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DEBRA A. CASTILLO

Tongue in the Ear: Fuentes' *Gringo viejo*

Superficialmente, la novela Gringo viejo *de Carlos Fuentes nos relata la historia de un autor norteamericano que viaja a México con el propósito de morir memorablemente bajo el marco de la Revolución mexicana. Una lectura más detallada nos revela a otro autor más contemporáneo, un autor errante que penetra en la conciencia de una vieja gringa con el objetivo de relatar los recuerdos – o los recuerdos de los recuerdos – de un amor que ella nunca entendió, en un país que le era indescifrable. Esta narración de las memorias de Harriet Winslow se centra en el salón de espejos, el salón de baile de la destruida hacienda de los Miranda. Allí, ella organiza una escuela para los niños del ejército; allí el general mexicano Tomás Arroyo le "mete la lengua en la oreja," en su seducción/violacíon sexual y lingüística de la mujer americana. Su seducción es la causa de la muerte del general joven y del gringo viejo, es asimismo causa del ser de la novela, un texto que sólo se vuelve una posibilidad a través de estas muertes.*

> Cartesian, adj. Relating to Descartes, a famous philosopher, author of the celebrated dictum, *Cogito ergo sum* – whereby he was pleased to suppose he demonstrated the reality of human existence. The dictum might be improved, however, thus: *Cogito cogito ergo cogito sum* – "I think that I think, therefore I think that I am;" as close an approach to certainty as any philosopher has yet made.
>
> Ambrose Bierce (*Dictionary*)

THE GERM OF THE STORY

In his preface to *The Spoils of Poynton*, Henry James reflects on what he calls "the germ" that inspired the fiction. He recalls that "most of the stories straining to shape under my hand have sprung from a single small seed, a seed as minute and wind-blown as that casual hint ... dropped

unwittingly by my neighbor." This germ, or seed, inoculates the writer, piercing his imagination and causing him to wince "as at the prick of some sharp point (*Art*, 119). *The Spoils of Poynton* grew from a bit of casual dinner-table conversation and, in his famous prefaces to his novels, James reveals the germs of other novels as an essential aspect of his discussion of them. The germ of the story is, for James, the key to authorial intention. Carlos Fuentes, whose novelistic *oeuvre* shares little with the work of James, has nevertheless written a very Jamesian afterword to his novel *Gringo viejo*, a brief note that recovers for the reader the ostensible novelistic germ of the tale. Fuentes refers to the unsolved mystery of the nineteenth-century soldier, journalist, and short story writer Ambrose Bierce who, after announcing his intention to tour South America, disappeared into the chaos of the Mexican Revolution and never returned. Fuentes found the germ for his novel in a line from one of Bierce's last letters, here quoted at slightly greater length with the phrase that interested Fuentes highlighted:[1]

I go away tomorrow for a long time, so this is only to say good-bye. I think there is nothing else worth saying; *therefore* you will naturally expect a long letter. What an intolerable world this would be if we said nothing but what is worth saying! And did nothing foolish – like going into Mexico and South America.

Good-bye – if you hear of my being stood up against a Mexican stone wall and shot to rags please know I think that a pretty good way to depart this life. It beats old age, disease, or falling down the cellar stairs. *To be a Gringo in Mexico – ah, that is euthanasia*! (196–97).

This wind-blown germ or wandering seed, a fragment of a letter from one of the most notoriously obscure (Davidson, 1) American authors, pierces another author's imagination and grows to artistic maturity in his work – or so it seems. For while the reference to Bierce in the Fuentes' authorial note superficially resolves the question nagging the reader from the beginning of the novel as to the identity of the title character, the revelation only ironically provides the kind of centering function for authorial intention which is so typical of James' meditative prefaces. Despite the title and the author's note, the novel does not focus on Ambrose Bierce, or "Ambrose Bierce," or even the nameless old gringo.[2] Instead, the novel begins as it ends with another wandering author in search of novelistic germs, an author who enters into the imagination not of an old gringo but an old gringa and re-tells/reinvents *her* story: "Ésta no sería más sólo una historia de hombres. La presencia (mi presencia, dijo Harriet) deformará la historia" (108). Thus, *Gringo viejo* is manifestly and multiply displaced, constituting itself as a novel about a wandering author by a wandering author (who makes his presence – "la presencia" – and the tale of his wandering known on the last page of the novel), a novel displaced nationally and sexually by its reliance on an old woman who recalls long-buried youthful wanderings in a land she cannot hope to understand.

"Ella se sienta sola y recuerda:" coming to terms with the germ of the story entails coming to terms as well with this obsessively repeated phrase, the first and last sentence in the novel.[3] Harriet Winslow, in an unspecified present, sits and calls up fragmentary, contradictory memories of a Mexico that cannot be found, that is an unavoidable presence: opaque and inaccessible, yet taking unmistakable form (deformation) in her mind. For her, "México había desaparecido para siempre." Nevertheless, the memorious dust forces her to take cognizance of it once again – remembering what is beyond all logical recall in "su tierra sin memoria" (11). This Mexico, gone forever, provokes memory, and the novel based on these memories brings Mexico, like the old gringo and Tomás Arroyo, back to life to die again, and again, endlessly. The old gringo, writer of many books and non-reader of *Don Quixote*, has faded into a book, and Harriet's Mexican lover, General Tomás Arroyo, "habia terminado" like a novel, or a bad dream. She, incongruously, is the only survivor, she with her old rancour and non-memories, condemned by Pancho Villa's command: "A usted nomás le va a tocar acordarse de todo" (173). Unidentified voices converse:

–¿Qué hace ella ahora?
–Ahora se sienta sola y recuerda.
–No. Ahora ella duerme.
–Ella sueña y ya no tiene edad.
–Ella cree cuando sueña que su sueño será su destino. (49)

Harriet broods over her past (her dreams?), her fading memories (her novel?), and her musings are interrupted by a chorus of solicitous voices emerging from the dust to accompany her in her solitude, voices that attest to the centrality of the author firmly, if duplicitously, in place behind the central character whose consciousness dominates the story. The choric invitation to dream signals the pressures of the commanding presence – Villa or some other – who negates the promise of the central germ, that Mexico is a place of joyful death where tormenting memories can be eased into oblivion. Yet, since the memories take the form of dreams, it is no wonder that Harriet's autobiography "parecía inventada, sobre todo 'si se la cuento aquí'" (68); it bears the hall-

marks of the same willfully masterful fictive shaping that sent the old gringo to die violently (but poetically) in Mexico rather than in a fall down the stairs. As Poulet writes of James, "At the back of the consciousness of the character, there is therefore the consciousness of the novelist. It is like the consciousness of a consciousness. Occult, dissimulated into the background, it reigns no less everywhere. It is the center of the center" (311). Furthermore, in Fuentes' novel this centering force, this consciousness of a consciousness, intimates suggestively the doubled selves reflected in the mirrored salon of the hacienda of the Mirandas, the novelistic representation of a Jamesian house of fiction converted into a deadly-serious funhouse where the reader, peering into the room, sees herself for the first time and discovers her nature as irreducibly feminine, an alienated "lector-hembra" or "lector-alondra" for whom "el 'estilo' de antes era un espejo ... se miraban, se solazaban, se reconocían ..." (Cortázar, 539). However, in *Gringo viejo* reflection is always distorted by invention, recognition deflected by error, and the status of the individual within the family home, this mirrored house of fiction, constantly comes into question.

THE HOUSE OF FICTION

In James' well-known formulation, the monolithic house of fiction stands in the midst of a sweeping landscape of human activity. Within the house stand the artists, peering out of windows like inmates in a madhouse, or, more actively, piercing windows of their own in the immense structure. The house, says James, "has in short not one window, but a million – a number of possible windows not to be reckoned rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable ... by the pressure of the individual will." Significantly, James uses the same metaphor of violent penetration to describe the consciousness of the artist acting upon the house of fiction and the piercing of artistic consciousness by the germ of an idea; in each case a small aperture is opened into a closed system. As James is careful to stress, these windows are not doors that "open straight upon life" (*Art*, 46). The novelistic consciousness of consciousness, pricked and piercing, is nevertheless a mediated consciousness. The writer, and the reader who peers into the scene over the writer's shoulder, are condemned to mere observation. In the absence of doors, none of us can ever participate in the scene depicted before our eyes. For Ortega y Gasset, the pierced aperture and attendant consciousnesses require recognition of a further complication. "Take a garden seen through a window," he suggests. "The purer the glass, the less we see it. But we can also deliberately disregard the garden and, withdrawing the ray of vision, detain it at the window ... Hence to see the garden and to see the windowpane are two incompatible operations which exclude one another because they require different adjustments" (10). The scene outside, limited by the dimensions of the aperture, is further distorted by the shifting perceptions of a consciousness that shuttles to-and-fro between mutually exclusive visions of reality.

In *Gringo viejo* vision is detained at the glass in a particularly forceful manner with the destruction, just prior to the arrival of the old man in the army camp, of the ancient family home, the house of many fictions, the hacienda of the powerful Mirandas. The absent Miranda (the conjunction with *mirar*, to look upon, is crucial), an uncaring father who does not recognize his bastard children, a discredited consciousness of consciousness, does not, ironically, gaze upon anything at all. His family home is built upon a fiction, has no pierced apertures, and members of the officially recognized family who once dwelled within looked only at portraits of each other hanging on the walls or gazed at reflections of themselves in glittering full-length mirrors.

In the destruction of his family home, the home from which he was barred by his illegitimate birth, Tomás Arroyo nevertheless allows the most insidious fiction of all to remain: he preserves from general destruction the great mirrored ballroom. The novel, spatially, is centered on this mirrored room, apparently a space of reflection upon the past and anticipation of the future. More and more clearly as the novel progresses, however, the reader discovers this mirrored house of fiction to be merely a prison-house of poisoned dreams that speaks not of the world that was or might be but rather of an overdetermined and fascinated gaze directed towards the fiction itself. Consciousness mirrors consciousness in what Michel Foucault calls "its mirrored reflection upon death and the construction, from this reflection, of a virtual space where speech discovers the endless resourcefulness of its own image and where it can represent itself as already existing behind itself, already active beyond itself, to infinity" (55). In Fuentes' house of fiction, infinitely repeating linguistic mirrors replace the windows until the gringo's destruction of the precious papers precipitates the final collapse of the house, giving Arroyo a voice and putting a term to the interminable fascination of the mirrors. "Ya es hora de seguir adelante," says one of his troop. "No se entretenga más con los espejos, mi general" (149). The unlocalizable Jamesian house of fiction is given a specific site in the halls of the Miranda hacienda, a dream site, a House of Usher that must crumble at the end of the nightmare, for it is no fit dwelling place.

For the greater part of the novel, however, the ballroom stands as a central focus, drawing together the three protagonists – gringo, gringa, and Mexican general – into an incongruous family defined by their mu-

tually unintelligible representative delusions. The old gringo, a tired and cynical journalist who has come to die in Mexico, is quite obviously a place holder for the absent fathers of Tomás Arroyo and Harriet Winslow. He is a half-imagined presence, an "espejismo de un caballero blanco sobre un caballo blanco, que de tan visible parecía invisible" (59), a desert mirage without a name or a face: "los nombres gringos nos cuestan mucho trabajo, igual que las caras gringas, que todas nos parecen igualitas ..." (15). For Arroyo the gringo feels "afecto paternal" (33), and he treats Harriet likewise with the affection of a father for his beloved daughter.

The love affair of the two orphans consolidates the displacement or replacement of a lost father, freeing Harriet and Arroyo from the psychological presence of their absent parents, allowing them to pursue their separate fates. Arroyo, son of a country "que vivía su historia como una serie de asesinatos de los padres viejos, ahora inservibles" (79), commits the necessary parricide, while Harriet "le pidió que no matara al único padre que les quedaba a ambos" (145). After the gringo's death, Harriet, a fit representative of her culture, suffers deeply from the traumatic loss of her father to the Latins for the second time and she returns to her lonely apartment in Washington, D.C., to relive the torments of a recent past interred in an illegitimate burial place.

If the handsome old gringo occupies the center of this unusual family portrait, a barred or bracketed center, he is flanked by the unlikely pairing of Tomás Arroyo and Harriet Winslow. In contrast to the nameless, faceless old gringo who, like all gringos, "se pasaron la vida cruzando fronteras, las suyas y las ajenas" (13), Arroyo's life is firmly centered on the ruined hacienda of the family that refused him recognition. He turns this lack of recognition to account in the construction of a racial identity. "Yo sé quién soy," he tells the old man, "¿Lo sabes tú?" (37). Enigmatic, opaque to the gringo's questioning gaze (41), Arroyo's essence lies in the papers he carries but cannot read, in the silenced racial memory that is his heritage: "en vez de voz, yo tengo un papel" (65).

Harriet, with her North American transparency (41), fails to comprehend the significance of the Indian general's silence, his ferocious dedication to his papers, his insistence on destroying all of the beautiful house but the ballroom. "Este es su monumento a la venganza," she concludes, and moves to counteract his influence by starting lessons in Christian resignation for the children of the troop in a make-shift schoolroom established in the mirrored ballroom. Her voice, speaking of "La Presunción, La Vanidad, El Diablo, El Pecado," echoes in the room as the children studiously avoid looking at themselves in the mirrors (62). Her words counterpoint and provide a counterpart to Arroyo's

silence, her transparency to his opacity, her concern with the future to his identity rooted in the distant past represented by the parchments. Despite the contrasting personalities, they are fated to come together, transparent glass and opaque silvered backing, in the finititely reflecting mirrors where lines of sight and memory, of the seen and the unseen, cross without comprehension.

THE READER'S SEDUCTION

Harriet Winslow speaks to the children about presumption and vanity, using the room around her as an object case for demonstration of the wages of sin. The children, absorbing the lesson given in her careful, correct Spanish, are wary. They conscientiously avoid distraction; they answer eagerly. Harriet would have done well to remember, however, the lessons taught by that other great teacher, Socrates, long ago: "Here you are asking me to give you my 'teaching,'" he tells Meno, "I who claim that there is no such thing as teaching, only recollection" (Plato 14). The children, listening to Harriet, recollect other teachings: "La lección de la maestrita gringa no era muy distinta de los sermones del párroco aquí en la hacienda, sólo que en la capilla había cosas más bonitas para mirar ..." (62). No teaching, only recollection; to which Fuentes might add: no sight, only reflection. The teachings of the American Miss recall those of a Mexican priest, the ballroom recalls the parish church, and the children cautiously avoid catching sight of themselves in the mirrors during the lesson. Harriet's teaching does not demonstrate mastery, but rather a lack of control, a mutual lack of reflection, a kind of blindness.

The gaze, and what is reflected in that gaze, is a central concern. Arroyo tells Harriet he has preserved the mirrored room in order that his men could rid themselves "de todos los años ciegos en que vivieron ciegos con sus propios cuerpos." He wishes them to see themselves whole and direct for the first time in their lives and in this reflection/recollection of their lost bodies break the enchantment of the mirror (119). For the American schoolteacher, the mirrors reflect enchantment of another sort: not freedom from blindness, but another kind of blindness – that of vanity – and she asks the children "¿Se vieron en los espejos al entrar al salón de baile?" (62). The teacher's inquiry is echoed by other characters in the novel to such an extent that the question of sight and reflection, insistently, obsessively, repeated, becomes *the* central question of the text. "Let us suppose that literature begins at the moment when literature becomes a question," says Maurice Blanchot in *The Gaze of Orpheus* (21); and Octavio Paz, voicing a similar concern about the specific question of Carlos Fuentes, inquires in his name, "¿qué es la novela y qué significa escribir novelas? y la novela le responde con otra

pregunta: ¿qué son los hombres, esas criaturas que sólo alcanzan plena realidad cuando se transforman en imágenes?" (*In/mediaciones*, 179).

This question of sight, of reality, and of the transformation into images dominates the novel, but is most clealy focussed on Harriet. One of the anonymous voices in the text asks her "¿Vio usted algo distinto de lo que veía en Washington, o siempre la misma imagen?" (62), and her relationship with the old gringo, the old writer, is mediated by his fascination with Harriet's secrecy about her response to the mirrored Mexican ballroom: "Y él sólo quería preguntarle de nuevo: ¿Te viste en los espejos al entrar al salón de baile?" (67). Did Harriet see herself and, if so, what image of the self did she see? What reality is made or unmade in the image reflected back at her? If Arroyo's men see in the mirror an image of the self withheld from them for so many years, does a gringa, accustomed to mirrors and reflections, find in these foreign mirrors an unrecognized resemblance, a new understanding of herself?

The answers to such questions, slow in forthcoming, are suggestive. In their images, as Paz hints, Arroyo's men achieve a fuller reality. Harriet, in contrast, sees herself unreflectively, blindly entering into a dream where reality is leeched from the image: "Al separarse de Arroyo se vio en un salón de baile lleno de espejos. Se vio entrando a los espejos sin mirarse a sí misma porque en realidad entraba a un sueño ..." (109). Harriet, the dream woman ("¿No te alegras de que te haya escogido como mi chica ideal, Harriet?" [55]), the dreamer who distorts history, intimates an ambiguous relationship to a personal reality that can come into existence only as history is cancelled. Blanchot asks, "What happens, for example, when one lives an event as an image?" He answers his own question; it is to be taken in or taken back (taken aback) by the possibility/impossibility of understanding both truth and death. Furthermore, he warns, to live as an image allows one neither to remain apart nor "to take part freely and decisively. It is to be taken ..." (*Space*, 261). It is, necessarily, to be taken. Thus Harriet, at the moment in which she sees, or does not see, herself in the mirrors, turns to Arroyo, sees him finally, and allows herself to be taken, to be seduced by him in his improbably baroque train car. She responds ardently to this seduction by mirrors, by her own image, by her dreams of a father who has not abandoned her: mirror and image, self and reflected being, reality and dream, "el ser y su fantasma: ser y estar, una forma de existencia el espejo de la otra ..." (124). Or, in the words of Fuentes/Derrida: "Coupling is [es, está] a mirror. The mirror is traversed of its own accord, which is to say, it is never traversed at all."

It is not possible, nonetheless, as Derrida admits, "to rest upon the copula" (353), the intrusion of the copula between the mirror and the

image offers only a partial response to the question of the text. We must reflect further. The ballroom is indeed a labyrinth of mirrors, a funhouse of shifting bodies, the site where dreams are found and selves are lost, a place where men and women meet on ends of seduction. On the day the house is captured, the men and women of Arroyo's troop are first "paralizados por sus propias imágenes" and then find voice and movement:

–Mira, eres tú.
Y el compañero señaló hacia el reflejo del otro.
–Soy yo.
–Somos nosotros.
–Las palabras hicieron la ronda, somos nosotros, somos nosotros ... (44–45)

"La ronda de palabras," the echoing voices, word reflections, replace the "ronda de placeres perpetua" (44) of the elegant ladies and gentlemen who should be reflected in the mirrors, dancing waltzes and conducting civilized flirtations. Instead, the gleaming parquet is scored by the spurs of the poor Indian soldiers and their women, dancing polkas to the music of the accordion.

Yet, the echoing voices of the soldiers do not exorcise the word echoes of the elegant should-have-beens. Harriet's seduction is conducted not to the music of guitars or accordions, but to the accompaniment of a waltz issuing from "la Voz de su Amo," a disembodied voice for a dream girl, intangible but not absent from the scene. To this voice, the Mexican general adds his own voiced/voiceless plea: "Tomás Arroyo metió la lengua en la oreja de Harriet Winslow" (106). This double seduction, masterly voice and Spanish tongue – the same tongue of the Cuba that seduced her father – seduce the young woman, representing as well her seduction into and by the Mexico she tries to forget and must remember. In this manner, Arroyo's seduction by ear echoes the earlier word-seduction by the old writer, inveigling her into recall and reflection: "(Ella permanece sentada y recuerda: quería que el viejo terminara ya y que ella no tuviera que empezar nunca)" (75). As Nora Bayes speaks only through the masterly voice of the victrola, the "Voz de su Amo," so too Harriet implicitly echoes the masterly text that allows her to give voice to the old writer/young soldier. Pierced through the ear by the conjunction of a disembodied gringo technology and a Mexican physical presence, the young woman experiences a violent insemination that becomes, potentially at least, Derridean dissemination: "Y esto Harriet Winslow nunca se lo perdonó a Tomás Arroyo" (118, 133, 187). All that survives of Harriet's affair is the dynamic repression of a desire

no longer sexual but literary: the repression of a tormenting desire to speak, to write. And this Harriet cannot forgive: her coming into being as a text, a penetrable feminine text, a text ... and a reader.

Henry James, reflecting on his own experience of readerly seduction, concludes, "The anodyne is not the particular picture [or reflection in a mirror], it is our own act of surrender, and therefore most, for each reader, what he most surrenders to (*Theory*, 322). All readers, and Harriet is the archetypal reader, become "lectores-hembra" drugged and seduced by the persuasions of style.

There is, then a convergence of liberating mirrors and enslaving voices. "Mírame," orders Arroyo, "mírame mirándote ... incapaz de moverme mientras te miro a la cara ..." (121). Harriet, captured in the mirror, paralyzed as her lover is paralyzed by the intersecting lines of sight, seduced by the voice in her ear, falls into dream, into literature. We recall that Arroyo has curiously insisted throughout the novel on his *lack* of voice, on the precious papers that make voice unnecessary for him. Yet, his tongue in Harriet's ear, his voice or the father's masterly voice, is the direct cause not only of Harriet's yielding to him, but also precipitates the loss of those papers. Those papers, stolen and burned by the old gringo, are mirrors and voices: "Las nubes cercanas buscaron su espejo en la tierra, mirándose en las palabras de fuego ... y las palabras quemadas se fueron volando a gritos" (146, 149). All stories reflect these shattered mirrors/burned words, as Fuentes mirrors Bierce, as Bierce, achronologically, reflects the blind poet and labyrinth builder, Jorge Luis Borges, who, like the Mexican and the American writer, shares an obsession with mirrors, with papers, with people who live as images, and images that, blindly, seek their reflections in history and in fiction.[4] Blind: "sin mirarse" (75). Blind: "sin las palabras todos somos ciegos" (140). In this novel, gazes lost in the desert find themselves in a penetration of "la ceguera nocturna" (75), and search fruitlessly for mirrors of the self in an arid, waterless wasteland.

THE WRITER'S DEATH

The convergence of blindness and sight, mirror and mirage, is essential to this seduction of the reader into/by the language of the master's voice. The house of fiction survives the destruction of the family home, and Harriet's entry into dream survives the double loss of father and lover. The mechanism of this survival, the creation of the work of art, bears an uncanny resemblance to what Abraham and Torok call the "poetics of psychoanalysis" in the work of mourning. In their discussion of mourning and melancholy, death and the voice are conjoined, and both reflect upon the presence/absence of the lost object as the mourner "exchange[s] one's own identity for a phantasmic identification with the 'life' beyond the grave." Exiled in the realm of illusion, of dream, of mirage, of phantom language mirrors, Harriet is tormented by "a memory [she] buried *without legal burial place*, the memory of an idyll experienced with a prestigious object that for some reason has become unspeakable ... (4). Through its exposure of Harriet's obsessive memories, the novel provides, of course, a classic example of this work of mourning. As she sits and recalls the days in Mexico, she is clearly anguished by the traumatic loss of the old gringo, her substitute father, and by her role in the subsequent execution of her erstwhile lover, Tomás Arroyo. Her mendacious identification of the old gringo's corpse as that of her father and her high-handed removal of the cadaver for burial under her father's tombstone in Arlington National Cemetery is indeed a literal example of interment "without legal burial place." Yet, it would be a mistake to read the novel as a case history, for the application of the poetics of psychoanalysis is neither so facile nor so direct. The old gringo is a writer; the dead general a custodian of the written word; and Harriet, the schoolteacher, alternatively text and ideal reader. If literature is an illegal burial, it is also a disinterment of a phantom, of Borgesian memorious dust in a "tierra sin memoria." On another level, it is not so much that the burial place is illegitimate, but that the relation to place itself is put into question. As Blanchot notes in reference to poetic imagery: "the place is missing, the corpse is not in its place. Where is it? ... The cadaverous presence establishes a relationship between here and nowhere" (*Space*, 256). For Blanchot, the corpse and the poetic image come together as uncannily similar in respect to this alienation from place. Abraham and Torok's poetics adds an understanding of the role of the ear in the parallel recognition of a similar critical gap: "Does the analyst have an ear for *all* "poems" and for all "poets?" Surely not. But those whose message he failed to hear, those whose deficient, mutilated text he listened to time after time – the riddles with no key – those who left him without yielding up to him the distinctive *oeuvre* of their lives, these come back forever as phantoms of their unaccomplished destiny, haunting ghosts of the analyst's own deficiency" (4). All readings reenact the scene of repression, the coming into being of the text, and all textual exegesis likewise shares the work of mourning, the coequal torment of analyst and analysand. Despite the centrality of Harriet and her ineluctable reflections, it is nevertheless death, the death of the writer, that serves as catalyst to the tale.

For this reason, in Fuentes' novel, the question of Harriet couples with and is enclosed by an implicit question put to the other principal characters: what does it mean to choose death freely? Arroyo's death

is comparatively less complex in this regard; he must die young in order to preserve the ideals of the Revolution. He is a historical moment, that moment, as Blanchot says reflecting on Hegel, "when 'life endures death and maintains itself in it' in order to gain from death the possibility of speaking and the truth of speech" (*Gaze*, 41). Speech, the tongue in the ear, endures death and maintains itself in death, just as the papers, screaming as they burn, settle into speaking dust, the writing in this novel. The possession of the papers gives Arroyo mastery, but he carries with them his death warrant, the assurance of his imminent physical destruction.

The old gringo's relationship to his anticipated death is less straightforward. He is a writer, that is, "one who writes in order to be able to die, and he is one whose power to write comes from an anticipated relationship with death" (Blanchot, *Space*, 93). It is this anticipatory relationship that causes the difficulty, for it lends to the writer's Mexican experience a second-hand, entirely fictive quality. His errabund consciousness reclaims him for life and the novel: "¿Sabías que todos somos objeto de la imaginación ajena?" (138). The gringo is a writer whose longing for death is coupled with a feeling of mastery over it, as he tries in this novel to plot his death like a short story or a novel. Thus, as he crosses the border, he is already placing his action within the context of an imaginative reconstruction: "todo esto escribió en su cabeza el gringo viejo" (20) – and the narrative voice, the voice of his conscience or the consciousness of consciousness behind the character, asks rhetorically, "¿Estaba aquí para morir o para escribir una novela sobre un general mexicano y un gringo viejo y una maestra de escuela de Washington perdida en los desiertos del norte de México?" (90). Has he journeyed to Mexico to die or to write a novel, this novel? The errabund consciousness causes us to recollect the role of the "escritor errante," a connection more firmly cemented by the mention that this wandering writer, like the "Fuentes" of the "nota del autor," works as he travels, on a trip that ends (or begins) in Chihuahua. Furthermore, in an ironic twist, the old gringo carries with him an unread copy of *Don Quixote*, the tales of a "caballero errante" and character in a book of his own devising.

The old gringo searches in Mexico, then, not just for death but for a proper death. The old writer still seeks mastery, and the imposition of appropriate formal constraints is still his goal. "Quiero ser un cadáver bien parecido," he says. "Ser un gringo en México ... *eso es eutanasia*" (139: my emphasis). He dies in his imagination not once but many times, staging his extinction with care, to the degree that this excessive death comes to overburden the novel.

The writerly, overdetermined nature of the writer's death poses the question, as Andrzej Warminski has noted, of the subterfuge involved in a consciousness representing its own death. Such efforts at imaging the death of the self are, as Warminski observes, necessarily poetic or literary representations. He continues, "I cannot *experience* death, I can only name it, impose a sense on it ... give it a face, eyes and a point of view ... In order to bring death into the world, we ... bring death into the word." Finally, he finds, "death read as writing makes death impossible (and yet is its condition of possibility)" (273). Death makes possible both writing and death, restores the center to the work of art, sediments consciousness in a seductive event, not now a germ but an essential form-giving lack of place. Fuentes' text, then, mirrors this possible/impossible death, this exercise in a fantasized end. The flight into voluntary death – euthanasia in Mexico as well-dressed corpse – marks a refusal to acknowledge another death, a death without name or face or point of view, an ungraspable, unliterary death. "La muerte," says Paz, "es un espejo" (*Laberinto*, 48). Did Harriet see herself in the mirror? "La muerte nos seduce," but these intimate relations with death are "desnudas de significación y desprovistas de erotismo" (52–53). Is death the voice of a master – or a mistress?

So we return, although we have not really ever left her, to the remembering woman rather than the old writer, and return not to the grim reaper of the gringos, but to the infinitely seductive female, "la muerte." The House of Usher, we recall, crumbles with the resurrection of Madeline – muse, incestuous lover, mirror twin – who rises from a premature burial to die again, and in dying, to bring about her brother's death. In Fuentes' novel, the house of fiction, the house of Miranda, is similarly marked by these excessive, problematic, literary double deaths. it is thoroughly typical, therefore, that the focus of attention in this fictive dwelling is on literature rather than history, on the ballroom rather than the bedroom, on the mirror rather than the window. "Presently," says Blanchot, "... from behind there will be no longer an inanimate thing, but Someone: the unbearable image and figure ["desnudas de significación"] of the unique becoming nothing in particular, no matter what" (*Space*, 257). Action is, finally, displaced from the crumbling house, and the deaths, or someone and nothing in particular, become, as Paz would say, "signos en rotación:" "Ah, viejo. Ah, joven (187).

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NOTES

1 In his note, Fuentes indicates that this line is found in "su última carta," a slight poetic fiction that Ambrose Bierce may have approved and should have made fact if he had felt any consideration for the trials/betrayals of his twentieth-century Mexican counterpart. Bierce's last letter, sent from Chihuahua in December 1913, indicates that he had attached himself to a division of Villa's army. A news story from 1915 tells of an old gringo accompanying Villa's forces who was captured and shot before a firing squad, but Bierce scholars are skeptical that the gringo of 1915 was indeed Ambrose Bierce (see *Letters*, xvi, xi).

2 I do not intend, with this statement, to relegate Bierce to a marginal role in the text. Bierce scholars will find, for example, numerous references to that author and his works scattered throughout the novel. Thus, the old gringo's concern with his personal appearance reflects Bierce's own well-documented fanaticism about cleanliness even in trying conditions. Similarly, bits of the October 1, 1913, euthanasia letter are inserted into conversation (e.g., 15, 17, 139–40), and when Harriet questions him about the book he carries with him, the old gringo warns, "No las lea ... son obras muy amargas, diccionarios del diablo ...," referring to his own preferred title for the book published in 1906 as *The Cynic's Word Book*.

Bierce's short stories are also mined for the novel. La Garduña's scream, "lo que pasa es que nunca ha estado muerto en toda la vida" (26), echoes the words of captured spy Parker Adderson in the Bierce short story. Adderson, when reprimanded for not taking his imminent death seriously, responds: "How can I know that [death is serious]? I have heard that death is a serious matter, but never from those who have experienced it" (*The Complete Short Stories*, 337).

3 The framing effect of the repetition of the reference to Harriet Winslow is, unfortunately, lost in the original Spanish text since the final sentence is missing. Carlos Fuentes assured me that the absence in the Spanish version results from publisher's oversight and not authorial intention. Thus, the English translation is more complete and accurate in this respect.

4 Brigid Brophy has suggested playfully that Bierce went underground after his mysterious disappearance into Mexico and resurfaced in Buenos Aires in the twentieth century under the pseudonym Jorge Luis Borges when the world was better able to accept his labyrinthine tales (20-25). It is equally plausible that Bierce, in his wanderings, encountered Borges and was inspired by the Argentinian author's metafictions to write his own fantastic short stories. (See also Howard Fraser).

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