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Recent Spanish American Fiction:

Trial and Success

Myron I. Lichtblau



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The Spanish American novel first appeared in 1816 with the publication of a didactic, tediously long work by a liberal pamphleteer and anti-Spanish propagandist, José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi. The first steps were awkward and faltering, taken at the dawn of emancipation from the Spanish yoke and guided by the precepts of the seventeenth-century Spanish picaresque novel. The Spanish American novel continued to falter and stumble through most of the nineteenth century, as it tried to adapt European modes of fiction—romanticism, realism, naturalism—to the American scene. Yet while the Spanish American novel was frequently derivative in its formative years, it was never slavishly imitative, even within the restraints of narrative forms and techniques learned from European models. In the course of the nineteenth century, novelists succeeded in portraying the uniqueness of their native America with growing sensitivity and national pride. What they lacked in technical skill they made up for in inspiration and artistic sincerity.

With the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and the resultant political, social, and cultural upheaval, Spanish American writers for the first time felt a common national theme and vigorously exploited it in the novel, short story, and other genres. The Spanish American novel cast off its European bonds and asserted itself as an original and independent art form. Shortly after the emergence of the novel of the Mexican Revolution, there arose in Spanish America a literary movement called *criollismo*, which went one important step further than the novels of the nineteenth century in portraying the American scene; it showed nature as an implacable enemy of helpless man caught in its grip. The *criollista* novel, or novel of the land, distorted the total picture of America by presenting only the most distinctive but not necessarily the most representative features of its culture—the limitless and solitary pampa of Argentina, the perilous jungles of Colombia, the plains of Venezuela, and the high plateau of Bolivia. In the words of the Chilean critic and novelist Fernando Alegría: "As the novel humanized nature it dehumanized man." It made nature the protagonist of

the novel and an almost deterministic force in shaping man's destiny. The *criollista* novel subordinated man to his environment, made man a victim of nature's villainy.

The close of the Second World War brought about a greater cultural and intellectual sophistication in Spanish America. The public tired of the limited scope of the regionally oriented *criollista* novel and its failure to penetrate man's inner feelings. Writers began to change their focus from the struggle between man and nature to the struggle within man himself, to the dialectic between his conscience and his will, between wish and attainment. In the 1940s and 1950s, responding to the demands of an increasingly vocal and influential literary elite, the Spanish American novel became more universal in the values it treated and the themes it broached. Not that the *criollista* novel was brusquely discarded; but the new dominant tone shifted from America as a geographic entity to America which, within it distinctiveness, harbored man's common conflicts and aspirations. The new novel selected its themes from the incompatibility between man's reason and man's affective states. It no longer needed the telluric and purely external elements in American life as its narrative source. It was in Argentina—which perhaps looks just as much to Europe as to the rest of Spanish America for its cultural identity—where this new interest in the existential portrayal of man's emotional and mental states took firmest root and contrasted most sharply with the regionalistic fiction of the 1920s and 1930s. With Eduardo Mallea, in such works as *The Bay of Silence* (1940), *All Green Shall Perish* (1941), or *Chaves* (1953), the novel becomes static, almost essayistic, a vehicle for the expression of alienation, solitude, and anguish. Modern man is “emotionally mute,” as Mallea writes—silent, withdrawn, unable to give of himself, unwilling to share his deepest emotions. With Ernesto Sábato, especially in *The Tunnel* (1948), the novel becomes the expression of logical man's quest for recognition and understanding in an illogical and absurd world. In Mallea, we find shades of Sartre with deeply religious overtones; in Sábato, shades of Unamuno with a peculiar Spanish American cynicism; in both, frustrated idealism coupled with man's futile attempts to know himself.

With the advent of the 1960s, the Spanish American novel became highly original, experimental, avant-garde. Not that all fiction writing adopted this pose, not that all novelists were involved in shaking the foundations of the traditional, objective representation of observed reality; but a considerable number of the best and most significant novelists abandoned the lineal and chronological depiction of life and sought other narrative modes that would reflect the complex, multifaceted nature of human experience. Certainly Spanish American novelists can hold no exclusive claim to innovative approaches to the narrative. Yet the frequency and quality of these innovations in so many notable works of fiction have made the literary world react first with pleasant surprise, then with no little admiration.

Professional critics and others less qualified to judge have been mourning the demise of the novel for some fifty years. They certainly did not expect Spanish American writers to point out the error of their assessment. Among the first to do so was the Argentine Jorge Luis

Borges, with his tortuous, philosophical inquiry into man's search for truth and wisdom. Strangely, this literary genius has eschewed the novel, perhaps because he feels it is too diffuse and cumbersome a genre for the preciseness of his mind; but his short stories and narratives have played a central role in shaping the course of Spanish American fiction writing. Borges does not imitate reality but creates his own fictional world of labyrinths and symmetries, of space and time, to give an illusion of reality outside the reader's mundane experience and yet intellectually within it. In several essays published in a volume entitled *Other Inquisitions* (1960), Borges not only states his own aesthetic position regarding reality in fiction but also sums up the more general position held by Spanish American novelists concerning the elusive relationships between reality and fantasy, between the tangible and the imaginative world. For Borges, the unreal, the fanciful, the fantastic, the imagined, are not the antithesis of reality but rather a separate segment of reality because they too stem from man's rational process. Moreover, Borges suggests that fantasy in fiction is never an exclusive end in itself; it may also provide a broader base for understanding observable reality.

The mesh of reality and unreality lies at the core of Borges's creative powers in such stories as "The Babylon Lottery," "The Aleph," and "The Secret Miracle" and explains, more than any other single characteristic, the wide intellectual appeal of his works. Other short-story writers followed Borges's lead and developed similar narrative forms that juxtaposed the tangible and the intangible. Enrique Anderson Imbert, as much at home in the short story as in a Harvard lecture hall; Juan José Arreola, whose "Guardagujas" has become a classic; and Julio Cortázar, who ranges from the absurdly fantastic to the oneirically suggestive in many of his stories, have all approached reality obliquely rather than directly through the subtle play of realistic and unrealistic elements. Novelists, too, with equal vigor and innovativeness, have adroitly blended the real and the unreal in myriad ways to reflect Spanish American society, its heritage, its tradition and mores. The mythical world of Macondo created by that other genius, Gabriel García Márquez, in his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) is no less a realistic portrayal of Colombia simply because fantastic scenes mix with earthy drama. The work is no less a stark denunciation of Colombia's masters and plunderers because the real world of the Buendía family is set into a legendary, timeless frame of reference. One critic has called the novel the biggest lie perpetrated by an author on his public; the lie, the deception, is of course, metaphoric and ironic, since it is precisely the reader's acceptance of this unreal and fabulous fiction within the broader fiction of tangible experience that creates narrative interest and tension. Indeed, the lie of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is no greater a lie than that of any other work of fiction; the difference is not only in the more potent imaginative force of García Márquez's novel but also in the fact that the real/unreal duality seems to be in almost perfect aesthetic harmony.

Spanish American fiction writers were certainly not the first to superimpose unteality on reality for artistic purposes. The device existed in painting long before it became fashionable in the fifties and sixties in the novel and short story. "Magic realism," as this literary phenomenon has come to be called, is one of the most original con-

tributions of contemporary Spanish American fiction and stands in strong contrast to the often heavy, prosaic, and socially oriented novels that preceded it. As the two words of the phrase indicate, the narrative mode is essentially realism, with a touch of the magical or fanciful. Magic realism, in a sense, has much of the twilight zone; it too stops short of the utterly fantastic. The famous Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier may have had the same concept of magic realism in mind when he coined the phrase *lo real maravilloso*, as if pointing out his sense of wonderment on beholding America and its civilization. In *The Lost Steps* (1953), Carpentier makes us feel this *real maravilloso* as he narrates a journey back in time undertaken by a young man in search of primitive musical instruments. The journey, a metaphor for civilization's progress or lack of it, takes him to all periods of Spanish American culture and even to the earliest indigenous tribal societies. Carpentier turns the "marvelous" reality before him into an artistic creation through the strange and almost prophetic vision of America that constantly haunts him.

If art is illusion, then magic realism as a narrative mode is indeed one of the highest forms of illusion. Spanish American novelists, who for so long sought to separate reality from the artistic vision of reality, and saw their function as merely transcribing or recording that reality, in recent years have come to consider social elements as less important than narrative perspective and artistic form. Carlos Loveira's pat and unimaginative portrayal of Cuban life in the 1920s in *Juan Criollo* (1928) has given way to José Lezama Lima's mythical, grotesque, almost demoniacal vision of Cuban reality in his creatively conceived *Paradise* (1966). Manuel Gálvez's photographic realism in depicting the sordid aspects of life in metropolitan Buenos Aires has yielded to Julio Cortázar's ironic wit, elusive sense of reality, and complex characterization of Horacio Oliveira in *Hopscotch* (1963), which disregards the most basic ingredients of the traditional novel and yet remains an intriguing art form of the highest quality. Juan Stefanish's insipid and simplistic portrayal of Paraguay's civil strife in *Dawn* (1920) has little comparison to Augusto Roa Bastos's transcendental probing into the essence of the Paraguayan spirit in *Son of Man* (1965), not so much because the later novel uses more interesting structural and narrative techniques than the earlier one, but because the earlier work merely reproduces or imitates reality; while *Son of Man* has reality filtered through the author's imagination.

The Chilean critic-scholar Arturo Torres Ríoseco suggests that one possible explanation for the absence of the novel in colonial Spanish American literature (the first did not appear until 1816 in Mexico) is that potential novelists felt little need to "invent" fiction when all around them the most astonishing and incredible real events were being played out—the Spanish conquest of América, the subjugation of entire indigenous populations, the substitution of one culture, religion, and language for another. There is implicit in Torres Ríoseco's conjecture the same view of America as that expressed by Carpentier in his phrase *lo real maravilloso* or by the many other novelists for whom magic realism has become a dominating narrative mood.

The period roughly from the late 1950s to the middle 1970s—the

years of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Hopscotch*, *The Green House* (1965), and *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (1962)—has received the somewhat risible label of *La generación del "boom,"* "the Boom Generation," with the onomatopoeic English word *boom* resounding heavily on the Spanish ear. The use of the term is quite appropriate, for that period was an explosion, a detonation, an era of unprecedented activity in innovative fiction, an era of brash experimentation in redefining and restructuring the novel and short story. If poetry was Spanish America's most important literary genre from 1880 to about 1915, fiction has achieved that position today. And the writers of that fiction, as no other group had done before, have left the narrow confines of their own national literatures to become figures of universal stature. The Boom Generation has been accused of forming a closed group of nine or ten novelists promoted unjustifiably by editorial houses in Spanish America and Spain, by biased critics and overly zealous professors of literature, to the exclusion of other deserving writers. There are some cynics who even say that the boom was created by criticism itself. Although the accusation of elitism may have some validity, it is hardly debatable that Fuentes, Cortázar, García Márquez, Cabrera Infante, Carpentier, Vargas Llosa, and perhaps Donoso and Rulfo are the best and most significant writers of contemporary fiction, representing its most distinctive characteristics, its forward movement, its great originality.

The story of contemporary fiction is certainly more than that of these few exceptional and highly visible writers, certainly more than the elite Boom group. The total picture would have to include regional writers, *costumbrista* and *criollista* writers, mystery writers, and a range of secondary writers who defy literary categories but who entertain, amuse, protest, and moralize with their steady but undistinguished output of fiction. The list would have to include the many traditional authors who make no great impact on the literary scene but whose works are widely read, and avant-garde writers who do make an impact on current fiction but whose works may not endure beyond one or two decades. Were it not for the stars of the Boom group, however, Spanish American fiction would not be in the forefront of world literature today, nor would it have collectively made any important strides in overcoming the limitations imposed by its deep-rooted European tradition and social and cultural biases. No less than this is the real meaning of the boom.

One of the hallmarks of recent Spanish American fiction is experimentation with structure, narrative form, and language. This experimentation stems from a reevaluation of the concept of the novel itself, of the basic nature and purpose of fiction. The remote origins of fiction lie in man's need for verbal self-expression, in the desire to tell a story and perhaps communicate something about himself. When the storyteller, or the narrator, veers from the natural, direct approach to his tale, he is manipulating and even straining the narrative and structural elements that make up all literature. In a word, he is using form to create an effect and, if done artfully, an illusion. This is precisely what Spanish American novelists have done so well and so ingeniously—that is, mold the story line, the conflict, the theme, or the psychological analysis of character into nar-

rative shapes that are as complex and fragmented as the process of life itself.

In *Hopscotch*, Cortázar invites his audience to read the novel in one of two ways: in the traditional fashion, consecutively from chapters 1 to 56, but then, untraditionally, omitting chapters 57-155, which the author states are dispensable; or by covering the entire work, chapters 1-155, in a certain nonconsecutive order prescribed by Cortázar, interweaving chapters 57-155 into the principal text. The result, or the apparent result, is an open novel, in which the reader actively participates in its growth and development. At the same time it becomes a novel in which the felt presence of the author is minimal, a far cry from the omniscient nineteenth-century narrator.

Carlos Fuentes, in his celebrated novel of the Mexican Revolution, *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, effectively utilizes narrators in the first, second, and third persons to separate internal consciousness from external reality in his portrayal of the feared caudillo. This alternation of narrative voices is more than a mere narrative artifice; it not only shapes the varied perceptions the reader gains of the political machinations and emotional entanglements of the devious Artemio Cruz but creates as well a sort of subtle irony of contrastive discourses.

In García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the actions of five generations of the Buendía family are so intertwined and replicated to give the impression of endless, cyclical time that a genealogical tree is provided the reader to unravel the story. But here too form and structure are more than clever devices; they create art out of the sameness of reality and literary enjoyment out of the banality of life's inexorable repetitiveness.

In Juan Rulfo's puzzling novel *Pedro Paramo* (1955), in which all the characters are dead when Juan Preciado returns to his native Comala, the narrative structure is so incoherent and disconnected as to challenge even the most careful reader. Many other novels having innovative structure, form, or narrative focus could be cited; indeed, for each of the works mentioned here, scores of others could easily have been substituted to illustrate similar distortion of the fundamental characteristics of the novel. In brief, manipulation of form and structure in recent Spanish American fiction is more than a superficial recourse or adornment, more than a means; it has become an artistic end in itself.

So too have stylistic and verbal innovation and experimentation, and perhaps to an even more marked degree. Innovation in language, involving verbal play of the most varied and unconventional sort, has become a way of reaching out beyond the normal limits of language to communicate thought and emotion and action. Language play has been so dominant an element in recent Spanish American fiction that one critic has called language the real protagonist of Guillermo Cabrera Infante's 1967 novel on pre-Castro Cuba, *Tres tristes tigres* (*Three Trapped Tigers*; actually "Three Sad Tigers," but the Spanish alliteration of the letter *t* would not then be carried over into English).

Linguistic innovation has given the novel a dimension which goes beyond the purely communicative or even aesthetic purpose of language in literature. Linguistic play and experimentation involve the essential nature of the novel form as well as the relationship between verbal extravagances and thematic and narrative elements. It is in-

teresting to note that critical approaches to this experimentation have centered on the identification and classification of the types of stylistic and verbal excesses, with little reference to aesthetic function or effect or to the larger question of the relationship between form and language. In the same way that innovation in structure and narrative technique must be seen in a context that transcends the innovative forms themselves, innovation in language—that is, innovation in the vehicle that carries thought and emotion to the reader—must also be seen in a broad, comprehensive context embracing aesthetic considerations.

To present the chaos and impersonality of modern society and man's inner turmoil, many novelists have, in scattered but recurring instances, replaced normal conventional language with a display of the most outlandish deviations, neologisms, puns, riddles, language inversion, language fragmentation, auditory effects, nonsense language, anti-language, mirror language, and even blank language. We have reason to think in terms of changing concepts regarding the function and capability of language itself, in terms of an aesthetic or aesthetic base to set the parameters for the use of language and especially of experimental language. Verbal innovation must respond to an aesthetic that channels its creativity, helps define its role, disciplines its use, and determines its limits.

What occurred between 1840 and 1950, despite stylistic changes corresponding to the development of the novel from romanticism to *criollismo* to neorealism, can be designated language accommodation to achieve a desired artistic effect or create a particular social ambience. After about 1950, such writers as Fuentes, Cabrera Infante, and Cortázar have chosen to view language as a recourse to bridge the gap between the physical abstraction we call the printed word and the reality that emerges in the form of idea and emotion that the reader extracts from the printed word. Ultimately, it is a struggle between two forces or capabilities within man—his capacity to think and feel as the prime reality, on the one hand, and his capacity to verbalize, on the other. Some Spanish American writers openly suggest that language capacity is limited and that stylistic excesses are a way of counteracting this deficiency. It is, of course, ironic to suggest this limitation of language, since language is the only means of communication available to literature and since literature can not exist without either the oral or the written word. If language does have limited capacity, then fiction does too, for there is no alternative. If critics accept this premise of limitation, then they have to determine the function of these linguistic innovations, their literary value, their contribution to the total work.

Not a few Spanish American authors, unable to accept this concept of language limitation and yet dissatisfied with conventional literary expression, feel that the only answer is deliberately to manipulate, strain, twist, stretch, and distort language in an effort to draw out meaning. Traditionally, writers have tried to extend these limitations by working within the limitations themselves, by extracting from language every suitable particle of strength without doing violence to it. But the abundant creativity of the new generation has meant that

writers have not dealt with the inherent restrictions of language from within a preconceived framework but instead have produced a sort of anti-language, an antidotal concoction of linguistic signs to show that conventional language is no longer effective for all narrative purposes. The problem of just how far writers can go in disfiguring language is a fundamental one that has not yet received sufficient critical attention. To a large degree linguistic extravagances are a kind of game the novelist plays with his reader. At its best, language play can be entertaining in its ingenuity, stimulating in its wit and semantic discriminations, and above all artistically pleasing in its exploration of lexical relationships. At its worst, language play may lead to the disintegration of the novel as the art form we recognize today.

A few examples of language play are in order. In Cortázar's *Hopscotch*, a fifteen-line paragraph minutely describes the sexual act. Of the one hundred and fifty or so words, some one hundred are clearly recognizable as Spanish; the others, representing the key words, are pure invention. The paragraph is completely intelligible to all readers despite the use of many nonsense words. On another occasion in the same novel, Horacio Oliveira starts reading a novel by Galdós but finds he is preoccupied and inattentive. To signal this mental distraction as he tries to read the Spanish novelist, there appear in alternate lines Galdós's narrative and Oliveira's real thoughts and interpolations in the process of reading. The reader is at first baffled and perhaps annoyed, but he quickly catches on and joins in the verbal game. In another novel, *A Manual for Manuel*, Cortázar has an entire dialogue appear with nonsense words, a device he uses to show his mistrust of existing words to convey true meaning. What Cortázar has done here to retain some link with real words is to invent nonsense words that still preserve the physical appearance, structure, or even sound pattern of Spanish.

Again in *Hopscotch*, Cortázar uses intricate, interminable sentences which seem to be a deliberate challenge to the reader's patience and skill in unscrambling disconnected or loosely connected ramblings. On a few occasions, he arbitrarily prefixes the normally silent letter *h* to Spanish words to make the narrator self-conscious of the many empty words and phrases he is using and to underscore the fact that the language of literature is contrived and artificial in all too many cases.

In *Three Trapped Tigers*, which Jean Franco has appropriately called "the invention of language systems as a parody on society," Cabrera Infante captures the garbled, hybrid language of jazz musicians, café singers, and Afro-Cubans in Havana. In this remarkable comic novel, one of the few in Spanish American literature, the spoken language is set up in an antithetical relationship to the written word—to the venerable written word, to the word of literature, of deviousness, falseness, and hypocrisy. Puns, anagrams, verbal gyrations, wit, and clever repartee copiously run through the novel. Rarely in literature has language been so transfigured, mutilated, expanded, contracted, distorted, and ingeniously exploited as in *Three Trapped Tigers*, which is, ultimately, much more than a novel, much more than a work of fiction. It is the apotheosis of man's creativity with language.

A concluding thought: nearly forty years ago, in the final paragraph

of his pioneering study *Contemporary Spanish American Fiction*, Jefferson Rea Spell stated:

It was once thought that Spanish American fiction might well rest on a triangular foundation, La maestra normal supporting one corner in Argentina; Los de abajo, another in Mexico; and La vorágine, the third in Colombia. But this triangular base became diamond-shaped when Doña Bárbara brought Venezuela for the first time into international fiction. Now it might better rest on a base in the form of a five-pointed star, which would join all these countries and Chile; for El hermano asno should also figure among the distinctive Spanish American novels destined to hold a permanent place in literature.¹

1. Jefferson Rea Spell, *Contemporary Spanish American Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944), pp. 285–286.

The five-pointed star is today woefully outdated and inadequate; so is a six-pointed one. A nonagon or, better still, an ever-expanding geometrical figure would be needed for the great foundation stones in Spanish American fiction. There is no point in knocking down old idols to replace them with new ones. The *Underdogs* and *Doña Bárbara* will always remain great works, despite the onrush of new techniques and literary styles. The more recent masterpieces, *Hopscotch* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, for example, are perhaps even greater because they have more universal appeal and are more intellectually stimulating. We shall have to wait forty more years for the test of time.

The direction the Spanish American novel will take in the future is highly uncertain. Although the creative vigor of that fiction makes conjecture difficult, a few possibilities come to mind: it might remain highly innovative, experimental in narrative form and stylistic expression, and in doing so sacrifice traditional norms at the altar of ingenuity and newness; it might take the best of the innovative techniques in structure and language and incorporate them into a more traditional fictional framework; or it might return to a more regionalistic, *criollista* type of fiction, with clearly defined and obvious social and political implications, thereby sacrificing artistic and aesthetic values for ideological and reformist concerns. All of these conjectures may very well prove to be wrong; that possibility is perhaps the most interesting.