

Los acordes esféricos

(The Spherical Chords)

Ignacio Díaz de la Serna

Ediciones ERA/Conaculta

Mexico City, 2005, 129 pp.

The first lines of a novel are always extremely important. How many of those beginnings will we remember forever? “In a village in La Mancha (I don’t want to bother you with its name)...”; “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul...”; “Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.”

Los acordes esféricos (The Spherical Chords), a novel by Ignacio Díaz de la Serna, also begins with a fortunate phrase: “I surmise that Ireneo began writing the *Diary* a little before setting up in Madrid.” Ireneo. I immediately think not of a novel, but of a story by Borges, “Funes el memorioso” (Funes, the Memorious), which introduces us to the unforgettable Ireneo Funes, in whom a blow to the head caused a kind of inverted amnesia that made him remember everything he had experienced in absolutely minute detail.

How risky to start a novel with the word “surmise”! What commitment for the writer! And I ask myself whether the novel will manage to live up to its first phrase, “I surmise”. If



it stirs all these reactions in me, it is a good beginning; it makes me want to know more about Ireneo, his *Diary*, his Madrid, the eighteenth-century atmospheres that our author

reconstructs so well, and about the “I” who is doing the surmising and has spent two years and seven months of his life studying that *Diary*. This is how I got into reading the novel that I read in a single, delightful sitting.

We could deal with it from very different angles because it is enormously rich. However, I would like to point out the part of it that is an homage to Jorge Luis Borges, who in turn pays tribute to the *Thousand and One Nights*, to the thousand and one stories that enthrall the king, who, for both Borges and for Díaz de la Serna, is the reader. Which reader? The reader of *Los acordes esféricos*, who cannot help but be trapped by the novel’s suspense.

Let us be clear: the text is about the research-reconstruction by a twenty-first-century man of a diary written by a man named Ireneo, born in New Spain and who decided to travel to Spain to visit the land of his parents. In this Borgian dialogue the reader is enticed into, Díaz de la Serna imagines, I believe, what a diary by someone like Ireneo Funes would be like. Borges calls him memorious, someone who remembers everything but notes down in his diary only what he wants to for the pleasure of the game he establishes with the reader, for the pure pleasure of the telling. Thus, practically at the beginning of the novel, the narrator-researcher announces what he has found in the diaries and that, to a certain extent, marks the development of the novel.

Thus, for example, the reader follows the description of a monument, which is abruptly cut off, and a digression unexpectedly emerges about the nature of demons; he renews the chapter about Cunqueiro that he had dropped 40 folios back, continues single spaced with the theme of the protests against the king, from there jumps to the Gaspar episode, and dedicates the end of the day to pondering the recipe for some little rum-soaked pastries.

Where did the monument end up?

It’s 100 folios ahead, among the couplets by old Nereus and Madrid’s butcher shops.¹

Los acordes esféricos causes pleasure through what is narrated in the diary, but above all because it takes us masterfully into the game of narrating. Playfulness is just as important for Díaz de la Serna as for Borges, and this is clear throughout the novel. Erudition is another essential shared trait, and it confuses serious readers, who perceive that the greatest pleasures of narrating and reading lie in being playful. That is, erudition is part of the game, not something external to it.

The title, *Los acordes esféricos*, which seemed so enigmatic to me, is justified in the development of the novel, and is a kind of homage to Borges’ “El Aleph.”² In Díaz’s novel, dreaming—particularly dreaming in the eighteenth century, a time alien to the cinematographer—is an experience that happens all at once and not as a succession of images. In the dream, you receive everything at once, simultaneously, like what happens to Carlos Argentino in “The Aleph.” Definitely, what for Díaz is a spherical chord, for Borges is an aleph.

“Already aboard the galleon that brought me to these lands, my dreams began to happen in spherical chords.” By describing it in these terms, Ireneo tries to put into words a strange experience that perturbs him and whose meaning he cannot manage to unravel. What does it consist of? When he dreams, action *does not develop*. Events are simultaneous, they all appear at once. Nothing, nobody, maintains order because the ingredients of each dream are compacted into a single instant. The activity of dreaming does not unfold in sequential time; it does not include a “before”, a “during” and an “after.” On the contrary, it is an explosion, a blaze. It does not last. That Ireneo calls this experience a “spherical chord” simply shows his taste for music. I do not think it is a Pythagorean allusion.³

The narrative game is complicated as we make our way into Díaz de la Serna’s game. For that reason, in the game of mirrors that is life, the narrator is fascinated by a diary like the one he has in his hands and that somehow narrates what is happening to the narrator, who in turn is invented by the writer who invents the diary and the character of Ireneo; an Ireneo whose last name is Díaz, as we discover at the end of the novel. If we reduce him to his initials, I.D., we find that both the author and the character share them, and we deduce that the “I.” of Ireneo is the “I” of the memory personified in the memorious Ireneo Funes, he who travels through memory to encounter an entire tradition, that of Moorish, Jewish and Christian Spain; who travels to the Americas with its conquistadors, with their baroque nature, their religiosity, and which, like carrots, in contrast with leafy trees, “grows inward, slim.” If this is the case, the “I” is shared with that of Ignacio, making Ireneo and Ignacio Díaz identical. Ireneo is the memory of a tradition that Ignacio has in his blood and in his last name, because Díaz was also El Cid. Thus, life and literature are confused in a torrent that, like a dream, makes itself present and vanishes in an instant. For this reason, the end of the novel says:

Thus, in this evil smelling bog where we float together, adrift, the dead and the forgotten dead, lies forever the Creole Ireneo Díaz, without a cross, without a headstone, without a name.⁴

The enigma of why someone spends two years and seven months of his life deciphering Ireneo's diaries is resolved at the end. As we just pointed out, Ireneo is interesting because he is Ignacio himself. The demons who beleaguer Ireneo in his diary are the same ones that somehow torment the narrator-researcher-writer today.

"I feel that I'm falling apart in mummy flesh." Starting from a place, a mask is buried. A little after it arrives, another mask replaces the first one.

The repertory of that mummy flesh is infinite. As it changes location, masks fall apart and are shaped, they disappear and are drawn. Ireneo is no hypocrite; he is an apprentice acrobat, living between his incessant death and resurrection. The present is no more than the biography *that was and will be* where the cadavers turn.⁵

But Díaz de la Serna does not let us go so easily. Another turn of the screw traps us and is the one that happens when Ireneo wants to return to New Spain. At the moment that he says good-bye to Juan, his Spanish friend, Juan gives him a book, *The Gospel of the Nomads* by Ireneo the Good. Like Borges, Ignacio invents a rare book and in a footnote, the narrator tells us:

Thanks to my friend Philippe's instinct for finding curious books that have been unfortunately forgotten by men, I came upon a copy of the *Evangelio de los nómadas* [The Gospel of the Nomads]. Today, only two copies of the only translation into Spanish printed in 1743 survive. One is in the parish archives of Freixedas, a city in Portugal's Beira Alta region. The second is in the Salamanca University Library, in the rare book section, under the catalogue number PJT049/2592/C03.

When I found it, the well preserved copy was between a little treatise on horsemanship published in Oviedo at the end of the seventeenth century and *Sylvas espirituales para el entretenimiento del alma christiana* [Spiritual Verses for the Entertainment of the Christian Soul], written by His Excellency Don Miguel Santos de San Pedro, who had been the bishop of Soria and Plenipotentiary Counselor of Ferdinand V in the Supreme Council of the Indies. According to the title page, the work by Ireneo the Good was translated from the Latin by

Father Friar Lorenzo Aldave Gomar, the prior of the Saint Katherine the Martyr Monastery in the city of Ávila. It was printed by Martín Santiago Ribas at his own expense, at number 4 Hilanderas Street, next door to the Portería de la Concepción Gerónima in Salamanca. It was approved by Reverend Father Vicente Navarro of the Society of Jesus, a Reader in Theology and Judge of the Holy Inquisition, and Father Friar Miguel Ruiz de Berlanga, also a Jesuit.

Finding that copy made it possible for me to follow exactly the allusions that Ireneo makes in the *Diary* to the book by Ireneo the Good.⁶

The narrative game that Díaz de la Serna proposes is delicious and, like all fantastic tales, it creates doubt. It sows a disquiet that makes us ask ourselves if the book we are reading is *The Spherical Chords* or *The Gospel of the Nomads*. If it is, the book I am reviewing here is not this one, but a different one, and is the same one, dating both from 1743 and 2005. Is the temporal, narrative game linked to the demons that appear in the novel? I will leave that question to its next readers, hoping that they discover the mysteries of *The Chords of the Nomads* or *The Spherical Gospel*, and that they delight in Díaz de la Serna's erudition, in the intratextual, historical and other games proposed in this, his first novel. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Ignacio Díaz de la Serna, *Los acordes esféricos* (Mexico City: ERA/Conaculta, 2005), p. 10.

² "Under the step, toward the right, I saw a small iridescent sphere of almost unbearable brightness. At first I thought it was spinning; then I realized that the movement was an illusion produced by the dizzying spectacles inside it. The Aleph was probably two or three centimeters in diameter, but universal space was contained within it, with no diminution in size. Each thing (the glass surface of a mirror, let us say) was infinite things, because I could clearly see it from every point in the cosmos." "The Aleph," at <http://web.archive.org/web/2006041201300/wolcano.host.sk/web/txt/borges/aleph.html> translated by Norman Thomas Di Giovanni in collaboration with the author.

³ Díaz de la Serna, op. cit., pp. 31-32.

⁴ Ibid., p. 129.

⁵ Ibid., p. 65.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 100-101.

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