

Mauricio Molina and *Tiempo lunar*

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This article is part of a series of talks with young Mexican artists related to three words I am obsessed with: *temptation*, as a phenomenon of excited curiosity that drives the human being far away from the rest of nature; *eroticism*, as an act of will that defies the reproductive instinct; and *cannibalism*, as the tragic culmination of our impulse to know everything.

Mauricio Molina was born in Mexico City in 1959. In 1987, he published a book of historical research, *Crónica de Texas* (Texas Chronicle). While on a scholarship from the National Council of Culture and the Arts, he finished his first novel, *Tiempo lunar* (Lunar Time), which was awarded the José Rubén Romero National Novel Prize. Molina is currently at work on a second novel on Fray Servando Teresa de Mier, a book of short stories which will include "Mantis religiosa" (Praying Mantis), which was made into a film, and two collections of essays which have been published in several magazines and literary supplements. These include *El espejo de Hipólito* (The Mirror of Hippolytus), which he published in *Voices of Mexico* 23.

Temptation

For Mauricio Molina, temptation is the expression of what one does not have; the revelation that there is a lack, a

hunger, a hidden desire. Thus one can say that the novelist writes because he is tempted by the search for hidden knowledge. In *Tiempo lunar*, Molina creates a Mexico City with numerous appearances, a megalopolis similar to the one we now think we know, but whose reality has been exaggerated. The floods which inevitably appear during the rainy season now keep half the city permanently submerged.

The individual's isolation among urban multitudes is accentuated when the latter disappear, hide and are revealed to be the wandering dead. We discover a forgetful society, a Mexico that forgets its history, when Andrés—the protagonist—has a meeting with a librarian who seems more like the guardian of a labyrinthine cemetery of debilitated if not totally annihilated knowledge.

In the concrete jungle that we live in, the loss of time and objects has become an everyday event. These disappearances emerge in Molina's prose when we venture into the fascinating and confusing room of lost objects. Mexico City, a place in the navel of the moon, is immersed in an endless eclipse, a "state of exception." Mauricio Molina is a chimerical utopian, a compulsive exaggerator who isolates and defies his own otherness, as personified by Andrés, so as to reveal the enigmatic.

"The character is the same as the narrator," says Molina. "There's an examination of the feminine, a search

for the other. Temptation involves a mystical and sacred idea of woman. Our religiosity has traditionally obliged heroes to seek virility. Conversely, the great search in *Tiempo lunar* is for the female mystery, hidden, forbidden and subterranean. Milena's secret, her relation with the tides, the moon and the entire cosmos, is something that Andrés cannot understand."

Tiempo lunar concerns the temptation of moving towards the other to understand and assimilate him or her. Man examines the female mystery, while woman delights in the male universe. Molina does not propose a tranquil solution but rather an interminable struggle that derives from opposition itself. There is no primitive androgyne, in the Platonic style, but an original, fluctuating and insoluble opposition. In *Tiempo lunar*, we are assailed by the feminine secret sought by medieval poets and symbolists such as Baudelaire. The question that the narrative develops and solves is the same as the one posed by these poets and symbolists: "Why do I desire you?"

"Woman holds a secret that makes it impossible to know her. Milena is perhaps the manifestation of that secret, one which does not go beyond her body," says Molina. In fact, Milena's secret impregnates the entire novel. In the scenes where she does not appear, "femininity is manifested in the most ominous way."

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The feminine is a morgue of ancestral knowledge: the library. The feminine is a forbidden zone that we cannot fully know because it cannot be summed up; it is a room of lost objects. The feminine is expressed and vanishes senseless, without the need to mean anything, such as the mole¹ on Milena's thigh. The feminine submerges and swallows the whole city. We read, in one chapter of *Tiempo lunar*:

Groups of whores in the streets, in the folds of the avenues, on the edges of the parks, emerging from the dark, making their cigarettes glow from afar: the disdainful signals of urban fireflies. You go past slowly, peering through the windscreen spattered with raindrops and dust, at the tight clothes, the high heels sharp as fangs, the empty gaze behind impenetrable make-up. You observe the cautious and feline customs of their ghostly presence that is both attractive and awful.

This is death, or the dead woman, you think as you watch one draw nearer through the cold early morning. It is not a woman but rather a mere appearance, a weightless presence with no more density than puddles' electric mirages.

Eroticism

"Eroticism is the knowledge of death; going towards death and coming back with that secret. Wandering death appears in *Tiempo lunar* as the opposite of desire, and its complement. Eroticism is a representation, not an instinct. Unlike other living beings, humans are

obliged to establish representations of sexuality and male-female duality. Eroticism is poetics; sexuality is a language apart from words.

"To penetrate the mystery of eroticism, we have to pretend we are other people. When Milena and Andrés make love, there is a principle of representation; she puts on her make-up and he observes her like a work of art. Eroticism is a ritual. Sexuality is simply reproduction, while eroticism is a ritual, occurring in the here and now, with no future. Andrés' fear reveals the deep rituality of the erotic act, imbued with our desire to become archetypes and play the cosmic game of desire."

—So the erotic rite would be an invocation to make desire appear.

—Yes. And to make the dark side of men and women appear.

—Isn't desire the dark side?

—To a certain extent it is. Desire is the dark side of banal, everyday actions. Getting back to the idea of the moon... I tried to show people's hidden face. *Tiempo lunar* is a thriller, which can be read as a detective novel. But behind this there is an erotic search. Andrés' true face is not the one that goes in search of Ismael, but the one that seeks woman, the moon and what is forbidden to the senses. From this point of view, *Tiempo lunar* is a mystical novel. The protagonist searches for what is on the other side of appearances. I'm not sure whether I achieved this, but it is in fact a mythical search.

—Mythical or mystical?

—Both. Mythical because there is a search for archetypes, and the temptation to examine the feminine. Mystical because Andrés intuitively perceives that beneath human activities there are hidden energies and forces at play, of which we are an expression. The novel can be seen as a

coded story on the search for the sacred based on a concrete event—a futuristic Mexico City, demolished and full of strange events. Within eroticism there is a religious environment at play. Beyond what happens between a man and a woman, there are forces that propel us to closeness. Perhaps Milena and Andrés do not consciously know what they are doing, but they are pursuing the knowledge of desire. I would not like the novel to be thought of as a platonic search for opposites. Instead, I would like to hold onto the idea that there is a constant challenge, and that opposites never fuse. They are fatefully separated while seeking moments of union—violent moments or moments of intense erotic revelation. Plato's idea is irrelevant because the point is to present continuous opposition. There is no primitive united being, only two beings in continuous struggle.

—Devouring each other.

—Yes, exactly. That's the key word. Milena tries to get Andrés to enter this parallel universe where living beings disappear. The beings that disappear in *Tiempo lunar* are male. The women are always present.

—Like the city.

—Another female entity. Or like the water that swallows drowning men. From a symbolic point of view, what man swallows is that which is feminine: water, Milena, the city, the moon. Man tries to understand this, and understanding is another means of devouring. To understand the other is to devour and assimilate him. However, what is clear is that the other devours us, and it is in this exotic passion of journeying towards the other that the intensity of the story is found.

In the early morning, fever rises, ghosts appear and the awareness of

¹ The Spanish word for mole is *lunar*, which also means "lunar" (of or pertaining to the moon). (Editor's note.)



Jorge Santana, *Rupture*, watercolor and ink on paper, 1992.

time and last vestiges of reality are erased. Fever, that cold fire coursing through your veins, unsustainable fever, a flame that beats the body's unreal parts, a wave that consumes thought. Fever and its shadowy images, the specter of a burning woman pressed against one's body at night, a burning mare emerging from darkness. A madwoman in heat. A nightmare that spits forth curses.

Cannibalism

"The cannibal assimilates the other in order to understand him. Brazilian artists understood cannibalism from an interesting point of view; I'm thinking about the avant-garde: Drummond de Andrade, for example. They suggest

that Latin American culture is anthropophagous. America devours Europe and Asia. We devour those who try to conquer and oppose us. With regard to the erotic, this would be its final expression, its greatest crystallization, devouring the other in order to assimilate and understand it.

"What remains afterwards is the restoration of temptation. The only thing discovered by the cannibal that manages to devour, assimilate and comprehend the other is the temptation to go in search of more, in order to devour them. What remains after this terrible act of assimilation is more hunger. The act of cannibalism is a tragic act par excellence; you violate biological, human and divine

laws and yet you still have the desire to go on devouring. The cannibal is someone who is absolutely beyond the law. This is a hidden projection present in several mundane acts. True lovers are those who aim to devour each other —and given the impossibility of this, each one searches for himself within the other."

—According to Eric Bentley in *The Life of Drama*, the theater can be described in this phrase: A personifies B, while C looks at him. If, as you say, eroticism is an act of representation, at least in *Tiempo lunar*, could you define your terms?

—Let us say, arbitrarily, that A = Andrés and B = Milena. A attempts to personify B.

—So Milena is the manifestation of Andrés' desire?

—To a degree, although she is not just a manifestation of this but a projection, a ghost. Andrés faces the most terrible thing of all: the fulfillment of all his desires. The worst thing about desire is that it can be fulfilled.

—Who or what is C?

—Death, always present in the quest to assimilate the other and project him as a ghost of desire. This is a medieval idea; just think of the *dances macabres* or making love with death. As a result of my desire, I find myself facing death. The satisfaction of desire leads us to the knowledge of death. We say that orgasm is *la petite mort*. When a person loves another, he actually wants to die.

—Could we conclude that in *Tiempo lunar* life personifies love, while death looks at him?

—Perhaps, although those words are rather too precise for me. Death, which always intervenes, with its sardonic expression, seems to be telling them that they will not be able to assimilate each other, because the only means of assimilation is death. Death also represents the last great question. What would happen if a dead person came back to life? Gilgamesh wonders, as he looks at Enkidu's dead body, whether she will ever move again. Odysseus, following the rape of Circe, discovered the entrance to the land of the dead. In all our fatal erotic games, there is a corpse that mocks us.

Tiempo lunar cannot be reduced to a mere romantic science-fiction novel. The drama of Andrés and Milena is extrapolated to the whole of nature, involving everything that is alive and struggling against what is dead. All the novel's symbols are combined in the tiger salamander

that Milena feeds, in her apartment. The tiger salamander is an animal that buries itself in the mud and feigns death, although it has every power to live. What is striking is the tiger salamander's ability to remain still. The idea of metamorphosis: a living thing can represent death. What is dead throbs and walks, while the live characters in a novel are really dead.

"There is a wish to represent death beyond appearances," explains Molina. "The obsession with death is also present in nature, as is the desire for representation. The dead and the living devour each other. Short lives try to devour the immense silence of the cosmos."

—This creature called *Tiempo lunar*, a relative of the tiger salamander, is a rite of initiation. Anthropology has marked out and defined three stages for this type of rite, hasn't it? Let's see. 1) *Separation* is clear: Andrés leaves the city to embark on a journey, like Telemachus, in search of the feminine. 2) The *liminal stage*: the search, the state of exception, the meaning of a lunar eclipse and the tiger salamander. 3) The *incorporation*: the novel remains apparently unfinished when the protagonist emerges from the last point of the map (or the first, for Ismael, who in fact preceded him). We intuitively know what he is moving away from, as we ourselves move away from everyday events through reading. We are living in a liminal state, but we don't know where or how the hero becomes involved, as he gets out of the subway at Observatorio.

The author continues: —In a modern universe where God has died and all philosophical basis for

explaining the emergence of life has disappeared, the only way of continuing to establish rituals is by asking questions, not by providing answers. In the ancient world, heroes came back with answers because the world was explained and ordered by a mystical, theological entity. From James Joyce, Proust and Nietzsche's narratives onwards, the hero of a story embarks on a challenge with the unknown and returns with other questions.

—And more hunger.

—Once God had disappeared, together with all theological explanations about human beings, life, and the world, the hero came back with questions. This is the meaning of open works in post-modern times. We take up the quests from before modernity, and no longer return with complete answers. I am specifically referring to the opening up of contemporary art; it proposes no answers, just good questions. The reader should formulate his own interpretation. A good work of contemporary art, more than a piece of research into a specific social, historical or religious problem is, above all, a device for asking questions. It is not possible to establish answers in a world ruled by quantum physics, the theory of relativity and all the other things that the sciences have so kindly and terribly placed at our disposal. Works by Beckett, Calvin and Cortázar are great questions about mystery. Tarkowsky's movies simply ask what would happen if the world were not the way we see it. It would be a crime to shut the door on the range of possible interpretations.

—Because there are no conclusive answers.

—Exactly. In a world ruled by quantum mechanics, where the observer modifies what has been observed....

—So your characters are quantum particles that appear and disappear, depending on how the observer sees them.

—That is a marvelous interpretation of what is at the core of novel's concerns. *Tiempo lunar* is governed by the German physicist Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, and there are also certain ideas on the physics of chaos. If we cannot know the exact location of a particle at the microscopic level, the same can happen at the macroscopic level. There is nothing to say it can't be so.

I can say that a dead person gets up and walks through the street, or that a woman has a mole that appears and disappears. Until the early 20th century, a work of art was an answer to a series of questions, because reality was something that had to be explained. Nowadays, the challenge for the artist committed to the situation both of human knowledge and of contemporary life is not to explain reality but to discover it. To explain is to kill; interpretation destroys. The creation of ambiguous works, that are being continually opened, has been the basic principle of art from the '50s onwards. Why are we here? Why do I desire a particular woman? Why is woman unknowable? Why am I

hungry for her and she for me? What is mankind's situation with regard to the cosmos? The artist struggles to formulate minimal answers, because all answers produce new questions.

The end of *Tiempo lunar* is anticlimactic. Andrés' cycle of searching comes to a close and it becomes patently obvious that everything has been a representation. From a distant point of view, the reader's questions can be extended. Woman tempts man and captures him for a moment. Man sneaks away and wonders why females can never be captured, despite being seduced or raped (in one chapter of the novel, Andrés rapes Milena). The search never ends, the novel remains



Jorge Santana, Fish Palate, watercolor and ink on paper, 1992.

The mysterious disappearance of Ismael, the photographer of forbidden zones and secret places, introduces Andrés, the novel's solitary and melancholy hero, to a strange universe of unusual relations and correspondences. The maps, notes and photographs left by Ismael plunge Andrés into a deluded voyage across a Mexico City of the future, destroyed by the ecological, political and social problems of the present, where natural laws have begun to fail and time has changed. A dead man strolling through the streets, a librarian suffering from forgetfulness and a fascinating woman with an enigmatic mole on her thigh that appears and disappears are some of the secrets that Andrés encounters in his wanderings. At the center of this labyrinthine search is a fossil lake that refuses to vanish from the collective memory of the city, the same imperial city that the Aztecs called The Place in the Navel of the Moon. *Tiempo lunar* combines the techniques and themes of a detective story, tales of fantasy and science fiction, to provide an apocalyptic vision of what the future of the world's largest city could be. As the novel unfolds, it attempts to re-establish the ancient mythical relation between Mexico City and the moon, at the same time as it explores the symbolic possibilities of lunar aspects in their relation to the feminine.

Mauricio Molina

unfinished. Beneath feminine appearances, there is a hidden secret that can never be revealed.

Molina's characters are creatures in the laboratory of his literature. To us, they represent a futile little game; Milena's mole appears and disappears capriciously. Andrés' obsession grows with the lunar tides and might even disappear if he managed to understand these tides. The errant corpse injects life into the game. The librarian, the morgue's guardian, is afraid of forgetting, hates to forget and is immersed in the loss of his past.

Molina goes on to say:

—The lack of historical awareness is devouring us. The tree of knowledge has been chopped down. Man has become divorced from the earth and the past, and is in continual orbit, remote from nature.

We have lost the horizon of nature. Modern cities pulsate, removed from the organic quality of ancient cultures. The principle of ritual that man's continual defiance of nature provided has vanished. It seems that

nature has ceased to exist and only occurs as a secret. We live surrounded by carpets, and dead wood.

Nature takes us by surprise, catastrophically, with its telluric movements, its holes in the ozone layer, its acquired immuno-deficiency syndromes....

Finally, I wanted to write a coded novel that was somehow related to agnosticism. That is the basis of our world. The universe is malignant, there are forces at play in which we men are not involved. Therefore, we have to break the laws that have been imposed on us by a false demiurge. Basically, there is a revolution against nature that has been imposed on us, a rebellion against instinct which is resolved by means of representation. Eroticism involves rebelling against imposition. Man is a cosmic rebel struggling against the unknown, which he regards as terrible: the movement of comets, the phases of the moon, tides, earthquakes, cataclysms. Human laws governed by natural principles are innocuous if we think that one should

rebel against social, historical and natural impositions. I think, together with Oscar Wilde, that nature imitates art and that we artists generate new forms of behavior.

I shall have to erase the footprints that led me, at an uncertain hour, to places where no one should venture: to a dead street that preserves strange vestiges left by time, to a walled-up room of a ruined building watched over by a dead man, to a muddy alley near the old refinery. They lay hidden, like traps, disobeying the order of the world and things. These places inhabited by shadows, these ghostly constructions full of forgotten objects should never have been discovered: black holes, leading into nothingness. Unlucky the man who finds the way into these places. I saw the remains of those who had gone there, I saw their vehicles rust under unreal constellations, I met the woman who began all this. I know I shall never see her again X