

# The contemporary Mexican story

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For many decades, readers of Mexican literature focused their attention almost exclusively on novels; short stories were relegated to the back of the bus. Now this situation has undergone a major change as a result of the transformation of short-story writing, in particular over the past two decades. This has drawn the interest of many readers, both in Mexico and abroad.

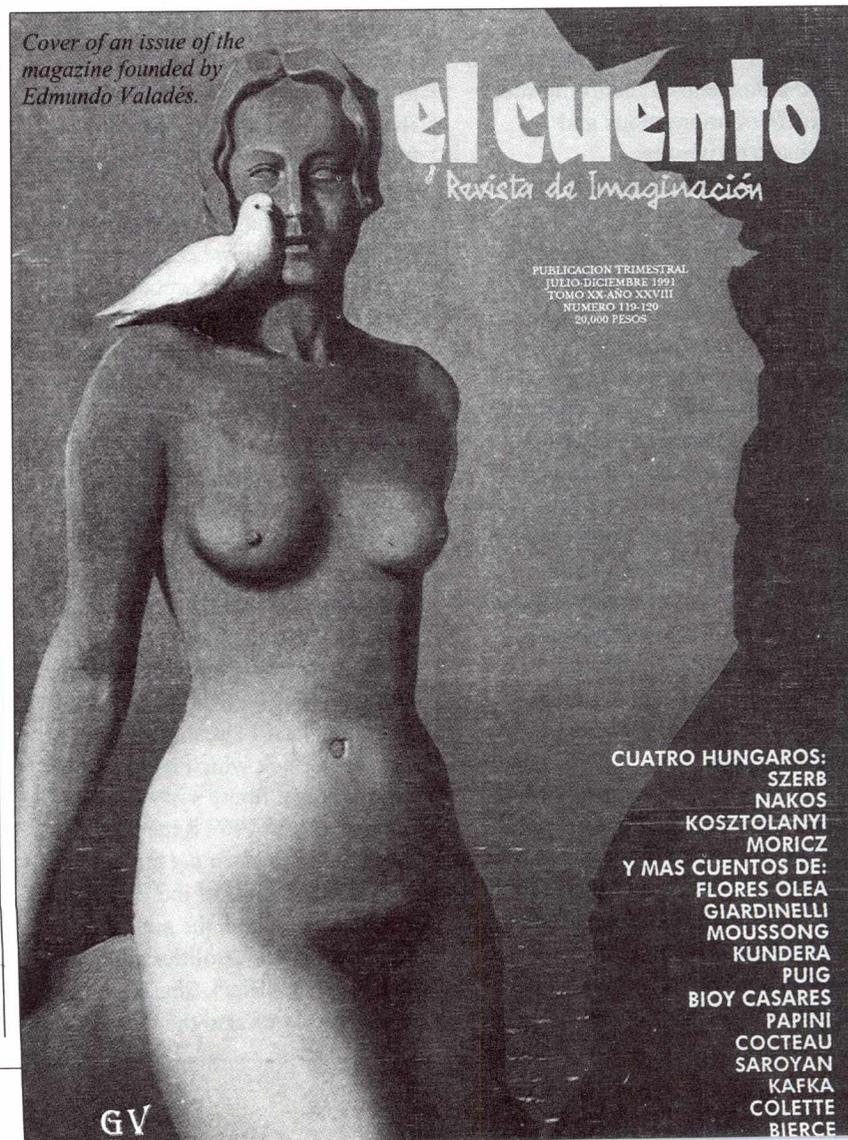
Let us examine the evolution of this process, particularly during the second half of this century. For many decades a "solemn tone" was cited as one of the most characteristic features of Mexican narrative. One of the changes during recent decades is the advent of an ironic tone and the experimental nature of story writing. Still, in the early '90s the youngest writers revived the "conversational" form and the use of such traditional genres as detective stories and epics of daily life.

The most important reference points for contemporary writing are found in the 1950s and '60s. The writing of that period was generally characterized by an intimate tone ("intimism"), close to tragedy and the hieratic approach. In this context, the short story was still viewed as a way to prepare the writing of a novel, and—perhaps partly for this reason—many stories tended to be relatively long, often rivaling short novels.

Among the paradigmatic writers of this period one must mention José Revueltas, Juan García Ponce, José de la Colina, Juan Vicente Melo, Inés Arredondo and Elena Garro. Of course, each writer generated characteristics specific to his or her

narrative universe, always on the basis of the search for personal epiphanies and the presence of some specific mystery which the reader could intuit throughout the reading of the work.

In contrast, the Mexican short story of the past 25 years has been



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characterized by experimentation with language, the exercise of parody, irony and humor, and an almost journalistic treatment of collective daily life.

The new Mexican story involves a way of writing which is as experimental as poetry. It competes with the novel for readers' attention, for two reasons: its brevity (stories rarely exceed three or four pages) and its thematic and technical mimicry of journalistic writing and such other, equally quotidian genres as letter-writing and aphorisms.

There are numerous stylistic and ideological symmetries between these writers and some chroniclers of contemporary urban identity, such as José Joaquín Blanco, Hermann Bellinghausen and Carlos Monsiváis, who, in turn, share the interest of narrators like Armando Ramírez and Cristina Pacheco in recording the daily life of anonymous and marginalized people.

The key genre antecedents of these writing forms may be found in the work of such diverse figures as Efrén Hernández and Julio Torri (in the first half of this century), Juan Rulfo and Juan José Arreola (1950s), Salvador Elizondo and Augusto Monterroso (1960s). It is worth taking the time to describe these writers.

Julio Torri created a narrative universe in which voices of the people coexist with classical myths, shaping a skeptical vision of the human condition. Efrén Hernández created an autonomous imaginary universe, apparently removed from the contingencies of daily life, with its own rules and, above all, its own reading rhythm.

In the stories of Juan Rulfo (*El llano en llamas* [The Plain in Flames], 1954), narrative transculturation means extrapolating the mythic syntax of the rural world to the language of urban readers, a process through which the experimental use of narrative time acquires allegorical resonances.

Juan José Arreola (*Confabulario* [Scheme Compendium], 1952; *Bestiario* [Bestiary], 1959) created a densely intertextual writing in which surprise endings are, paradoxically, prefigured in veiled form from the first lines. Thus the force and rhythm of the language make this classic story technique (the surprise ending) irrelevant.

Salvador Elizondo (*El grafógrafo* [The Graphologist], 1967) produced self-sufficient, self-referential writing; he was able to produce his own parameters within which the events related lack importance in light of the means employed to evoke a diversity of images.

Augusto Monterroso practices (in *La oveja negra y demás fábulas* [The Black Sheep and Other Fables], 1969) a parody of a genre alien to literary stories—the morality tale—in order to create complicities with the reader. His work is part of the literary tradition, of which Julio Torri is the best exemplar, in which the most is said through that which is left unsaid; the shorter, the more complex.

In retrospect, the importance of "The Black Sheep and Other Fables" can be appreciated by noting that it is the most significant work of the transitional period from 1967 to 1971. During that period various books of stories were published which, taken together, marked a break with the dominant tone of over 50 years of Mexican narrative. In 1967 Jorge Ibarguengoitia published *La ley de Herodes* (Herod's Law), a collection of ironic stories; 1968 witnessed the publication of *Inventando que sueño* (Feigning That I Dream) by José Agustín, a book which included the important and funny story "What Is the Wave?"; in 1969 René Avilés Fabila's *Hacia el fin del mundo* (Towards the Ends of the Earth) was published, in which the author integrates fantasy, politics and humor. 1969—when "Black Sheep..." was published—was also the year of

Sergio Golwarz's *Infundios ejemplares* (Exemplary Fibs), consisting of ever-briefer paradoxical exercises. 1971 saw the publication of Rosario Castellanos' *Album de familia* (Family Album)—which includes "The Cooking Lesson," a story/essay which is a historic demonstration of grotesque humor—as well as *El principio del placer* (The Pleasure Principle) by José Emilio Pacheco, which contains the splendid "Bull Fight."

"Bull Fight" merits special mention here, since it is virtually the only example of historiographical metafiction in the history of Mexican short stories. In contrast, the outstanding Hispano-American novels of the 1960s and '70s mined this vein, which one might designate "Neo-Baroque," consisting of an ironic look both at a people's collective history and at the process of literary creation, relativizing any construction of meaning based on the use of a cultural code.

In all these writers one observes an interest in playing with conventions regarding the perception of social reality. The ridiculous and grotesque aspects of these conventions are thereby put on display; there is a deliberate use of humor, parody and irony.

Beginning in 1970, partly as a consequence of the 1968 crisis, story-writers began to show greater concern for the country's political problems and a greater interest in reflecting popular urban speech; at the same time they continued to work with humor and experiments in the fantasy genre. Among the foremost writers of the period were Guadalupe Dueñas, Amparo Dávila, Elena Poniatowska and Eraclio Zepeda.

During the 1970s experimentation was more notable in the fields of poetry and the novel than in short stories, as can be seen in the novels of Fernando del Paso, José Emilio Pacheco, Carlos Fuentes, Sergio Fernández, Héctor

Manjarrez, Daniel Leyva, Joaquín Armando Chacón and Gustavo Sáinz. In addition to a tendency towards historiographical metafiction, their work was strikingly fragmentary, a feature which inevitably implied a kinship with story writing.

Leaving aside the distinction between classical stories (with single, surprising endings) and modern ones (with endings which are open, imminent, deferred to other stories in the same series or anticipated within the narrative itself), the new short story born in the 1980s had the following formal characteristics:

a) *playful tone*: estrangement from daily life through the use of fantasy, humor, the absurd and language games;

b) *extreme brevity*: a tendency towards almost journalistic and aphoristic forms of writing, with a length varying from three lines to three pages;

c) *genre experimentation* with the limits and boundaries of the traditional short story, whether in relation to other forms of writing (*inter-genre* experimentation) or within the narrative itself (*intra-genre* experimentation).

In recent years the forms of experimentation have been very diverse. By way of example we can cite the following: the parody of philosophical treatises on the basis of trivial or implausible themes (Hugo Hiriart in "Dissertation on Cobwebs"); the skeptical narration of radically personal surprises, trifles, rubbish and protests (Alejandro Rossi in "Manual of the Distracted"); the questioning, through satirical chronicles, of the conditions of "extreme non-productivity risk" in which university researchers work (Guillermo Sheridan in "Letters from Copilco" [an avenue near the UNAM campus]).

There are also reflections on the act of writing, formulated as epistolary reviews of literary books (Bárbara

Jacobs in "Written in Time"); a lipogrammatical series of five stories, each of which uses only words containing one of the five vowels (Oscar de la Borbolla in "The Cursed Vowels"); stories in the form of prose-poem riddles (Manuel Mejía Valera in "Riddles"); music criticism articles written as stories, and vice versa (Alain Derbez in "The Uses of Radio"); games of form, such as the writing of a 100-chapter detective thriller in the space of a few lines (Francisco Hinojosa in "Black Report"); detailed psychological descriptions of daily objects (Fabio Morábito in "Tool Box"); and parody versions of canonical stories (Vicente Leñero's "Who Killed Agatha Christie?" and José Emilio Pacheco's collection *La sangre de Medusa y otros cuentos marginales* ["The Blood of Medusa and Other Marginal Stories"]).

Our account of these experiments must also take note of the intuitive typologies of female personalities on the basis of a preference for certain types of clothing (Guillermo Samperio in "Imaginary Notebook"); narrations which adjectivize verbs, make nouns out of pronouns and, in general, mix up all of the language's syntactical and grammatical functions (Dante Medina in "Childeries"); vampire stories which subvert the genre's conventions (Laszlo Moussong's "Castles in the Letter"); irreverent narrations of experimental nature (Hugo Enrique Sáez in "Pataphysical Notebooks"); and parodies in which a feminine perspective subverts common sense (Martha Cerda's "Señora Rodríguez and Other Worlds").

A retrospective glance at the main polemics regarding the Mexican short story over the past 40 years can give us a better idea of the genre's current situation. The 1950s witnessed a polemic between "earthy" stories (exemplified by Juan Rulfo) and the "artisan" style (represented by Juan José Arreola, who —like Rulfo— was from the state of Jalisco). The late '60s

produced a break between the realist, "intimist" and tragic story (represented by the former writers for the canonical and indispensable *Revista Mexicana de Literatura* [Mexican Literary Journal]) on the one hand and a style characterized by humor, parody and irreverence (exemplified by José Agustín) on the other.

In the 1970s and '80s the boundaries were no longer so clearly demarcated; the polemics of prior decades had become irrelevant and in many cases once-competing tendencies coexisted in one and the same text. Even those writers working with the most traditional story techniques presented an extremely sharp (and ironic) vision of reality; they too may be considered experimental. This is the case with Carlos Fuentes, Sergio Pitol, Hernán Lara Zavala, Juan Villoro, Agustín Monsreal and Enrique Serna.

There continued, of course, to be story writers working within the "intimist" tradition, among them María Luisa Puga, Ethel Krauze, Felipe Garrido, Bernardo Ruiz, Mónica Mansour and Brianda Domecq.

We must add to all this the rise of literary voices which have a post-modern character, precisely because they do not correspond to the editorial and cultural conditions of the country's political and economic center: Mexico City. Among story writers from other cities, denominated "the provinces," are Alvaro Uribe and Luis Arturo Ramos (from Xalapa), Dante Medina and Martha Cerda (Guadalajara), Luis Humberto Crosthwaite (Tijuana), Daniel Sada (Coahuila), Jesús Gardea (Ciudad Juárez), Ricardo Elizondo Elizondo (Monterrey), Francisco José Amparán (Torreón), as well as many Chicano writers, such as Sandra Cisneros, Rolando Hinojosa and others, who remain virtually unknown in Mexico.

The view of Mexican reality offered by writers from the country's "interior" is precisely a fragmentary,

## Her what?

Impossible to go anywhere with her without finding a child who had committed suicide. Suicides suited for the situation, of corpse. In the bathroom a drowned person, in the closet a hanging (tight tie, I'd tease), and of course in the kitchen sliced veins painted their stains that can't be cleaned by washing and wash with bleach and scrub a dub dub, my love, and that there so it the impossible way wasn't possible for her, and, Where do you get children who commit suicide?

Then she might theorize until my desire to paranoize her with "once upon a time there was one who theorized..." clawed at other scrawls: "and the reason is that the power discharged in the name of a thing onto its central itness leads to the no of over there, the no of the time when the thing non-exists or to the when it already does, or better, inventing the name you can't find if you need you don't know what." My placing-in-order invented a beginning in language affirming a Then: 1) knowing the name of a thing gives you power over it; 2) knowing the name of a non-existent thing means holding a power over all non-existent things or over what we don't know; 3) to invent a name is to have power over a you-don't-know-what.

—"To have power over a you-don't-know-what," over a you-don't-what-yourself, I what myself, what you stayed. Bravo: Treatise.

And treating me with Treatise she scordemned me as old-fashioned, and there was no way I could make her laugh, not even those times when I really understand the wordplay.

She doused me a tinytimation, praycluding herself:

—That is more or less that, but you mess-entangle.

—In any case, one doesn't know what.

—"One doesn't know what:"

—what is always known

—like what?

—like what.

Dig in.

Dig in to what?

Oh you poor thing.

In any case, the children kept committing suicide on her and what had no idea where to hide.

Excerpt from *A ella qué* by Dante Medina  
Translated by Santiago Vaquera  
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contradictory and paradoxical one. Their forms of humor and irony reflect conditions of cultural and economic marginalization. One might even speak of cultural borders (especially those which determine the publication and distribution of their books in Mexico City), which wind up being as difficult to cross as the geographical and linguistic borders between Mexico and the United States. Some of these writers have indeed managed to cross these publishing barriers, which distinguishes them from Mexico City writers whose work is characterized instead by a crossing of genre boundaries.

On the other hand, it is noteworthy that over the past ten years there has been

an extraordinary interest in publishing Mexican stories, both here and abroad. More anthologies were published from 1985 to 1994 than over the entire 50 preceding years, both in Mexico and in translated versions in other countries.

In recent years, despite the crisis of the Mexican publishing industry, more than 400 books of short stories have been published annually. This demonstrates the status of a genre which—more difficult than the novel and as experimental as poetry—is the best indicator of the imaginative vitality of our literary language.

The new Mexican story, in addition to continuing the traditions of regional narrative and psychological fiction which were

dominant for three decades, is noteworthy for its playful and experimental nature. In its less orthodox variants, this form of writing challenges the boundaries between traditional narrative and other prose genres, particularly the essay, the vignette and the chronicle. In doing so, it employs humor as a weapon of demystification and irony as a critical strategy.

Alternating eroticism, imagination and immediate historical memory with reflection on writing, testimony of our urban life and the recording of intimate and collective earthquakes, these stories simultaneously nurture their readers' capacity for surprise and indigation **M**