

Fuentes at a Distance

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As early as when I read *Cantar de ciegos* (Song of the Blind), a book of short stories by Carlos Fuentes, I immediately perceived the attractive influence that, in addition to delighting us with his stories, transmitted something that a newcomer seldom does: the yearning to write. My favorite story in that collection, “Un alma pura” (A Pure Soul), moved me and made me identify with the characters, constructed very consciously on the basis of the device of the word and the intimate, melancholy tone sometimes produced by a story narrated in the second person. Starting then, I became

a frequent visitor to Fuentes’s work. I read *La región más transparente* (Where the Air Is Clear), which fascinated, disconcerted, and dazzled me by its experimental —though slightly chaotic— nature, its audacious treatment, and its dizzying rhythm. *Aura* followed, with its halo of magic and mystery about the theme of the double, and the play of mirrors inside the gothic, funereal room on downtown Mexico City’s Donceles Street. And then *Los días enmascarados* (Masked Days), his first book, including what is now a legendary, emblematic story: “Chac Mool.” In college, one class gave me the opportunity to read and carefully study *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (The Death of Artemio Cruz) and admire the structure of that novel that shows the past, present, and future of the Mexican Revolution through the development of the character, who starts off as a well-intentioned hero and ends up corrupt and annihilated with the corresponding disillusionment of the revolutionary project itself. I read *Cambio de piel* (A Change of Skin), a car-

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nivalesque, pyrotechnical novel dedicated to Julio Cortázar, and *Agua quemada* (Burnt Water), a book of short stories via novel, and then the dense *Terra nostra*, his magnum opus, and so on, over the years. I did not always manage to keep up with his fast, broad, prolific, varied, ambitious body of work in its attempt to unravel the complexities of the Mexican being and its conflictive past.

The first time in my life that I saw Fuentes in person was one morning when I was browsing through the La Paz Avenue British Bookstore sometime in the 1960s. He was just a little over 40, but he was already “Carlos Fuentes.” He began to look through the shelves, and as soon as he found what he was looking for —*The Dubliners* by James Joyce, if I remember correctly—, he went right to the cash register where he paid Gaby, the woman then in charge of the bookstore, and left as breezily as he had come in.

Fuentes as a public figure was always in the spotlight of the world of national culture. His first intellectual friends in Mexico may have been his fellow students at the School of Law, some of whom he had also studied with at the CUM (Centro Universitario México), like Mario Moya Palencia, Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, and Víctor Flores Olea. A few others like Enrique González Pedrero, Bernardo Sepúlveda Amor, and Javier Wimer joined the group that came to be known as the “Medio Siglo” (Mid-Century) generation. He also had a few older friends like Martín Luis Guzmán, Manolo Barbachano Ponce, Luis Buñuel, Fernando Benítez, Juan José Arreola (his teacher and the editor of his first book at the Los Presentes publishing house), Juan Rulfo, and, of course, Octavio Paz, who in the early stages of his career acted as a tutor, encouraging him to find his destiny and vocation. They remained very close until they made a break, foreseeable because teacher and student had entered into frank competition with each other. It had been Paz who suggested that Fuentes be the first editor of *Revista Mexicana de Literatura* (Mexican Literature Review) jointly with Emmanuel Carballo. The writer and critic would build a healthy collaboration to lead culture in Mexico. But in contrast with Alfonso Reyes, Paz, and Monsiváis, Fuentes was

not interested in becoming a cultural strongman, or *cacique*, and he resigned as soon as he could from the editorship at *Revista Mexicana de Literatura* to pursue his work freely as a writer. Among his contemporaries in Mexico, Fuentes frequented José Luis Cuevas, Salvador Elizondo, “La China” Mendoza, Juan Ibáñez, Tomás Segovia, José Emilio Pacheco, and Carlos Monsiváis. Later, he developed his friendship with Gabriel García Márquez, and shortly after his arrival to Mexico with Álvaro Mutis. He never had good relations with García Ponce, and their stories “Un alma pura” (A Pure Soul) and “Tajimara,” made into films directed by Juan Ibáñez and Juan José Gurrola, respectively, competed against each other at the 1964 Experimental Film Festival. Then came his great meeting with Julio Cortázar —“Is your father here?” “That’s me, Carlos. Come in,” and with Mario Vargas Llosa, José Donoso, and Juan Goytisolo, who created the Latin American boom in literature. And later, he frequented Sergio Ramírez, Tomás Eloy Martínez, and Nérida Piñon when the post-boom began to consolidate. Simultaneously, he made friends internationally, like with Milan Kundera, Jerzy Kosinsky, Arthur Miller, William Styron, Susan Sontag, and Harold Pinter, among many, many other first-class figures who enjoyed his personality and broad cultural background. I have the impression, however, that at the end of the day, Carlos Fuentes was always a fundamentally solitary person, although perhaps for that very reason he liked to make friends and meet people. He considered friendship one of the most important values a human being could enjoy (“What we don’t have, we find in friends”). In this sense, perhaps his greatest friends in life were Julio Cortázar and Gabriel García Márquez.

When he broke with Octavio Paz, a gap opened in Mexican culture whose two camps were the contributors to the magazines *Vuelta* and *Nexos*. There, Fuentes made friends with Héctor Aguilar Camín, Jorge G. Castañeda, Federico Reyes Heróles, and José María Pérez Gay.

In those long-ago times, I never imagined, not even for a moment, that some day I would meet him personally and have the opportunity and privilege of chatting with him, exchanging

impressions, talking about books, film, plays, and authors, and even go to his home, meet him at the homes of mutual friends, and host him in my home. I never imagined that I would enjoy his friendship and generosity as a reader and a critic of my own work. Carlos Fuentes, the most renowned Mexican author, the most professional, the greatest, the one who as a baby sat on Alfonso Reyes's knee and later traveled the world before he came of age, who spoke four or five languages perfectly, who knew history, art, and politics, and looked a little like Jorge Negrete, who was attracted to beautiful women, particularly talented actresses, and who managed to find his "better half," Silvia Lemus, as beautiful as any actress, and who accompanied him in good times and bad, supporting his work all their lives. That Carlos Fuentes, who at 30 became an icon, a literary phenomenon unprecedented in our milieu, a giant of Mexican letters who gave himself over body and soul to structuring with indefatigable talent and effort, a great and unique body of work, a precursor of the Latin American boom and a unique, emblematic figure of that movement that revolutionized the literary world and revived the novel as a genre when the Europeans had already given it its last rites; that Carlos Fuentes was also, and for that very reason, one of the eternal candidates for the Nobel Prize for Literature.

The first time I had the chance to speak to him personally was at a congress at Brown University, organized by another of his great friends, Peruvian critic and writer Julio Ortega; the reason for the meeting was the forthcoming publication of *Diana o la cazadora solitaria* (Diana: the Goddess Who Hunts Alone). Year after year, Fuentes gave a keynote, inaugural address at the different seminars Julio organized very ably and imaginatively in the city of Providence. On that occasion, I was invited, along with other writers. The reason Carlos was interested in talking to me was that I had surreptitiously—but not in bad faith—already read his novel while it was still at press. Carlos Aguirre, the designer for the Alfaguara publishing house, headed by Sealtiel Alatríste, was preparing the cover, and he was at my parents' house in Cuernavaca one weekend. I was terribly curious because it was about Fuen-

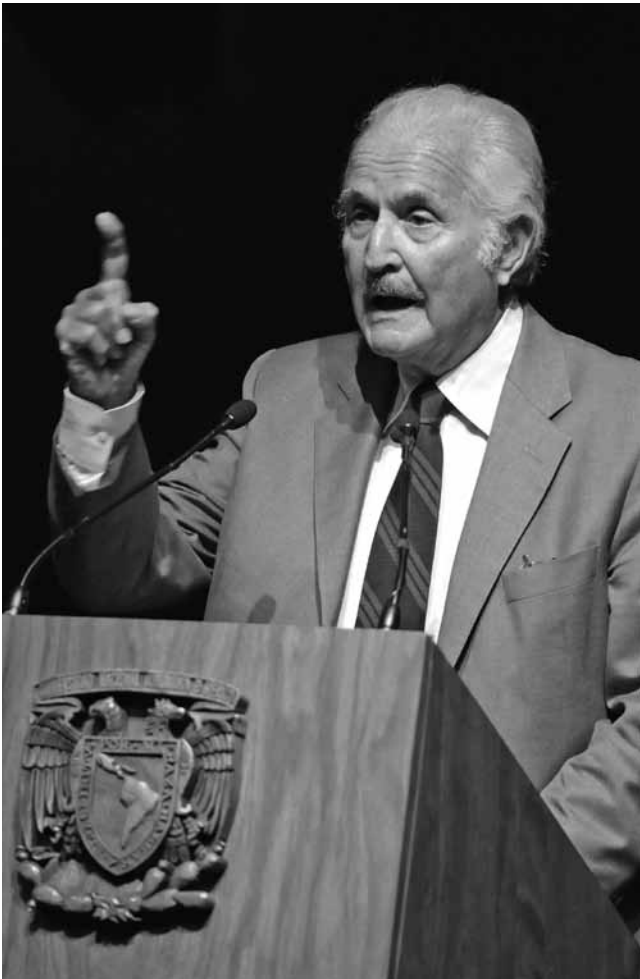
tes's relationship with the actress Jean Seberg, so I asked him to let me give it a look, which he did without demur. As an editor, Sealtiel Alatríste had managed to infuse extraordinary vitality and prestige into the Alfaguara publishing house, leading it into an unprecedented boom: in just a few years, it was able to bring together the most important Latin American writers under its name, and very specifically, Carlos Fuentes. At that time, Alfaguara México was more important than Alfaguara Spain.

Fuentes was rather dubious about the fact that someone he didn't know, like me, had read his novel before it was formally published, and so he asked Sealtiel to introduce us for a short chat. Sealtiel came out in my defense: "I can assure you that Hernán won't do anything bad with his foreknowledge," he said. We met alone in a little adjoining room to where a toast was being made after the inaugural lecture, and without any great protocol, alone, seated facing each other, Fuentes asked me for my impression of his novel. His presence was rather imposing, not just because of his fame. He was a man of character and a penetrating gaze, not at all complacent, much less obsequious. I confessed to him that it seemed very different from the rest of his work and that I liked the frank autobiographical tone he had used. He didn't turn a hair. Looking at me directly, he asked me to elaborate, and I did:

It's an autobiographical narrative in which you try to recover a love story from 1970 that you have now decided to write about, more than 20 years later, to relive it and give it its literary dimension, to evoke that moment when you and your character tried to be happy. Regardless of whether you managed it or not, I think that it approaches something that readers are looking for today: credibility above imagination, a real case peopled with famous but flesh-and-blood figures as protagonists, a testimonial novel in which you are risking your own fame as a man and as an intellectual, in your search for love, even if at that time you didn't realize what your relationship with Jean—or rather Diana—implied, but that life would take the responsibility for giving a tragic ending. It is your frankest novel to date, the bravest and the

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CARLOS FUENTES



most self-critical. It is part of the genre of confessional novels like those of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Michel Leiris, or Bertrand Russell.

I thought that I had not managed to strike an emotional chord with my comments, much less convince him. When he heard my answer, without a word, he got up, shook my hand, and said good-bye. I still think, however, that *Diana: the Goddess Who Hunts Alone* is one of his most authentic, interesting works, where Fuentes allowed himself the freedom to make several intimate confessions of different kinds, but above all about his view of the world: “Literature is my true lover, and all the rest (sex, politics, religion if I had one, death when it comes) passes through the literary experience, which is the filter of all the other experiences of my life.”

But after that, my relations with Fuentes began to become closer. Sealtiel Alatrste took it upon himself to bring together a group of writer friends to him. Our meetings were spo-

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radic. The first time we met at the Prego restaurant in Polanco. Fuentes had a martini and then a little white wine. By five in the afternoon, he had already left.

When Harold Pinter came to Mexico, Fuentes offered to translate two of his brief works, *Moonlight* and *Party Time*. Through Gonzalo Celorio, at that time the coordinator of UNAM Cultural Dissemination Office, it was agreed that the play would be put on by Ludwik Margules in the Juan Ruiz de Alarcón Theater using Fuentes’s translation and that simultaneously, it would be published by the UNAM Literature Department that I was heading up then.

From that time on, the relationship with Fuentes began to be more fluid. When he came to Mexico for Christmas, we would have a soirée in his and Silvia’s honor and we began to get to know each other. He had proposed reading the work of younger Mexican writers without regard to what group, genre, or trend they might belong to, and that is noticeable in his most recent work, *La gran novela latinoamericana* (The Great Latin American Novel). In addition to his life-long friends, Fuentes read and supported an infinite number of writers, displaying enormous intellectual generosity and a diligent viewpoint, although always maintaining his critical distance: he was tolerant, but never indulgent.

Fuentes never won the Nobel Prize, although in readers’ hearts he is identified as though he had. Thus, he enters the ranks of Proust, Kafka, Joyce, Musil, Durrell, Henry Miller, Borges, Nabokov, Cortázar, Updike, Graham Green, and so many others who never received the famous award, but who are more appreciated and read than many who did.

With the death of Carlos Fuentes, a great stage in twentieth century and early twenty-first century Mexican literature comes to its culmination. He served as the heir, champion, and literary witness of our day-to-day events and wrote the saga of the entire era marked by the Mexican Revolution and its consequences, fighting for a better country. His work will endure beyond history thanks to the power of literature, which was the justification for his life. **MM**