

The City in Writing



Humor and Irony in the Contemporary Mexican Urban Short Story

Part I

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Mexico City went through many changes between 1975 and 1999. Perhaps the most notable of these, the one that seems to encompass the others, is its atomization, that is, the fact that the city has become an increasingly formless, unending conglomerate of many cities, all joined together in a single space that has come to be

called —without being a euphemism— the growing “urban blotch.”

Despite the current formal division of Mexico City in political wards, the real division enabling the recognition of areas of cultural homogeneity is what has been christened with the rather peculiar name “*colonia*,” or “colony.” Each of these areas usually covers no more than 10 or 12 streets, as can be verified on any Mexico City map. But what is really surprising for the attentive observer is that in

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Drawings by Héctor Ponce de León

some of these areas a particular unity of language, customs, rhythms and urban landscape has been preserved, characteristics that not only are distinctive, but have even generated a literary tradition of their own.

In this essay,¹ I show some of the trends in brief narratives produced in Mexico City in this 25-year period, in particular in works written using humor, irony and parody. With these literary instruments, the writers offer a critical, familiar, plausible view of urban life in which it is possible to recognize the most conflictive dimensions of a contradictory day-to-day existence.

The distinctive elements of this body of work include a hybrid form that combines literary narrative with urban chronicles, the use of language characteristic of precise areas of the city, experimentation with the conventions of the fantasy and detective genres and a reversal of the traditional relationship between the home and the street.

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SOME ROOTS

Humor as a writing strategy in urban stories and chronicles has some very valuable precedents in Mexico. Already in the first short prose pieces by Salvador Novo written in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, there is a certain modern, ingenious impertinence: “Big bills like the 10,000 peso note condescend to rub elbows with lightweights like one peso notes.”² Something similar can be said of Alfonso Reyes, whose humor is more light-hearted and care-free; see for example, the titles of a couple of 1931 urban stories: “Por qué ya no colecciono sonrisas” (Why I No Longer Collect Smiles), followed by “Por qué ahora colecciono miradas” (Why I Now Collect Glances).³ In a 1959 text, he concludes his description of city trash collectors like this:

There it goes up the street, every morning's parade float, gathering the world's relics to start another day. There, broom in their lance-rest, go the Knights of Trash. The communion bell rings. We should all kneel.⁴

The *La Familia Burrón* (The Burrón Family, a play on words that roughly translated means “the Donkey Family”) comic book narrative chronicles a life style in which the family network is still the enjoyable center of solidarity in social relations.

The early 1950s gave us another direct antecedent of contemporary humorous narrative: the parodies of detective stories by Pepe Martínez de la Vega. His main character, detective Péter Pérez, became a very popular radio personality at the time. He is able to solve problems on an empty stomach in exchange for a cup of *atole* and a tamale sandwich, based on his experience as a denizen of the poorest part of Mexico City, Peralvillo and environs. So, for example, Péter Pérez solves that classical enigma of detective fiction, the mystery of the closed room (where a crime is committed in a closed room without forcing

the lock) using his familiarity with urban living conditions: the criminal was able to enter the room because the house owners were so poor that they never had enough money to put a roof on it.

Jorge Ibarguengoitia's well-known short stories, written between 1968 and 1976, continue to have surprising vitality in the last decade of the century, which is why they have been included in several volumes of materials originally published in daily newspapers. Ibarguengoitia's humor, particularly in the stories of his 1967 *La ley de Herodes* (The Law of Herod) display permanent surprise in the face of the catastrophes of our peculiar urban idiosyncracies.

One of the most representative stories in the literary history of Mexico City is "Cuál es la onda" (What's Doin'?) by José Agustín, published in 1967, which makes a strong critique of government demagoguery. Before finishing their nocturnal tour of the city, Raquel and Oliveira get into a cab whose driver gives them his personal view of the government radio program, *La hora nacional* (The Nationwide Hour):

No, it don't bore me neither; I think it's good. The thing is that you hear all about how progress is a good thing an' all about progress an' stability an' the communist menace everyplace, 'cause don't ya think they tire a body out with all that gab? In the papers and on the radio and on TV and even in the toilet —your pardon, miss— they go on about it. Sometimes it seems like it prob'ly can't be so true if they have to repeat it so much.⁵

This critical view was not only part of the cultural climate at the end of the 1960s, but it also established an almost journalistic form of narration adopted by a whole generation of urban writers. In contrast with the self-pitying, nostalgic intimism dominant in previous years, Mexican short-story writers in this decade began a more critical, pro-active tradition whose natural writing strategy was characterized by an irony that appealed to their readers' complicity.

CROSSING THE LITERARY FRONTIER

Our history, however, begins in the second half of the 1970s when writing style, genre and velocity changed noticeably.

One of the distinctive traits of the post-modern narrative that emerged in the last 25 years is its hybrid, protean nature. In particular, the writing of numerous contemporary urban narrators explores the increasingly vague borders between short stories and chronicles without ever abandoning its ironic tone and parodying intent. This is the case of *Crónicas romanas* (Roman Chronicles) by Ignacio Trejo Fuentes, *Crónicas imaginarias* (Imaginary Chronicles) by Juan Villoro, the university chronicles in *Cartas de Copilco* (Letters from Copilco) by Guillermo Sheridan and Carlos Monsiváis' sharp observations about the fleeting nature of everyday excitement.

If we think of caricaturists as chroniclers who practice their craft with extreme brevity





and conciseness, we must include those who structure extremely brief narratives in the form of comics with 8 to 10 frames. This is the case of Jis, who has explored the possibilities of a necessarily urban black humor in his series *Policías y ladrones* (Cops and Robbers) (1997), originally set in Guadalajara. El Fisgón, another cartoonist, recently published his own urban narrations with the revealing title of *Cruentos policíacos* (Cruel Cop Stories) (1998).

One of the most outstanding short-story writers who has explored the frontier between the short story and the chronicle in the last two decades of the millennium is Juan Villoro. His brief volume *Tiempo transcurrido* (Time Passed) brings together 18 stories laconically titled for each year between 1968 and 1985, both years central for understanding the changes in Mexico City's urban culture. In the story corresponding to 1976, we meet Rocío, a woman symbolic of her generation with an ethical viewpoint and a look that attracts more

devotees every day. Villoro draws her in a way that by no means leaves aside the social aspects, but goes beyond that to make her an archetype that can be colored in almost at will:

Rocío was liberated, but she wasn't crazy. Rocío read books, but if they had already been made into a film, she went to the movies instead. Rocío had a cute little figure, but she didn't go out without a bra. Rocío didn't admire the gringos, but she didn't favor the Russians either. Rocío approved of premarital relations, but she didn't sleep with Fredy until they had already been engaged for six months. Rocío was modern enough to subscribe to *Cosmopolitan*, but old-fashioned enough to not pay any attention to the "techniques to drive your man crazy." Rocío was not a middle-class chick from the Ibero University, but she also was not about to study with the lower-class boors at the UNAM. So she enrolled at the Metropolitan University's Xochimilco campus. Rocío was feminine (she liked to wear make-up and cook), but she believed in women's independence (she wanted to study neurophysiology).

In brief, Rocío was neither up-tight nor a nympho, cultured or uncultured, a leftist or a right-winger, cosmopolitan or provincial, submissive or domineering, or very daring or very dull.

At a time when musical tastes were divided as never before and young people became a stampede of Hamlets in search of decisions ("What do you like, rock or disco music?"), Rocío was indifferent.⁶

Óscar de la Borbolla, for his part, has created his own Mexico City urban genre: the *Ucronías* (U-chronicles), news about the impossible, originally published in a newspaper column and later gathered in a collection of short stories. Let us look at the first paragraph of a story called "La familia mexicana" (The Mexican Family):

Frightened by the severe crisis that is crumbling the family, that sick cell, that neurosis-making

molecule or badly finished building brick of our society, numerous psychoanalysts, bartenders, priests and taxi drivers decided to join forces and knowledge to undertake the salvation—as far as generalized rejection would allow—of this out-of-date basic form of humanity. To that end and after much discussion, they recently agreed to create the Unified Movement of Lovers, the UMA, whose main objective is, obviously, to safeguard that strategy for living together—one of many—called the family.⁷

The other “*ucronías*” have themes like the advantages of dying, the creation of a Party of Ego Lovers (or PIE), and a documented history of corners. In “Tengo hambre” (I’m Hungry), the author confesses, “to making some additional income by subletting my subway seat and my place in the tortilla mill line.”⁸

As De la Borbolla himself says, the book is a series of brief texts that are “crisscrossed with a corrosive sense of humor that uses laughter as a lubricant to introduce ideas, fantasies and critiques that shake up people’s consciousness.”⁹ It is unabashedly an allegorical strategy of the contemporary urban chronicle.

IN THE BEGINNING THERE WAS LANGUAGE

In this city fiesta that is reading brief urban prose, we can find homages to urban language, whether in its regional varieties (such as in Emiliano Pérez Cruz’s narrative) or its peculiar idiolect (such as in some of Lazlo Moussong’s stories). Let us look at a playful version in this fragment from Rafael Bullé-Goyri’s “Diálogo con una secretaria” (Conversation with a Secretary):¹⁰

- Good afternoon, miss. My wife told me that the doctor was asking about our dog’s condition and I’m here to give it to him.
- You’re going to give the dog to the doctor?
- No, miss, I’m going to give him the condition.
- Well, the doctor isn’t in. Tell me about it.

- I don’t know, miss. Maybe if you call the local bar you can find him.
- I don’t mean the doctor, I mean her.
- Who do you mean? The dog or my wife?
- The dog, of course, sir.
- Well, it seems like the hair isn’t falling out anymore.
- Well, no, actually, I use a great shampoo made out of aloe. I don’t know how you’d notice it on the phone...¹¹

In “El caló como acto de justicia” (Slang as an Act of Justice), Lazlo Moussong shows the wealth of the underlying meaning in the slang used by urban police. Let’s look at a fragment of the narrator’s lexicological exploration after one policeman gives instructions to another about how to continue with an interrogation.

“Play the drums and see if he plays the trumpet, but if the mariachis are quiet, tune in to the AM station” (*Hit him in the stomach to see if he talks and if he doesn’t, give him some electric shocks with the cattle prod.*)

I confess that I continue to be surprised at the peculiar way the officers expressed their legitimate differences with the government, which is why I asked,



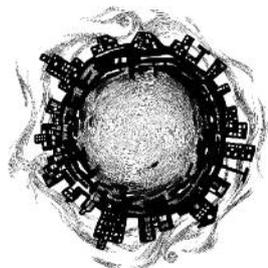
“And why are you promoting this former president?” (*Why are you investigating this poor son-of-a-bitch?*)

“Well, we caught him in the middle of the revolutionary family¹² and now he’s explaining inflation to us.” (*He belongs to a gang of thieves and now he keeps telling us lies.*)¹³

Emiliano Pérez Cruz uses urban language characteristic of Nezahualcóyotl City, the largest, most densely populated city in the world. In “Recordar es volver a gatear” (Remembering Is Going Back to Crawling) from his book *Borracho no vale* (Drunk Is No Good), he exhibits the ingenuity of the “Neza” dialect.

In his stories, we can recognize the marks of migration from countryside to the city, the forms of interaction that mix work and eroticism and the diversity of jobs characteristic of economically marginal urban areas.

Emiliano Pérez Cruz is one of a group of writers who have registered, with a dose of humor, irony and precision, the day-to-day existence that was also marginal to urban narrative until they began to write. Among this group are Armando Ramírez (the chronicler of the Tepito neighborhood, in downtown Mexico City), José Joaquín Blanco, Hermann Bellinghausen and a long etcetera that has already merited a first anthology, *El fin de la nostalgia* (The End of Nostalgia), published by Valverde y Argüelles in 1992, and the more recent publication of a collection of urban chronicles put out by the National Council for Culture and the Arts under the simple title *Periodismo cultural* (Cultural Journalism).¹⁴



NOTES

¹ This article is an abridged version of an essay first published in Lauro Zavala, comp., *La ciudad escrita. Antología de cuentos urbanos con humor e ironía* (Mexico City: Solar, Servicios Editoriales, 2000), pp. 13-28.

² Salvador Novo, *Nueva grandeza mexicana. Ensayo sobre la ciudad de México y sus alrededores en 1946* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1988), p. 46.

³ Alfonso Reyes, “Ficciones,” *Obras completas*, vol. 23 (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1990), p. 102.

⁴ In Mexico, the trash man announces his presence by ringing a bell as the truck goes up the street. [Translator’s Note.] Reyes, op. cit., p. 102.

⁵ José Agustín, “Cuál es la onda,” *Inventando que sueño* (Mexico City: Joaquín Mortiz, 1967), p. 75.

⁶ Juan Villoro, *Tiempo transcurrido. Crónicas imaginarias* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1986), p. 49.

⁷ Óscar de la Borbolla, *Ucronías* (Mexico City, Joaquín Mortiz, 1990), pp. 89-91.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

¹⁰ Rafael Bullé-Goyri, *Bodega de minucias* (Xalapa, Veracruz: Universidad Veracruzana, 1996), p. 145.

¹¹ Parts of this quote are untranslatable because in Spanish, the subject of a sentence is often understood and not explicitly stated, thus leading to the confusion between the doctor’s location and the dog’s condition. In addition, in Spanish, all nouns and pronouns have gender, and there is therefore no pronoun for “it,” thus leading to the confusion between how to find the doctor and how the dog is doing, as well as whose hair is no longer falling out. [Translator’s Note.]

¹² The “revolutionary family” was the name given to the government party elite. [Translator’s Note.]

¹³ Lazlo Moussong, *Castillos en la letra* (Xalapa, Veracruz: Universidad Veracruzana, 1986), p. 151.

¹⁴ Of course, some of these chroniclers have also merited special studies that show their literary richness and aesthetic and ideological breadth. See Linda Egan, “Lo marginal en el centro,” *Las crónicas de Carlos Monsiváis* (Doctoral thesis, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1993); Linda Egan, “El ‘descronicamiento’ de la realidad (El macho mundo mimético en Ignacio Trejo Fuentes),” *Vivir del cuento (La ficción en México)* (Tlaxcala, Tlaxcala: Universidad Autónoma de Tlaxcala, 1995), pp. 143-170; Gerardo de la Torre, “Periodismo cultural: palabras en juego,” *Memoria de papel. Crónicas de la cultura en México* 10 (1994), pp. 5-35; Carlos Monsiváis, “De la Santa Doctrina al Espíritu Público (sobre las funciones de la crónica en México),” *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica* 35 (El Colegio de México, 1987); Carlos Monsiváis, “Apocalipsis y utopías,” *La Jornada Semanal*, 4 April 1999, pp. 3-5.