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Carlos Fuentes's "Mirrors of Time": Art and Literature in the Twenty-First Century

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La obra literaria, cualquiera que sea su naturaleza, crea un universo verbal que antes no existía. El mundo reclama constantemente que sea escrito, que lo que no se ha dicho sea dicho. Y la gran manera de hacerlo es a través de la literatura, de la ficción, que es una aventura que nos conduce al interior de las sociedades y de los seres humanos. Nos reconocemos más como seres humanos leyendo a *Madame Bovary*, *Los Miserables* o *Don Quijote* que si no los tuviéramos. Es un aporte a nuestra humanidad; es algo que nos obliga a ser más partícipes de la sociedad. La literatura implica un acto de confianza en el futuro y en el lector. El buen libro es el libro que no concluye, aquel en cuya última página no se puede leer la palabra fin. La última palabra de la gran literatura queda en manos del lector.

—Fuentes, *La Nación*

(A literary work, no matter its nature, creates a verbal universe that did not previously exist. The world constantly demands to be written, to say all that has not been said before. And the grand way of doing so is through literature, through fiction, which is an adventure that takes us to the interior of societies and of human beings. We recognize ourselves better as human beings when we read *Madame Bovary*, *Les Miserables*, or *Don Quixote* than if we did not have access to them. Literature contributes to our humanity; it is something that forces us to participate in society. Literature implies an act of confidence in the future and in the reader. A good book does not conclude; it is one on whose last page one cannot read the words, "The End." The last word of great literature is in the hands of the reader.)

In this statement, Carlos Fuentes condenses the essence and value of the aesthetic experience. His comments strike a chord among those who still

believe in the centrality of literature within a liberal arts curriculum. This does not mean that literature should be seen as an instrument of morality, a commonplace long criticized by authors such as George Steiner, Edward Said, or Ángel Rama, who are cognizant that some avid readers and prolific writers have perpetrated horrors or supported nationalistic, totalitarian, and exclusionist beliefs. Similarly, Fuentes does not invite the reader to achieve a positivistic moral and cultural ideal of the civilized modern man through literature, as proposed by Arnold, Herder, and Sidgwick (Steiner). Rather, the reading of fiction helps one develop an awareness of society's ideas and values, of its crises and horrors, of their constant change, arbitrariness, and recurrence over time and across cultures. In so doing, fiction helps the reader to denaturalize difference and otherness. Literature, according to Fuentes, also allows one to reflect upon and to diversify ideas; to challenge and even destabilize a fixed order to create a new reality. The literary work becomes the "*agora*, where all voices are heard, where all voices are respected . . . [it is] the *agora* of many points of view, but also of not only a psychological reality or a political reality, but of many aesthetic realities that would otherwise have no languages—a meeting of languages, in other words" (qtd. in Wutz).

These reflections by Fuentes are particularly appropriate in the present academic environment, as many universities look for instrumental value in order to survive "financial exigencies," and as students face rapid changes in a symbolic order that does not necessarily coincide with their core beliefs. One might also say that such changes are apt to challenge their ideas about what seems different and in seeming different becomes the other (along racial, religious, and gender lines). Literature may well be one of the most meaningful arenas in which to engage students in a dialogue that helps them assess their individual and cultural realities. In this scenario, Fuentes's work allows us to discuss how the aesthetic experience is condensed in the written world, particularly in a number of short novels and stories written in what René Jara calls the mythical-allegorical vein, an author's attempt to reproduce a mythical idea of the world in order to make sense of her/his own broken reality (16).

Mythical characters populate Fuentes's stories, giving new meaning to old symbols of popular culture such as ghosts, witches, and vampires. At a time when these mythical characters are flooding mass media and capturing students' attention in shows like *Charmed*, *True Blood*, and *The Vampire Diaries*, the use of Fuentes's fantasy literature in the classroom can help students engage with a number of current sociopolitical issues while connecting them to known referents from contemporary pop culture. Fuentes's fantasy can be used to show how the author creates new symbols of silenced voices from the past, as well as showing how the genre can be read as a way to fictionalize the author's literary criticism. In this sense,

Fuentes connects the reader to a number of recurring issues, among them xenophobia, migration, and colonial and neocolonial discourses and experiences, while also analyzing the significance of artistic experimentation, the intrinsic value of art as memory, and art as our mechanism to survive and deceive nature's path. In this context, Fuentes can be read not just as a Mexican author, but also as an important Latin American writer whose work serves as a bridge between academic production and the reader who is informed and interested in her/his society.

It was during the late 1980s that Fuentes, by his own admission (and after reading Balzac's *La Comédie humaine*), realized that his work had a common thread and common obsessions and that, as such, it could be organized as part of a single project entitled *La edad del tiempo* (The Age of Time). Such a project was envisioned as containing a number of chapters "El tiempo romántico" (Romantic Time), "Tiempo de revoluciones" (Revolutionary Time), and "El mal del tiempo" (Mirrors of Time) among others. "El mal del tiempo" is the "chapter" in which Fuentes has condensed most of his fantasy works: *Aura*, *Cumpleaños* (Birthday), *Una familia lejana* (Distant Relations), *Constancia y otras novelas para vírgenes* (Constancia and Other Stories for Virgins), *Instinto de Inez* (Inez), and *Inquieta compañía* (Unquiet Company). Fantasy literature has been often viewed as a minor genre, a view that Fuentes rejects in light of the success of Borges, Poe, Maupassant, and Hemingway. Moreover, he also points to the genre's formal exigencies, and what Carpentier and Asturias referred to as a "natural surrealism" that gave birth to the sphere of magical realism (qtd. in Wutz).

In all of Fuentes's fantasy stories, one of the fundamental ideas is that of migration or human displacement, a topic that the author has also discussed in his more realistic narratives such as *La frontera de cristal: Una novela en nueve cuentos* (The Crystal Frontier: A Novel in Nine Stories), in interviews, and in essays such as *En esto creo* or *El espejo enterrado* (1992) (The Buried Mirror), where he asserts that "el inmigrante es la víctima perfecta" (514) (the immigrant is the perfect victim) and that in some way we all come from somewhere else (516). These remarks echo the latest report from the United Nations Human Rights Council's special investigator on racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and intolerance and a number of current news stories around the world.¹ In Fuentes's fantasy stories, human displacement is interwoven with ideas about nature, time, literature, and art, establishing an analogy between artistic creation and cultural "mestizaje" and thus questioning totalitarian ideas of race behind the new (and yet old) immigration scenario. Yet in Fuentes's fiction we see that migration entails more than human displacement, in the sense that it is the constant movement that keeps cultures alive, promoting racial and cultural *mestizaje*. Discussing such topic within the realm of fantasy has the advantage of placing such discussions in multiple time periods (all at the same time) and from various

levels of understanding. Literature (and the novel in particular) has the potential to stretch the boundaries of reality while keeping the “reading pact.” Discussions about time, memory, and the value of art become almost a physical presence, embodying characters that exceed the limitations of space, time, and national boundaries, thus helping the reader to metaphorically connect to the recurrence of a number of social issues. I shall try to focus on these issues through an analysis of several of the fictional texts belonging to “Mirrors of Time.”

“Constancia,” the first story in the collection *Constancia and Other Stories for Virgins*, portrays how waves of immigrants from various historical moments coexist at the same time. In this novella, Whitby Hull, a doctor from Savannah, Georgia, gets caught up in a mystery involving his Spanish wife (Constancia) and his Russian neighbor (the actor Monsieur Plotnikov). In his search for clues, Hull goes to Spain to discover that the woman he married was also Plotnikov’s wife, and that the couple left Russia for the Iberian peninsula in 1929, fleeing from their country’s political situation. They were detained in Cadiz and ten years later were killed by Franco’s forces while their furniture was shipped to Georgia, where they had planned to seek asylum. The fantastic character of a ghostly family’s arrival in the Southern United States thanks to the physical presence of their personal belongings invites the reader to think about the various waves of immigrants that have populated this country, and whose stories and contributions seem invisible when faced with the dominant white version of the nation. According to Fuentes, the history of the United States absorbs everything into one history, and not of a very good one (qtd. in Hernández 187), a history in which the black, indigenous, Asian, and Hispanic versions of reality continue to be a mere accident and no more than a list of contributions to white, Anglo-Saxon culture. Plotnikov confirms this idea of the United States as a country that only incorporates the history of the Pilgrims’ descendants.² Hull argues that his country has been built on immigration, and has granted asylum to more immigrants than any other nation in history. For the Russian actor, what matters—and what the United States fails to do—is to allow the existence of the memory that immigrants bring with them. Immigrants are supposed to assimilate into a “melting pot,” the image of which corresponds to an ideal white-European-Christian imaginary, and adopt the melting pot’s collective memory as their own. The only way for immigrants to hold on to their own cultural memories is to form a closed community, a sort of ghetto labeled as “fill-in-the-blank American.” But memories are alive and cannot be easily restrained. Instead, they generate more memories that subsequently create new versions of reality, and that is what does not fit in the nation’s melting pot.

When Hull comes back home after his Spanish trip, he finds that a Salvadorian family that had been running away from its country’s war has

occupied his basement. New immigrants seeing themselves reflected in old immigrants (Westrope 204) confront the narrator with a chain of human displacements, all of which have been promoted by totalitarian violence (whether from the left or the right), at times veiled behind the idea of "democracy." The first wave of immigrants in "Constancia" is represented by Plotnikov, himself one of a number of artists—unknown, in this case—displaced by Stalin's policies in the early twentieth century. This side of postcolonial *mestizaje* is represented by migration waves that pushed hundreds of artists and writers—harassed by Stalinism, Nazism, and Fascism during the first half of the twentieth century—to every nook of the globe.

Migration, in this case the one forced by twentieth-century political violence, is registered in "Constancia" as one of the engines that promote postcolonial *mestizaje*. Take, for example, the presence of undocumented Hispanics, which can be read as one of the consequences of Reagan's foreign economic policies through the Salvadorian family that Dr. Hull finds in his basement. This migration, the last one in the book, corresponds to one of the last waves of immigrants to the United States during the past five decades and could be said to be one of the most important axes of cultural penetration and social change in the country. The old doctor invites the family to stay at his house and do manual labor, advising them to always carry with them paper and pencil, things that the authorities would not be able to confiscate. Paper and pencil will allow the family to communicate, to claim legal aid. Writing imposes constrictive official policies, but is also capable of reaching the other across spatial and temporal distances. Writing is what survives, what is capable of overcoming even death, the "gran mecenas" and "el gran ángel de la escritura" (qtd. in Hernández 63) (the great patron and writing angel) because, as Fuentes says, one should write because one will not continue to be alive. The narrator is inclined to help the illegal family after he faces the mystery of his dead wife and neighbor, ghosts of immigrants who survived thanks to memory's charity (*Constancia* 51). This help seems to be promoted by Hull's historical guilt about slavery, a form of forced migration sponsored by the United States for more than two centuries that still influences the country's policies, behaviors, and social interactions.

In the context of education, human displacement is also an ontological matter that provokes questions about the individual's relationship to the social and natural environment, allowing students to connect to the core of creativity, artistic ideals, and their place in building a society. In "Gente de razón," (Reasonable People) we face the notion of migration as an act of nature, as an exile imposed from birth with our separation from the mother's womb. The search and necessity of a new space for life, of a new locus that allows us to alter, develop, and continue our previous existence, is intrinsic to being human. The limits we impose on this movement to and fro are part

of the tension between man and nature proposed by Schopenhauer and adopted and fictionalized by Fuentes in various texts (“Viva mi fama,” *Viendo visiones*, and *Instinto de Inez* among others). “Gente de razón” refers also to European movements toward Latin America during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when its new capitalist utopias—and, later, the totalitarian regimes and two world wars in Europe—made the continent a refuge for many people. In this story, Santiago Ferguson, a Mexican professor of architecture (of Scottish origin) decides to go back to his ancestors’ land, where he has an uncanny experience. While visiting a small museum, Ferguson encounters the ghost of Charles Rennie Mackintosh, one of the most important exponents of the United Kingdom’s Art Nouveau architecture, but whose work was not understood during his lifetime. Mackintosh asks Ferguson to take care of his family and to devote himself entirely to them. At this point, Ferguson has a vision of a possible future and possible versions of the past, all at the same time, bringing together various moments in time. This temporal displacement in which future and past meet at a single point in the present creates a new memory, a kind of synthesis that condenses a conglomerate of ideas that, in time—when the phantasmatic experience passes—starts diluting, losing their cohesion to become a mere reflex, a vague illusion of previous forms. Thus, memory comes and goes in spirals, collecting, discarding, and mixing information. Memory, as well as myths and cultures, reproduces and perpetuates its existence thanks to its constant pilgrimage. Memory survives because it mixes and adapts to new realities, because it is “*mestiza*.”

Ferguson’s phantasmatic encounter, as in “Constancia,” revolves around the survival of the past through the memory reproduced and fed by the living; in this case, however, Ferguson takes care of Mackintosh’s family through architecture, the art that he practices and teaches. In this sense, Ferguson claims teaching as the ritual that allows art to be in continuous circulation. The architect’s lessons about art revolve around the notions of change and symmetry, which create a rhythm that aims for unity, totality, and perfection, while knowing that each new piece of art distances itself from its predecessors and that it is nothing more than a constant approximation to its aesthetic ideal, which is in itself fragmented and multiple. The search for this ideal of symmetry is split by the consciousness of its impossibility, making the notion no more than a garment to cover asymmetry, which turns to be the rupture of the Platonic ideal. This rupture with the aesthetic ideal is what introduces the mystery that allows us, time after time, in a ritualistic way, to continue the impossible search for aesthetic perfection. In “Gente de razón” architecture is the medium that condenses the discussion about aesthetics to remind us that artistic ideas, as well as myth and memory, are constituted through their continuous displacement in time and space. Aesthetic ideas come and go, carrying old and new forms

that commingle and move away from one another, get lost, or simply disappear. In sum, art as well as architecture also perishes leaving only their ruins and their ghosts for us to revive.

"La bella durmiente" (Sleeping Beauty) is another compelling example of the marriage between fantasy, art, and the notion of human displacement in Fuentes's work. This short story, the fifth in the book *Inquieta Compañía* (2004), can easily connect to students' collective imaginary, allowing them to question the essence of the fairy tale and explore a number of symbols that relate to the consequences of racism, as well as understanding how art and cultures in general are nurtured by their constant rewriting and representation.

The short story is dedicated to Peter Straub, poet and novelist from Wisconsin, known as one of the contemporary masters of horrors. This reference is key because of the text's connection to Straub's novella *The General's Wife* (1982), which the author wrote as his own version of *Aura* in tribute to Fuentes who, at the same time, had expressed his admiration for his friend's gothic novel *Ghost Story* (1981). The idea of *Aura* emerged from his interpretation and re-creation of Henry James's *The Aspern Papers* (1888). "La bella durmiente" is, then, a reflection of a reflection. It is a story that presents a mirror-like relationship that re-creates the process in which art is generated in response to previous works and myths. In other words, it deals with how a story migrates and in this pilgrimage gives birth to new texts. This myth-migration intersects with medieval oral tradition and with contemporary popular imaginaries represented in movies, which also fed on nineteenth-century compilations of medieval oral stories.

In Fuentes's "La bella durmiente," the reader is conscious of reading a book about ghosts and not about fairy tales. The author oscillates between two different arenas of the fantasy world, establishing a dialogue with a reader who expects a connection to the fairy tale, knowing that s/he will only find a deformed image of it. The short story narrates the tale of Dr. Jorge Caballero, who is summoned by Emil Baur, a German engineer who arrived to Mexico in the early twentieth century to explore and exploit local mines. Dr. Caballero's services are required for Baur's wife, a Mennonite suffering from a severe case of narcolepsy. Caballero ends up reviving the woman through touch and sex, evoking, as in *Aura* and other stories, a link between eroticism, death, and creation. It is in this moment that the doctor's true identity is revealed by Baur: Caballero was Georg von Reiter, a Nazi doctor in charge of eliminating mentally and physically handicapped people in Treblinka, and Baur's Mennonite wife was Alberta Simmons, Reiter's maid and lover. The doctor's efforts to save Alberta from her destiny were futile and the efficient Nazi bureaucracy condemned the lovers to death. Baur, as it turns out, was a Nazi officer, Commander Wagner. Despite the time difference between the killings, the two dead bodies were found embracing

each other. Deeply moved, Baur/Commander Wagner took the corpses to Mexico to give them a peaceful burial. Caballero/Reiter is the only person capable of reviving the Mennonite, because only another dead person can infuse life through its own virility. The mutualism that allows the doctor to revive the patient (although here we are facing a ghost reviving a ghost) coincides with the vital, genetic-social character that Bruno Bettelheim attributes to the traditional fairy tale, in which—in a symbolic manner—the physiological and psychological transformations of an adolescent lead to key changes for the preservation of the species. The possibility of creating a new life comes with a new level of existence that implies a relationship in which the one who receives life also gives it (235).

Not only does the trauma generated by a loss keep a dead person's memory alive, but evoking her/him connects all of us with the nature of life and the inevitability of death. When death is related to the horror perpetrated by men against men, the ghost, the memory of that death, becomes action, law, and defense of life. Caballero/Reiter knows that he is not in control of his memory. He knows that this amalgam of recollections is placed and selected by Baur, a situation that invites the reader to question: who controls our memory of the past? Do we not construct our reality and plan our future based on the phantasms recovered by the historiographical tendencies of the moment? Are we not subjected to an Emil Baur who selects and rewrites our collective memory? The memory of the atrocities of World War II is the golden thread of Fuentes's story. However, as the author suggests in "Constancia" or "Gente de razón," memory is a living and mutable organism that not only depends on past facts, but is nurtured by a glimpse of the future. This future is also dependent and built upon the ideologies and social and power networks of the present. In Baur's words, "escoger el futuro significaba escoger el pasado" (200) (choosing the future meant choosing the past).

In "La bella durmiente," we confront the memory of the Holocaust, not only in relation to the atrocities against Jews, but also against gypsies, communists, homosexuals, Christian rebels (200), against anyone who defied Nazi ideology and order. Fuentes's story points toward the historical responsibility for the horrors of the war, which falls not only on the German government, but on doctors, lawyers, bankers, and every profession complicit in Nazi devastation (201). "La bella durmiente" invites the readers to consider our place in history and how we respond to torture, massacres, and the destruction of millions of lives at the hands of totalitarian beliefs. This responsibility can be direct, indirect, or historical, as in "Constancia" when Whitby Hull questions his guilt about slavery. Baur asks himself about his own historical debt in relation to the Holocaust: "¿Pude salvar a más muertos? ¿Sólo a dos entre millones? ¿Bastan dos cuerpos rescatados para perdonarme? ¿Hasta cuándo nos seguirán culpando? ¿No comprenden que el dolor de las víctimas ya fue igualado por la vergüenza de los verdugos?"

(210) (Could I have saved more dead people? Only two in millions? Are two rescued corpses enough to forgive me? How long will they keep blaming us? Don't they understand that the victims' pain has been matched by the shame of the executioners?).

But how can we measure the victims' pain? Is it possible to compare this pain with the executioner's shame? At the end of the story, the Mennonite is sitting next to Baur, without being seen or heard. She was a silent ghost who "served as the voice of other ghosts" and whose function was "to tell," to repeat the story over and over (210). Fuentes's short story has an open ending, a baffling and unexpected conclusion that leaves the reader with doubts about the existence of a new/different woman, a ghost woman who married Baur in Mexico and who was made invisible by the German, divested from her name and of whom there are no images in the house. The Mennonite is a ghost, she is not real, she is untouchable, but just like history, she is capable of telling and transmitting, of repeating continuous versions of the past that mold the present and face possible futures. The historical responsibility, however—she suggests—is not erased by constantly resurrecting Georg and Alberta. On the contrary, this resurrection can be the essence of a new erasure, like the invisibility generated by the guilt of her husband (210). Memory is selective, mutable, and Baur chose to rescue only part of it, the memory about what society has ascribed to his people. A collective memory of the Holocaust that has been repudiated and questioned for more than half a century, but what about the individual memory of intimacy that the engineer has forgotten and negated?

In Fuentes's "La bella durmiente," the Mennonite is a common woman, just like a fairy-tale character who is defined by her attributes and who is nameless. The ghosts born of the Holocaust cover up the ghost that comes out of Baur's disdain for the everyday woman; this woman has behind her a whole social structure based on the privilege of masculine reason. The Mennonite is the ghost that tells and retells the story; she is the ghost behind the ghost that makes the reader think not about the immediate and devastating consequences of the undeniable violence made manifest in the murder of millions of human beings but about another violence altogether. She is the ghost of silenced gender violence, a violence that goes beyond physical abuse, one that relates to the social place of women and to symbols that associate the feminine with the negative. The Mennonite appeals to the reader, the ghost of the text, so that her story has more resonance and the use of metaphors atop metaphors, of ghosts behind ghosts, creates an empty space that invites discussion of violence in all its forms, real-concrete and symbolic.

Revamping the Faustian Myth

One of the most important achievements of the late twentieth century is the technological revolution. We are now living a Renaissance dream in terms of access to information. Our problem is not the lack of information, but its overabundance and often its superficiality. This is what Fuentes calls “the paradox of modern information” (qtd. in Wutz). *Instinto de Inez* presents an opportunity to discuss this issue through a reinvention of the Faustian myth, inviting the reader to delve into the question of how the myth has migrated through art, music, and pop cultural history. Fuentes’s Faust elicits questions about contemporary ideals of youth, mass media spectacles and recordings, and the lack of utopias of today’s life; at the same time, his Faust reminds us about the value of artistic traditions, placing special importance on literature as a subject.

Instinto de Inez tells two stories that intersect, despite taking place in different periods of time. The first story’s protagonists, Gabriel Atlán-Ferrara—an eccentric French opera conductor whose role will be subsumed into that of a contemporary Faust—and Inez, a Mexican opera singer, are involved in a dramatic romance that has Berlioz’s *Damnation of Faust* as a backdrop during their three encounters. The second story tells the story of a prehistoric couple and is narrated mostly in the second person of the imperative future. This story takes the reader to the origin of language and the establishment of the patriarchal order, dealing with the imposition of the univocal masculine as opposed to the multiple feminine. Despite the temporal-spatial distance between the two stories, a-nel, the woman from the second story appears in the middle of the production of Berlioz’s *Damnation of Faust*. A-nel and Inez become one person resembling an optical illusion (166). This instant of union dissolves almost immediately and both stories go back to their respective timelines. However, both stories are polluted by that single moment of union shared in the London opera. The two stories also share an object: a round, crystal seal.

In the first story, Faust is a symbolic figure, a personification of desire, of eternal youth, and of constant yearning expressed in the pact between the magician-doctor and the devil (Pérez-Rioja 205). The price of the transaction: Faust’s soul in exchange for knowledge, or youth, or beauty. But the Faustian adjective refers to more than a man’s treaty with evil forces in order to achieve his desires and goals. It refers to a technological era where reason and intellect are employed—often in a destructive way—to control the natural world (Ziolkowski 45). This tension between nature and technological development is, according to Fuentes, the germ of the “first art.” It is in this fissure that one finds artistic creation, between adoration, fear, and subordination to nature. The Faustian myth comes with multiple meanings associated with the literary figure immortalized by Goethe, as the epitome of both the rational mind of the Enlightenment and the untrammelled

passions of nineteenth-century romanticism (Williams ix, x). This ambivalence intrinsic to the Faustian myth coincides with formal and thematic characteristics of Fuentes's work. In *Instinto de Inez*, Fuentes adds his name to a list of creators and re-creators of the Faustian myth. Among those creators, Fuentes privileges the productions of Berlioz and Rembrandt, evoking indirectly some of his previous ideas about the writing process.

In *Geografía de la novela*, for instance, the author discusses the elements of the novel as a literary genre. The first element is that the novel is an ample source of technical resources. The second is "una voluntad de apertura" (a will of opening), and the third, an understanding of the relationship between creation and tradition (26). For the Mexican writer, the importance of Rembrandt's engraving—whose complexity still puzzles art critics—resides, like that of the novel, in three fundamental aspects: its technical, its artistic, and its thematic characteristics. When it comes to technique, Fuentes explores the importance of achieving baroque chiaroscuro—not in painting, in oil on canvas—but in an engraving. This technique requires "digging" the surface that receives the ink, the element that will give life to a mirror image embodied in the paper. An engraving is thus a fingerprint, a signal indicative of an imprinted presence that resembles Plato's shadows, or memory, which is the pale and inaccurate reflection of a past reality. Fuentes discusses printmaking in the broad sense of the word, the engraving as that which is printed on any surface, whether textual or visual, and concludes that it is intended to bear witness to continuity. Memory, the thread that weaves the idea of continuity in the novella, is achieved through the use of the future tense in the narrative voice of the second story.

The structure of the novella is built on the principle of return, since it is at the end of the text that the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy is revealed, becoming the future of the characters. At the same time, the text implies that these events have already happened but had been forgotten. It is no coincidence that for Fuentes this segment of the novella may be part of either the past or a possible future (Solares 5). The order of events in the text creates the illusion of a time spiral, a sense that is also supported by comments on the seal in the first story and by the use of paragraphs in the second story, which are repeated almost word by word with small verbal and temporal variations such as the addition of one new sentence at the beginning or end of the paragraph, as if the text itself should bear its own memory and from it create a new reality that points towards the creation of an atmosphere of return, of cyclical time. This technique poses a challenge to the linear notion of progress and returns to the idea of mythical time. Myth is presented in *Instinto de Inez* as part of the theme and as the formal structure of the novella, in line with other texts from Fuentes's oeuvre, but with nuances and variations that emphasize the importance of artistic

experimentation. With that in mind, the author manages to create a novella that is itself creation and discourse on creation, just as Cervantes's *Don Quixote* is a self-referential and self-reflexive text.

The next point Fuentes highlights in Rembrandt's *Faust* is "una conciencia de la relación entre creación y tradición" (*Geografía* 26) (an awareness of the relationship between creativity and tradition). This relationship has been made notorious through the importance that authors such as Goethe placed on Rembrandt's work. The German author was so "impressed by the beauty and mystery of this print of Rembrandt that he asked to put it as an illustration of the 1760 [*sic*] edition of his *Faust*" (*Viendo visiones* 303). Fuentes also selected this same engraving for the cover of his novella *Instinto de Inez*. In addition, this relationship between creativity and tradition can be seen in the tradition of the myth itself: the legend of Faust is based on a real person who walked through sixteenth-century Germany duping the unwary with his tricks and ointments. The negative image of the historical Faust legend was transformed over the years thanks to pamphlets that circulated all over Europe. By the end of the sixteenth century, the legendary figure became—in Marlowe's hands—the prototype of the true intellectual. Two centuries later, Goethe composed his dramatic poem, complicating previous versions of the Faust legend. In Goethe's poem, salvation is achieved through the love and devotion of Margarita. In the twentieth century, Paul Valéry wrote *Mon Faust* (1946) and shortly thereafter (in 1947), Thomas Mann published his *Doctor Faustus*. In these last two works, says British critic Erich Heller, the gap between "knowledge and integrity of being" has become even deeper, to the extent that even the devil got lost in it. The human soul, which feeds the evil one, Heller continues, no longer requires hell to meet even its most extravagant ambitions (39).

Finally, Fuentes refers to the complexity of Rembrandt's engraving and how the multiplicity of symbols embodied in the piece of art contrasts with its small size (210 x 160mm), an aspect that takes us back to the difficulty and importance of technique. Among the many symbols in Rembrandt's engraving, the mirrors and seal that show up again in the intersecting narratives of Fuentes's text are of particular importance. For the opera conductor, the seal in his office brought back memories that he needed in order to keep on living (19). Thus, the fragility of the crystal seal becomes symbolic of the fragility of memory, a memory that "invokes" the past but also is constructed and returns, "transformed with each new experience" (21). That is, the narrator presents the idea of a working memory, a fluid memory that has nothing to do with the past as a fixed entity but a memory reconstructed from present experiences as well as from what we imagine about the future. This idea is reinforced by the narrator, who, referring to Berlioz's opera, questions the notion of a concrete, unique past that may

come back to haunt us.

The work of Hector Berlioz arises in the context of the nineteenth century. The composer, fascinated by Goethe's dramatic poem—which was translated into French by Gérard de Nerval—decided to compose music for the scenes from the first part that the German author associated with music.³ The composer sent to Goethe his first musical version of the myth, the *Huit Scènes de Faust*, but the writer failed to acknowledge receipt of the work, influenced by the negative reaction of his friend, the musician Carl-Friedrich Zelter, to Berlioz's work. Disappointed, the French composer destroyed his work and did not return to it until 1845 and 1846. Inspired by the Hungarian music on a tour through Austria, Hungary, Silesia, and Bohemia, Berlioz wrote *The Damnation of Faust*, which included the *Huit Scènes de Faust* revisited. In this second version, the composer created his own libretto, while the first had primarily used the poetry of Nerval (Klein 8–9). In this new composition, Berlioz followed the same pattern of creation that had followed Goethe, who first built disjointed scenes that became related a posteriori. This technique resulted in a complex and contradictory musical text in which, despite the differences between each scene, one can identify a *fixed idea* that runs throughout the book, showing how the author reflects on it. It is in this Cervantine sense that promotes the self-reflection and self-referentiality of a work that *The Damnation of Faust* is a continuing irony: style and substance disagree, covered by the cloak of a false coherence, which also reflects an awareness of the lack of authenticity in musical discourse (Albright 109, 118, 125).

Despite the innovations of the work and the similarities to Goethe's creative process, German critics of the time were not thrilled with Berlioz's opera. For nineteenth-century critics, the musical composition strayed too far from Goethe's text, to which Berlioz replied: "The very title of this work indicates that it is not based on the main idea of Goethe's Faust, as in that famous poem Faust is rescued. The author of *La damnation de Faust* has merely borrowed a series of scenes from Goethe because they fitted well into his plan and their seductiveness was irresistible" (qtd. in Klein 11). The position of the French composer agrees with the notion raised by Fuentes of literature as an act to extend and transform, rather than as an act of genesis that involves the stamp of authenticity. In this direction lies Berlioz's work, which not only inspired Fuentes's novella but accompanied the author throughout the writing process. The appreciation that Fuentes has for Berlioz's opera is a formal key to reading the novella. First, the pace of Berlioz's work that Fuentes tries to capture in his writing is particularly noticeable in the second story through the use of the second person of the imperative future, an experimental technique often employed by the Mexican. Second, when Carlos Fuentes takes up the Faustian myth, he follows his principles on the rupture with the previous norm, in the same

direction proposed by Berlioz in defending his music against the German critics of the time. The Faustian figure is inspiring, seductive, irresistible, yet transgressions against the myth are what led to the most significant works based on it: Marlowe and his claim of a historical and intellectual Faust, Goethe and the sinner's salvation through love, Berlioz and his poetic reworking through music, which created a scenario that is conspicuous for the absence of divinity (Klein 11).

In *Instinto de Inez*, Fuentes re-creates the Faustian myth from that same logic between tradition and experimentation that he finds in the works of Rembrandt and Berlioz. Following the dynamics of the Faustian myth where the historic character is diluted and is survived by the legend that bears the name, Fuentes returns to a historical figure in order to create an iconic character capable of embodying the changes and anxieties of the last century. In the novella, the character of Gabriel Atlán-Ferrara—the famous conductor of Mediterranean origin—is based on the figure of his flesh-and-blood counterpart, the Romanian composer Sergiu Celibidache, whom Fuentes met in Mexico in the 1940s and who acquired a legendary status in the music world first because of his refusal to be recorded, but also for his unusual theories about music and his use of extremely slow tempos (Solares 6). In other words, Celibidache's fame is due to his attitude toward artistic experimentation, in view of tradition and its technological development in music. These are the same guidelines that Fuentes admires in Rembrandt and Berlioz in their respective areas of creation. By delving into the possible relationship between Atlán-Ferrara and Faust, Fuentes brings this figure into the present without thereby neglecting the formal charge and weight of the tradition, and the emotional ambivalence of the nineteenth-century character. Fuentes transforms the Fausto-Celibidache into the archetype of the modern man, overcome by consumer society, immersed in the cult of youth and novelty that governs today's ideals. But Fuentes's Faust is not the man who sells his soul to the devil for knowledge or love. He is not the modern man of the sixteenth century or the nineteenth century, but the man of the early twenty-first century. He is a man who has taken individualism to the extreme, whose socio-cultural paradigms are destroyed and reinvented, fragmenting and multiplying to ridicule for questioning not so much the loss of the aura, but perhaps its very existence. Atlán-Ferrara is a conductor obsessed with Berlioz's *The Damnation of Faust*. A conductor who rejects technology and prevents his productions from being recorded and immortalized seems like an anachronism in this digital age. The musician in *Instinto de Inez* wants representations of his work to be retained in the memory of those present at the spectacle. The camera was not going to immortalize his work, but it also would not record the passage of time: it would not become the archive that would testify to the end of his youth.

For Fuentes, the Faustian myth is alive. However, like Rembrandt and

Berlioz (and Goethe, and Valéry, and Mann), Fuentes returns to the myth and transforms it, in this case challenging the consumer society of our time and the limitations of the filmed image. If the Renaissance origin of the Faustian myth involved a transcendent call in which knowledge and creativity were associated with evil, and the search for both suggested the pretension, the arrogance of feeling that one is part of the divine, in contemporary society, that call to transcendence loses all its force in accommodating the twenty-first-century Faust. These new symbols, following Ricoeur, should be read in conjunction with the character of their time. In this case, modernity raises the question of "the philosophy of the symbol," the moment of forgetting and also of restoration. This is the moment that neglects all signs of what is holy, including the idea of man as part of that holiness, but it is also a moment in which men forget humanity's technological, planetary dominion over nature (26). The absence of transcendent values is noticeable in Valéry's Faust, as is the impact of mass reproduction and technological mastery (Heller 38).

Adrian Leverkühn, Thomas Mann's Faust (also a musician like Atlán-Ferrara), is the extreme of perversion, since in his version the devil becomes the one who "endows" the soul. This devil provides feelings and passion to the Faustian genius whose soul "has been frozen into rigidity" with knowledge and intellectual abstraction (Heller 39). But Fuentes's Faust goes beyond the "extreme perversion" that Heller sees in Mann's work. The Mexican's Faust is a being trapped in the myth of the wise man. He wishes to repeat his acts, but is doomed to be unable to do so because his pact has lost all meaning. The pact was diluted not only in the multiplication and the spread of the "wonders" mentioned by Valéry but also in the proliferation and massification of the myth itself. The Fuentian Faust is, then, constituted from the relativization and democratization of knowledge that marks the end of the century, when access to knowledge—also taken for granted—became a commodity, part of the capitalist circuits subject to the vagaries of intellectual fashion and of the corporatization of the academy.

The myth became a pose, a form without content. Faust/Atlán-Ferrera is obsessed with his fixed image, evoking a particular aspect of the covenant exchanging knowledge for beauty and youth. The pact, which lost its position in "life" and "condemnation," now becomes a mere "story" without consequences. Faust/Atlán-Ferrera becomes a caricature of himself. Fuentes's Faust is, then, a mockery of notions such as beauty, youth, knowledge, divinity and evil, mediated by the consumer society and the modern age (Solares 7).

Like Cervantes, Fuentes does not offer an open criticism of literature and the society of his time, but calls them into question through the use of literary structures that call the attention of the "informed reader," which is precisely what literature courses promote. In this case, he calls upon the

double game that involves the relativization and democratization of life. On one hand, this game makes it possible to access the knowledge so greatly desired by Renaissance man, while on the other it makes us the puppets of new myths. This is the trap of modern man, who—according to Ricoeur—is subject to his own time, a time that comes with the possibility of emptying and refilling language “de manera que lo que nos anima no es la nostalgia por las atlántidas perdidas sino la esperanza de llevar a cabo una re-creación del lenguaje” (26) (so that what drives us is not the nostalgia for the lost Atlantis but a desire to carry out a re-creation of language). This re-creation is precisely what Fuentes calls “the other avenues of knowledge, the other avenues of sensibility, the other avenues of imagination” (qtd. in Wutz).

The literary work, this other avenue of knowledge, presents itself as a way to expose students to ideas that promote critical thinking; elicit interest in a certain issue, period, or event; and provoke emotional responses to topics that seem (or are indeed) distant and detached from their daily reality. Fuentes’s work, in this case his fantasy variant, becomes a doorway to connect students to sociopolitical issues that go beyond the study of Mexican and Latin American culture. His work also connects to the aesthetic experience, to the core of artistic experimentation and tradition, and the significance of symbols that populate today’s mass media, promoting a change of episteme that requires a new understanding of the world. This new episteme is an invitation to transcend national borders without losing local singularities, and without falling into the trap of homogenized modern views. Steiner has argued that literature is language freed from the obligation of information and that its social value, regardless of its intention, is an extra benefit (138). Literature in the classroom seems, then, like a pretty good deal.

Notes

1. “If I have found any specific group of people to be the subject of the most insidious contemporary forms of racial discrimination, those are migrants” (www.startribune.com 1 Nov. 2010). Current news involving the consequences of migration are at center stage and can only rouse the ghosts of some of the atrocities of the past couple of centuries: the SB 1070 Arizona’s legislative act, Angela Merkel’s observations on the failure of German multi-cultural society (www.bbc.co.uk), Alabama governor candidate Tim James’s campaign “America: We Speak English! Learn It!” (<http://vodpod.com>) and, a few years ago, John Gibson’s remarks on Fox News urging white Americans to do their duty and have more babies since, according to his reading of a national census, in a quarter of a century “the majority of the population [in the United States will be] Hispanic.”
2. Take, for example, Fox News’s comments on Obama’s children’s book entitled “Obama Praises Indian Chief Who Defeated U.S. General” (<http://nation.foxnews.com>).

3. For Aida N. Gambetta, the key to reading *Instinto de Inez* is in the relationship between text and opera. The nineteenth century, according to Gambetta, was the century that shaped the musical genre born in Italy in the sixteenth century into what it is today. Opera was also the musical genre that during the consolidation of national states incorporated a good number of European romantic literary texts. The narrator refers to the opera as “un aborto, un género falso que nada evoca en la naturaleza; es, a lo sumo, una ‘asamblea quimérica’ de poesía y música en la que poeta y compositor se torturan mutuamente” (93) (an abortion, a false genre that does not evoke anything in nature; a genre that is, at best, a ‘chimeric assemblage’ of poetry and music in which poet and composer torture each other). Opera is thus a sign of the creative impulse, but of rational and technical creation; it is a sign of man’s subordination of nature, characteristic of the industrial revolution which brought about the establishment of nation states, the second modern imperialist expansion, and with it, the final imposition of Western thought as the only valid measure of reality.

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