

BOOKS

Alejandro Toledo

NEWS OF THE EMPIRE: ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A QUEEN

In 1959 a magazine in Veracruz *La palabra y el hombre* ("Word and Man") published "El estudiante y la reina" ("The Student and the Queen") by Fernando del Paso. The short story tells of the encounters of a medical student with a mad woman who claims to be a queen but in reality is an old prostitute. This curious story establishes an intimate relationship between two of this Mexican writer's three novels, *Palinuro de México* (1977) ("Palinuros of Mexico") and *Noticias del Imperio* (1987) ("News of the Empire"). The protagonist of the first novel is a medical student who died in Santo Domingo Plaza in 1968 as a result of government repression of the student movement. The second tells of the French intervention in Mexico and of the residence of Maximilian of Hapsburg and Maria Carlota of Belgium in the Mexican Second Empire. The crux of the novel is a long monologue by Carlota, who by this time is insane and awaiting death in Bouchout Castle.

"The Student and the Queen" published in 1959 spans a bridge between two novels that had not yet been written. Its epigraph is work noting: "Her eyes gave him no sign of love or farewell or recognition." Perhaps it is from James Joyce's

Dubliners. This information helps us trace some of the coordinates between which Fernando del Paso will move—a medical student, a mad queen waiting to die, and the other axis grounded in the works of James Joyce.

Nevertheless, Fernando del Paso's first novel *José Trigo*, was not published until 1966. Its subject matter is a far cry from that of "The Student and the Queen." In *José Trigo*, Del Paso adopted the 1958-1959 railroad workers' movement as central theme. This movement affected the nation as a whole and it began a decade of dissidence and repression that culminated in the massacre at the Plaza of Three Cultures at Tlatelolco. As if a premonition, the geographical setting of *José Trigo* is Nonoalco Tlatelolco where railway workers had their camps. Some view this novel as a dark omen of the student massacre that occurred during the presidency of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz. The account of Tlatelolco told in *José Trigo* casts a gray, deathly halo over the region bathed by the tragedy.

Specific places and specific historical events—the railway workers' movement, the student movement, the French intervention—seem to be other gauges of Fernando del Paso's narrative exercise. An author of only three books, he has tended to form a trilogy of Mexico independently of the fact that he takes as his basis the most significant events of the 19th and 20th centuries in Mexico. Del Paso avoids direct reference to the 1910 Revolution, undoubtedly because it would be difficult to find new creative possibilities for the topic.

While Mexican narrative shows an interest in history, that does not fully define Fernando del Paso's novels. He belongs to a generation of writers born between 1925 and 1935 who share a critical view of Mexican history. The leading writer of that generation is Carlos Fuentes. It is, however, difficult to compare, the two authors. Fuentes has tried to forge in his writing a "Mexican comedy" in the style of Balzac,



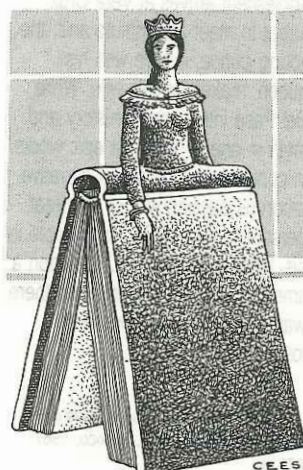
Fernando del Paso (Photo by José Fuentes)

while Del Paso seeks to achieve a supreme synthesis in only three books published a decade or more apart.

Marcel Schwob notes, "The science of history plunges us into uncertainty about individuals." Perhaps for this reason, literature that deals with history pays attention to those specific histories, which in their small complexity add up to form the past. A better definition of Fernando del Paso's novels is that they may be seen as a "bundle of narratives." It is not so much Great History as the more specific accounts of Luciano, the railway worker leader, of Palinuro, the fossilized student in the Medical School, or Maximilian of Hapsburg, a weak man educated to govern the masses. These intrusions into the individual, these visits to the interior universe offer new

perspectives when historical events are involved. In *News of the Empire*, for example, Carlota speaks at length:

Today the messenger came to bring me news of the Empire. He came laden with memories and dreams, in a caravel with sails swollen by a single puff of luminous wind filled with parrots. He brought me a handful of sand from the Isle of Sacrifices, some deerskin gloves and an enormous barrel made of precious woods brimming over with frothy and burning hot chocolate, where I am going to bathe every day of my life until my Bourbon princess skin, my 80-year old skin of a mad woman, my white Alençon and Brussels lace skin, my snowy skin like magnolias from the Miramar Gardens, until my skin, Maximilian, my skin split by centuries and tempests and the crumbling of dynasties, my white angel skin of Memling and of Beguinage's sweetheart falls to pieces and a new dark and perfumed skin, dark as the cocoa of Soconusco and perfumed as the vanilla of Papantla covers me entirely, Maximilian, from my dark forehead down to the tips of my Mexican Indian, brown-skinned virgin, Empress of America, bare, perfumed feet.



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The novels of Del Paso

(Photo by Arturo Fuentes)

Structuring *News of the Empire*, Carlota's monologue is composed of long sentences and extensive paragraphs that come to comprise several pages. It is a lyrical exercise that focuses its attention on the flow of images. By calling it a "lyrical exercise" one attempts to emphasize its pre-eminence for song and the fact that the continuous creation of metaphors provides historical information. It has been compared with Molly Bloom's monologue that closes James Joyce's *Ulysses*, but it is easy to distinguish between the two. While Joyce's work follows the stream of consciousness, Del Paso's has a verbal resonance: it is music of the word and not of thought. As in *Palinuro de México* everything contributes to the creation of the artistic image, and the infinite connections that give form to the monologue create a sense of resplendent catharsis.

News of the Empire is also a polyphonic novel. The amorous discourse of the insane empress precedes or serves as a prologue to the historical chapters, each divided into three sections narrated in the historian's voice.

Carlota embodies time that has stood still. She awaits death 60 years after her adventure in Mexico, when most of the protagonists have already died. This final awareness immerses the account which goes from 1861 to 1872, and then jumps to 1927 during Carlota's agony.

The dialogue of times and voices forms a counterpoint that

activates the novel. The intensities of the monologue find their match in the accounts of battles or events of war in which Del Paso achieves an uncommon mastery describing the torture inflicted by Colonel Du Pin on the prisoner Juan Carbajal on board a barge.

Del Paso recalls two accounts by Martín Luis Guzmán: "La fiesta de las balas" ("The festival of bullets") in *El águila y la serpiente* ("The Eagle and the Serpent") and "El lazo de Canuto Arenas" ("The Rope of Canuto Arenas"), published in the newspaper version of *La sombra del caudillo* ("The Shadow of the Commander"). The three works refer with great explanatory coldness to an act of torture and punishment in the midst of war.

The fame of Colonel Du Pin spread all over the world. Egon Caesar Conte Corti, principal historian of the Empire, speaks of him as "a desperate person who had lost his rank in his homeland as a consequence of different irregularities and had recovered it far from his country by offering himself voluntarily in acts of war. His mission consisted of mercilessly advancing against bands fighting the intervention that had overrun the country, but he also often dedicated himself to all kinds of robberies and assassinations, and he did this in such a radical way that he achieved the worst notoriety because of his terrible cruelty and his numerous senseless killings."

A writer's early texts sketch, although only roughly, the paths which he will follow. Fernando del Paso's first story published in 1959 for a university magazine dealt with two possible readings: the adolescent arrives at Vera Cruz Street to meet a prostitute and, the young prince, in love with his queen, makes her his wife. While Del Paso interweaves history and myth in one of the most epic works in contemporary Mexican narrative, amorous passion will be his great, personal twist. As Del Paso wrote in his 1959 short story, "Once upon a time there was a student. And there was a queen. And they were lovers."

Del Paso, Fernando. *Noticias del Imperio*. Editorial Diana, México, 1987. 670 pp.