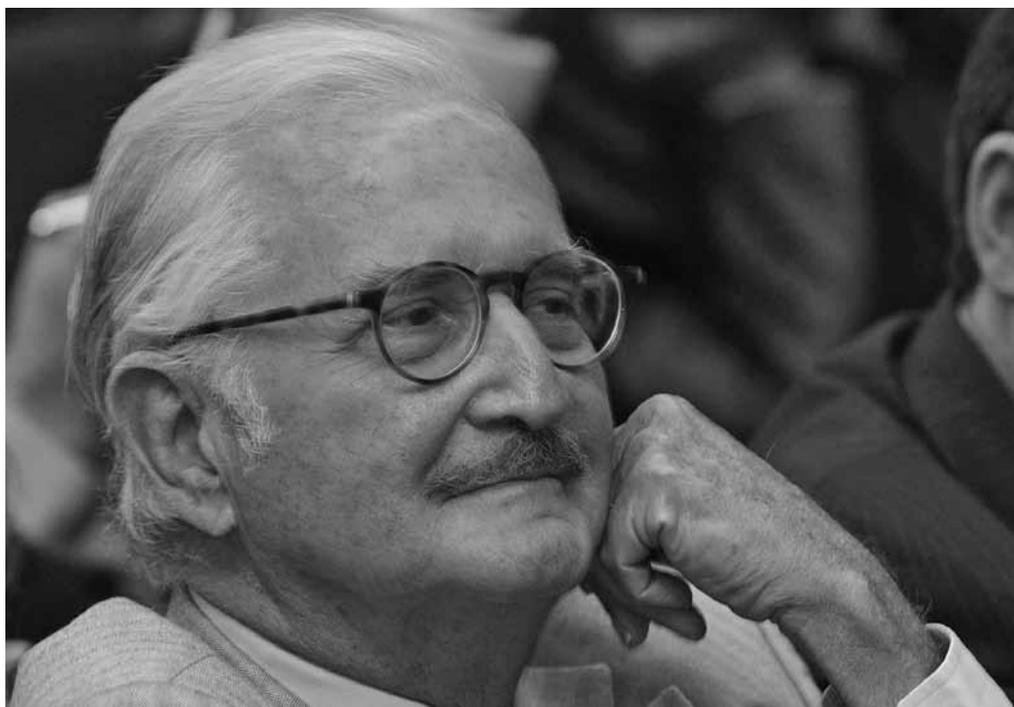


The Art of Dialogue With Oneself

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In the best Balzacian tradition, Carlos Fuentes carries on a continuing dialogue with himself in his work, introducing the reader into his own world. This is undoubtedly the most profound meaning of the creation of novels: the possibility of knowing and becoming intimate with ourselves, with ourselves and that “other” that we also are.

The manifestations of this incessant dialogue are practically inexhaustible in Fuentes’s work. For example, on one

page of *Aura* (1962), we find in the making the complete project of *Terra nostra*, which would come out 13 years later. The protagonist, Felipe Montero, says to himself,

If you could save at least 12 000 pesos, you could spend almost a year doing your own postponed, almost forgotten work. Your great overall work about the Spanish discoveries and conquests in the Americas. A work that would summarize all the disperse chronicles, make them intelligible, find the correspondences among all the enterprises and adventures of the Golden Century, among the human prototypes, and the greater event: the Renaissance.

It is significant that in the author’s shortest novel, he already announces —13 years ahead of time and with what

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precision!— his most ambitious, longest work. We also find this dialogue of the author with himself in works set in Mexico City and in the characters of his novels and short stories. For those who consider literature a verbal conquest of reality, there is no better way to possess something than by reading it: knowing its true name, that hidden name that every writer seeks even if he doesn't know it. Thus, literature is capable of impregnating certain cities and covering them with a sheen of mythology and resistant images over the years that are more lasting than the “real” architecture and history. This is what has happened with *La región más transparente* (*Where the Air Is Clear*), which continues to be the best portal we have to that Mexico City, so different from today's.

All that changed, and Carlos Fuentes has taken it upon himself to write a chronicle of that city that “threatens to eat each of its inhabitants alive, whether victims or predators,” as he says five decades later in *Todas las familias felices* (*Happy Families*), where he writes “What was left of the old City of Palaces? A big supermarket full of cans of blood and bottles of smoke? Blood and hunger, basic consumer items in the monster-city.”

From *Where the Air Is Clear* to *Happy Families*, the real Mexico City is the book itself, the books through which Carlos Fuentes shows us a cherished city “condemned to death,” and its transformation into an atrocious urban sprawl, but subtly suspended in our memories.

Another example of Fuentes's ability to dialogue with himself through his texts can be found in *Cambio de piel* (*A Change of Skin*), published in 1967, but in which a topic is left unfinished and is taken up fully years later in *Instinto de Inez* (*Inez*), published in 2000. *A Change of Skin* portrays a group of Jews in a concentration camp singing their own prayer for the dead when they perform Verdi's *Requiem*. The conductor finds the instruments in the most unexpected places, and a chimney brush becomes an improvised bass fiddle. At one point, the conductor talks about that “other” place where the musical interpretation will really be performed—even



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though they have before them their own executioners—and says, “The human voice, just because it is one, invents a joy that goes before the sadness of death.” That same human voice, with its implicit joy, that comes out of *A Change of Skin* is the true protagonist of *Inez*. The voice that takes on board the invention and the pain of the world and even our possibility of salvation.

Music, says Gabriel Atlan-Ferrara, the protagonist of *Inez*, is halfway between nature and God. With luck, it communicates the two. And with art, we musicians—he could say, “we writers”—are the intermediaries between God and nature.

We again encounter here the author in dialogue with his own work, but also with history, philosophy, psychology, art, and literary theory. Fuentes holds that the writer's obligation is to conjugate the times and tensions of human life verbally; imagine the past and remember the future; remember and write everything, from the beginning of time to the ultra-modern today and beyond. Every writer names the world, but Latin American writers—Carpentier, Rulfo, García Márquez, Cortázar, and Fuentes himself—have been possessed by the urgency of the discoverer: “If I do not name, no one will name; if I do not

write, everything will be forgotten; if everything is forgotten, we will stop being.” Thus, it is possible to understand his anxiety and obsession for putting everything into an immense body of work, impossible to encompass like time, like history itself.

This is why the theme of a work like *Terra nostra* is the Latin American utopia; the will and the passion through four centuries of a common history between the old Spanish world and the new American world, a utopia that seems like the be-all and end-all of History, and against which History has never stopped conspiring.

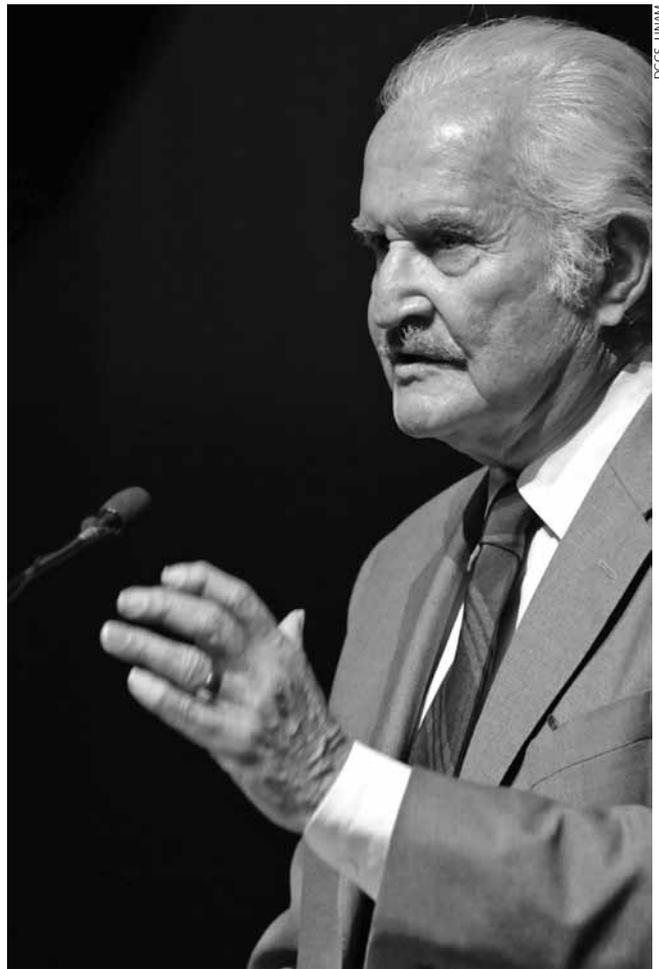
Beyond themes and situations, what is manifest is the search for a first and last heaven, the place that real history has not yet bitten, not yet lived at the expense of, the primitive beach that the protagonist of *Terra nostra*, that re-born Adam, naked, comes ashore on. It should be pointed out that in Fuentes’s work, the characters always revive in that same land that saw their births, but that the art of the novelist has turned into “another” place. For example, in *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (The Death of Artemio Cruz):

You’re going to live. . . . You’re going to be the meeting place and the reason of the universal order. . . . Your body has a reason. . . . Your life has a reason. . . . You are, you will be, you were the universe incarnate. . . . For you the galaxies will light up and the sun will burn. . . . For you to love and live and be. . . .

Also, there are the three theses of *Cumpleaños* (Birthday), which could be the same ones for all the author’s novels: “The world is eternal, therefore there was no creation; the truth is dual, therefore, it could be multiple; the soul is not immortal, but the common intellect of the species is unique and everlasting.”

In *Terra nostra*, Spain is the old world that has ended up being recognized as uninhabitable and hopeless. By contrast, the Americas are the new, open world, offering spaces to build a new Golden Age. But in addition, living in both worlds there is a third that contains and transcends them: Eternity, the great illusion of History, where men are with God or are God; a world where History and Culture are the path and the battle of men from and toward that place.

Fuentes sees himself as a heretic in the sense that Cervantes would use the term, someone who will continue the word of the only religion that we can deserve. He says, “Dogma was proclaimed so heresy could flower with deeper roots: all things change, all bodies with their metamorphosis, all souls are its transmigrations.”



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Roger Caillois once said that “nothing is more sacred than a great sacrilege,” and in the work of Carlos Fuentes, like in all great creation, death is abolished. Thus, the writer, by assuming his own heresy, turns into the only true believer. This world and its utopias are not enough; what is needed is to create another, better world, even if only on paper, inside the particular universe of literature.

One of the highest qualities of Carlos Fuentes’s work is that the reader really always reads between the lines. What he/she has in his/her hands, in the form of a book, is that immaterial, fleeting, and yet especially human substance that is life made memory, feeling, sensation, desire. It is the prism through which the narrator shows us the world—his world—and the avatar of his characters. And it is to them that is owed the particular atmosphere that he achieves in each of his novels from the very first lines: a suspended, subtle reality in which matter, and the very crystal that inspires it, seems to be endowed with the evasive quality of light. ■■■