted, alienated, or estranged, 2) being in the middle, 3) remaining in a neutral state, 4) abstaining from any law, [or] 5) participating in two opposing laws. This Nahuatl concept allows us to think about the incessant oscillation between one extreme and another.⁹

The fiesta then, is the return to the center, shaken by the earthquake. The ritual not only gets in the way; it also restores the order that has broken down. The feast in “El día del derrumbe” fulfills Uranga’s five points. Now, clearly, this uprooted, neutral center, superior to any law and contradictory, is unstable by definition and ends by creating more havoc than offering solutions. Alcohol and the other excesses of the flesh lead to a momentary, insecure center, incapable of establishing any kind of permanent order. The flow of life ends up recriminating the merry-makers for the neglect of the very person who had given life and who provides certainty and a more solid order than mere ritual: the wife of the unnamed narrator.

The other ritual remains, then; perhaps the true ritual, or at least the most constant, continual, or, rather, recurring ritual: the word, conversation, memory. The foregoing reflections illuminate two traits of the chat that makes up the story: the fact that Melitón does have a name and the fact that he has tired of telling the same story:

“Well, finally that little dandy came to tell us that it was Don Benito Juárez. And the things he said! Isn’t that right, Melitón? You, who have such a good memory, you must remember what that guy said.”

“I remember very well, but I’ve repeated it so many times that it’s a drag.”

“Well, you don’t have to. It’s just that these *señores* are missing out on something good.”

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Melitón remains lucid during the whole feast and is the memory capable of creating the conditions so that the rite of conversation—conversation as ritual—can be consummated (and, in the long run, consume itself in reiteration, since, because it is not an institutional ritual, it does not have the elements needed to guarantee its permanence beyond the will of more or less isolated individuals).

We people of flesh and bones do nothing else when we try to restore order after being shaken up by a natural misfortune in danger of becoming a social tragedy: we converse, we repeat the same stories, we fill them out, and we polish them all together.

At the end of the day, the essentially positive name “Melitón” coincides with the role played by the man of memory. If honey is physical food, memory is the ritual food for those surrounding Melitón. By contrast, the unnamed narrator behaves like that mass of humanity that requires a ritual to reestablish itself and for that reason does not deserve a name, even though even his newborn son has one.

And this explains why Rulfo, among all the options open to him, picked the conversed evocation or evocative conversation as the form to narrate the events: because that way he could unite the two rituals, the collective, commemorative feast and the ritual of conversation. ■■■

Notes

1 Only “El hombre” (The Man) poses problems of identification of those responsible for the words and actions, respectively, as a strategy for producing the effect that the pursuer will be pursued and the pursued has been the pursuer. Starting with the title, proper names are scarce in “El hombre,” and that creates the sensation that there is a loss of identity as the pursuit continues or as one is pursued.
2 Although the term “tragedy” has a normal usage covering all fatal misfortunes and accidents, literature and literary studies should distinguish between a simple misfortune and an authentic tragedy. The first is the result of natural events or because of carelessness with terrible consequences, while tragedy emerges from tension between people or within communities, as happens in the Greek genre that Aristotle studied in his *Poetics*. “El día del derrumbe” is the fruit

of a typical natural misfortune (an earthquake, which, in effect, is unpredictable), which can turn into a tragedy because those in government, builders, and inhabitants lacked foresight. But it can also turn into a tragicomedy because instead of helping the victims of the “ecipenter,” the characters organize a carnivalesque fiesta with fatal effects for some and ridiculous effects for others. Later, it will become clear that, even so, the fiesta is necessary as an attempt at a ritual that can restore order.

3 We now know, documents in hand, that Rulfo absorbed the poetry of Rilke. *Duino Elegies* is the most important book of the writer from Prague. Rulfo read this classic in more than one translation and version. The final verse of the tenth and last elegy had speaks precisely of a collapse, or in the translation Rulfo read, of a fall: “Und wir, die an steigendes Glück / denken, empfänden die Rührung, / die uns beinah bestürzt, / wenn ein Glückliches fällt” (And we, who have always thought of happiness climbing, would feel the emotion that almost startles when happiness falls.) (<http://www.geocities.ws/SoHo/1826/duino.pdf>, translation from the German by J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender). Besides the coincidence, we should note the importance of the notion itself as a crosscutting theme in both authors’ work: to Rilke it is enough to situate it in a place of such importance to throw it into relief; Rulfo uses it here explicitly, and elsewhere, implicitly. Apart from that, “El día del derrumbe” is the last story in the canonic work, since it was the last one written and published, together with “La herencia de Matilde Arcángel” (The Legacy of Matilde Arcángel).

4 See, for example Seo Eun Hee and Claudia Macías Rodríguez, “Lo carnavalesco en ‘El día del derrumbe’, de Juan Rulfo,” <http://www.biblioteca.org.ar/libros/151925.pdf>, March 18, 2018. Irene Rojas also quotes Friedrich Schmidt in an unpublished text.

5 “In regard to interrogation, its employment is especially opportune, when the opponent has already stated the opposite, so that the addition of a question makes the result an absurdity; as, for instance, when Pericles interrogated Lampon about initiation into the sacred rites of the savior goddess. . . . If a conclusion is put in the form of a question, we should state the reason for our answer. For instance, Sophocles being asked by Pisander.” Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, Book 3, Chapter 18, John H. Freese, trans., <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0060%3Abook%3D3%3Achapter%3D18>.

6 Juan Rulfo, *El llano en llamas* (Mexico City: RM/Fundación Juan Rulfo, 2017 [1953]), p. 135.

7 In Spanish, the name Pedro Páramo means “Peter Wasteland,” while the name Juan Preciado, a despised character, means “Juan Appreciated.” [Translator’s Note.]

8 In the article mentioned above, Seo Eun Hee and Claudia Macías Rodríguez note that Melitón was the mayor, and therefore, that what we had was one person in authority facing another: the lesser of the two, the local authority, does have a name, precisely because he is closer. By contrast, it does not seem defensible to say that this Melitón is the same one that appears in “Nos han dado la tierra” (They Gave Us the Land): the name is, in effect, the same, but the Melitón in “Nos han dado la tierra” has been defeated by, precisely, those in authority; in any case, it is true that both Melitóns suffer under the weight of a higher authority.

9 José Manuel Cuéllar Moreno, *La revolución inconclusa. La filosofía de Emilio Uranga, artífice oculto del PRI* (Mexico City: Ariel, 2018), pp. 22–23. I became familiar with this book due to the perspicacity, the inexhaustible intellectual curiosity, and the friendship of José Enrique Ampudia.