



## Recurrences in *William Faulkner and Juan Rulfo*

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William Faulkner (1897-1962) ventured into several literary genres painting a portrait of the southern United States. Based on a huge number of characters, families, and generations (the Snopeses, the Bundrens, the McCaslins, among others), his literature delved into a long-standing endeavor: to narrate the U.S. American epic. This epic, rooted in the country's history, began during the War of Secession (1861-1865), portraying the condition of blacks and showing the economic transformations that took place. Faulkner was interested how the coun-

try's general history was fed by small stories, anecdotes, elementary episodes, where the character of that culture was present. Endowed with its true dimension by the specificities, the community that Faulkner portrays is changing, unstable, in perpetual transformation. This can be seen in several of the texts in the volume *Uncollected Stories of William Faulkner*, which includes fragments of unfinished novels and stories he published in magazines.<sup>1</sup>

Faulkner's work shows us the identity traits of a nation emerging from different phenomena: the economic revolution of capitalism, which broke with incipient trade, and brought a cultural reconfiguration

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after the end of slavery. In his work *Faulkner, Mississippi*, poet and essayist Édouard Glissant relates how, during a trip to the United States, he was able to see the way all traces of what had been the slave culture had been erased, as though white U.S. Americans were ashamed of it and wanted to obliterate their past. It is obvious that the outrage of slavery and the trade in human beings brought from the Antilles and Africa provides a vast vein of material for literature. However Faulkner's aim is not simply a post-colonial reading, but the construction of his work using the most ambitious resources of literary experimentation.

As fundamental parts of his aesthetic proposal, his narrative plays with space and time and uses internal monologues by people who would not appear to have the capacity to have one, as well as different viewpoints. Rhetorically, his writing is extremely rich in figures of speech and thought, literary devices such as metonymies, hypallages, synecdoches, and ekphrases.

His experimentation shows influences of Joyce (the monologue), but also of Marcel Proust (time). However, he does not always emphasize the influence of Thomas Mann, particularly of his *Buddenbrooks*, in which several generations succeed each other throughout the story and it is necessary to show how time transforms, which continues to provide arguments for doubting that elastic modernity has been surpassed. It is interesting that when people talk about what allows us to identify post-modernity, such as fragmentation, the death of the author, multiple viewpoints, or experimentation with syntax, they forget that in the mid-twentieth century, this could already be found in Faulkner's novels.

His poetics borders on the political and the descriptive; however, Faulkner did not intend to write purely descriptively or for his work to approach naturalism. Quite to the contrary: he attempted to reconcile the proposals of avant-garde schools, such as U.S. modernism—a very different version from Latin American modernism—and therefore his writing achieves a new approximation to history and a renovation of narrative techniques, which would bring him close to poetics such as those of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, or William Carlos Williams; and his novels

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would have the depth of *Four Quartets* by Eliot, *The Cantos* by Pound, or *Paterson* by Williams.

It is also appropriate to point to several aspects that he developed as few other authors did. It is true that modernism has outstanding exponents such as Virginia Woolf or Aldous Huxley, and that the exploration of new narrative devices can also be found in authors like John Dos Passos. However, Faulkner comes closer to new spheres of thinking. For example, in one of his most ambitious works, *The Sound and the Fury*, he explores the point of view of a disabled character, Benjy, and how his perception of the world manifests itself anomalously. His sensitivity allows him to elucidate in a particular way the forms that heat or cold take. For example, the character talks about how he perceives certain colors when he experiences cold through the gate, as if the narrator were trying to make the character express himself through a particular synesthesia, but that he does not know how to react to pain, so he does not let go of the gate either. One of the mysteries that Benjy poses throughout the whole story is that he suddenly bursts out crying when he is near a golf course. In fact, this forces narrative experts to ask themselves new questions like why we take it as a given that the narrator must only be a part of the story or external to it. Could the character not have a distorted awareness?

One of the authors who best captured this possibility of exploration and of creating a portrait of society using elements different from realism was the Mexican Juan Rulfo (1917-1986), since his work maintains an intense dialogue with Faulknerian themes. When we think of the figure of Benjy, we can remember the character Macario in the short story of the same name included in *El llano en llamas* (*The Plain in Flames*) (1957), narrating his musings and ramblings. Macario talks about how time passes because his aunt sits him in front of a drain to kill frogs for hours. The narrative voice is presented as a monologue,

and we gradually discover that it does not come from a completely lucid consciousness. He also talks about the way he relates to his cousin Felipa, with whom he has an incestuous relationship. Thus, Benjy and Macario are each connected to a female character, Caddy and Felipa, respectively, without knowing if it is because of “love,” “sexual attraction,” or “affection.” For them, language loses meaning. In Faulkner’s case, the characters are influenced by language; that’s why the play on words with the nickname for Candace, Caddy, becomes torture for Benjy when he hears people calling for the “caddy” over and over on the golf course; Rulfo, meanwhile, plays with religious guilt in the region of Jalisco.

Both authors’ stories portray the spirit of wild arid regions where freedom becomes debauchery, barbarism. Although the story is narrated by one of the characters, enigmatic fragments are introduced into it, voices from the future and the past that are reiterated in the “literary space.” *Absalom, Absalom!* would be the example of this way of playing with narrative time. For Rulfo’s part, the novel *Pedro Páramo* (1955) is an experienced sample of narrative discontinuity, not only because the characters, all ghosts, appear to protagonist Juan Preciado, but because the story of Pedro Páramo himself is dealt with in his formative years as a pitiless *cacique*, or local strongman; that is, past and future merge in an instant.

Faulkner conceived a different landscape, created on the basis of his interests. Yoknapatawpha County, whose Indian name comes from one of the rivers that flanks the county—the other river is the Tallahatchie—is the changeable space where the stories take place, outside the county seat, Jefferson, based on the real city of Oxford in northern Mississippi’s Lafayette County. From their marginal space, the characters enjoy free will to survive, raise a family, or get ahead at the cost of the town. In his novels and in the stories, a series of local references, anec-

dotes, or rumors are known and repeated by the community. Something similar happens in Juan Rulfo’s Comala, since he makes a reference to the “*comal*,” a griddle used for cooking and that can withstand high temperatures. When Juan Preciado goes down to that place where he begins to feel that very strange climate, Rulfo writes,

“It’s hot here,” I said.

“Yes, and that’s nothing,” the other answered me. “Just you wait. It’ll be even hotter when we get to Comala. That’s on the coals of the earth, right in the mouth of Hell. Just imagine, a lot of the people who die there come back from Hell for their blankets.”<sup>2</sup>

The Rulfian Comala is a land with characteristics like the Bajos de Jalisco region,<sup>3</sup> where gangs still live, people accustomed to taking whatever they want even violently. To a large extent, this is the ambiance that Faulkner shows in his first novels, like *Sartoris*. Faulkner’s and Rulfo’s geography are very in tune; this can be observed in the aftereffects of the two conflicts that raged through their respective regions, the War of Secession and the Cristera War. In an interview for Spanish radio and television chain RTVE, Juan Rulfo said that the inhabitants of Jalisco had been left with the need to re-experience the violence of those moments. He added that the people who seem the mildest could secretly be murderers, and described how a peaceful person could have a long list of murders to his name.<sup>4</sup> Obviously, creating the characters in *Pedro Páramo* and *El llano en llamas* is not a realist quest to portray them, but to imagine them. For his part, Faulkner, when asked whether he was obsessed with violence, answered that a carpenter was obsessed with his hammer; that violence is one of the carpenter’s tools, and that the writer, just like the carpenter, cannot build a house with only one tool. Finally, Rulfo concluded that characters “are irrational.” I think this shows his greatest affinity to William Faulkner, and the profile of the character he shows us most frequently.

The best exponent of the social changes that took place in Yoknapatawpha after the War of Secession is the Snopes family, whose members try to appropriate local natural resources or even benefit from

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their posts as public servants. I think the way that Faulkner perceives this inertia of an official who tries to take advantage of his position to get rich, something that so clearly remains valid in the twenty-first century, is very important. The Snopes Trilogy (*The Hamlet*, *The Town*, and *The Mansion*) portrays how this family takes over towns with insatiable voracity. The so-called “business mentality” is brought into question as on few other occasions. In retrospect, it is difficult to think of any other literature as anti-system, as anti-capitalist, and as critical of bourgeois ideology. Paradoxically, the literature that responded to the capitalist onslaught the world faced in the twentieth century did not come from the Soviet bloc. Despite being one of its principles, the production of what was called “socialist realism” foundered before fulfilling its purpose of showing the most deplorable aspects of capitalism and limited itself to being a simple way of praising the feats of the Russian army, falling into the absurd cult of personality—usually of Stalin—and backing what it supposedly should have criticized: bureaucratic power. What catches the eye about this comparison is that the literature that reflected the absurdity of capitalism, even without putting forward solutions or alternative roads, but limiting itself to exhibiting its worse vices—no small thing—came from the very belly of capitalism. The place where there had been a trade in human beings, who were denigrated in a way comparable to Nazism, would offer up the breeding ground to show the way in which the “free world” had fed for decades on the work of the enslaved.

Something very similar occurs in Juan Rulfo's literature, although he did not create altarpieces or great murals to denounce the injustice of a system like Mexico's, characterized by vast empty spaces taken advantage of by *caciques* (local strongmen), leaders who used violence, usually armed men and extortion, to appropriate the natural resources and

businesses. What he did instead was to create a scene in which all of that was the background upon which the story of the characters was inscribed. Their voices and personalities are what stand out; the way they relate to each other is exactly what makes up the Rulfian world. Stories like “Nos han dado la tierra” (They Gave Us the Land), which depicts the distribution of land despite which people continued to live amidst overwhelming rising prices, since the role of the post-revolutionary government was very limited, are an example of literature that acts as a catalyst to transmit the paradox of the situation.

For his part, Pedro Páramo is a *cacique* who surpasses the social or political sphere and is the father of the protagonist, situating the story's tragedy from the very beginning. Just like in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, the characters are involved in a chaotic situation that overwhelms and constrains them. Mexican Revolution or Cristera War, these holocausts influenced several later generations, which was the case of the people who Rulfo knew.

Similarly, several U.S. American authors spoke clearly about the consequences of an absurd civil war. Faulkner's artistic and political perspective, as well as that of most of the so-called Lost Generation would be one of the most influential elements in a literary world that had found itself on pause or eclipsed by World War II. The views of authors like John Steinbeck (1902-1968), Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940), Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961), and John Dos Passos (1896-1960) transcended the apology of the Soviet bloc. These authors faced other kinds of obstacles to continue their work, since their problem was not whether their novels were to the taste of the party, but that this critical literature had to be so good that everyone had to like it or no one would buy it and it would pass into oblivion.

This makes for an undeniable paradox: the literature that was most critical of capitalism had to be self-sustaining and even translatable into other languages like cinema because, if it wasn't, the market would crush it immediately. The clash with reality would have to be the bait for the public to read these works. In short, a kind of artistic ambition and a commercial watchword combined; nevertheless, and fortunately for them, these were great works of literature that did



not fit into the niches of the fleeting or the *recherché*; their aim was to be appropriate for all audiences and also worthy of dissertations by seasoned readers.

For this reason, it is difficult to say that this literature has been surpassed, since its influence has even extended to what has been called the Latin American Boom. We should remember the impact that narration from this perspective had on authors who read Faulkner and admired him, like Juan Carlos Onetti, José Donoso, Mario Vargas Llosa, and a long etcetera. We can discern in their work the interest in digging deep down into the psyche of a character to whom discourse is denied, and therefore, we must admit that Faulkner's literature enjoys a currency and contemporaneity that even today we have not valued to its fullest extent. For his part, Juan Rulfo has also been a reference point for approaching the literature of Gabriel García Márquez or Daniel Sada. It is undeniable that their interior worlds, the literary devices that these writers use, can already be found in foundations like those of the author of *El llano en llamas*.

The specialists talk of Franz Kafka, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, and Thomas Mann as the fathers of twentieth-century literature. It is not my intention to dispute this assertion. However, the work of the Lost Generation, and particularly that of Faulkner, occupies a place closer to the ordinary reader, the one who reads not in a study, but in the few hours he/she has after a day's work; the reader who found in these stories characters who, just like their boss, used tricks to try to get them to work more hours for less money; and stories that also portrayed the spirit of the Negro people, who lived under the rule of racism and slavery. This was not the far-off world of *The Death of Virgil* or *Ulysses*, but the world of farmers who resisted paying taxes or big landowners who refused to admit that they had had a child with a black slave woman.

Finally, one of the greatest contributions to literature of Faulkner and Rulfo lies in achieving an opus that could establish a dialogue between two dissimilar social estates, the working class and intellectuals. Making those two worlds participants is one of the achievements of that fresh, modern, current literature, that deals with things that happen through constantly renovating narrative forms, giving rise to

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an interesting phenomenon since, at the same time that more experienced readers enjoy the way the stories are narrated through the "ruses" that make the story complex page after page, beginning readers know that there is a mysterious attraction that pushes them to continue reading and makes them desire the knowledge that will at some point allow them to unearth the very last of its secrets. ■■

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This book, first published by Vintage International in 1979, was translated and published in Spanish in 1997 by Anagrama as *Relatos*. [Translator's Note.]
- <sup>2</sup> Juan Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo* (Mexico City: Plaza & Janés, 2000), pp. 9-10.
- <sup>3</sup> Comala actually exists in Colima, a Mexican state near Jalisco state. [Editor's Note.]
- <sup>4</sup> RTVE, Joaquín Soler Serrano, "Juan Rulfo, entrevista a fondo," April 17, 1977, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V74yJztkxc&spfreload=10>. Look specifically at minute 16:12.



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