



PYRAMIDS OF GLASS

Short Fiction from Modern Mexico



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With an Introduction by Ilan Stavans



Corona Publishing Company
San Antonio
1994

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
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INTRODUCTION

Ilan Stavans

 At the center of the Mexican flag is an eagle abiding on a cactus, devouring a serpent, an emblem recalling the nation's Aztec ancestry. In foreign eyes, Mexico is, has always been, that scowling eagle: a large, solitary bird inhabiting an exotic stage where passion, magic, and instinctual violence intertwine; a predatory bird with a beak nearly as long as its head, eating a poisonous reptile. Open any tourist guide. In the popular *Mexico: Places and Pleasures*, for instance, Kate Simon writes, "In a world which is becoming homogenized with fearsome rapidity, Mexico is still a wonderful confusion and melding of disparate facts, eras, art, sociology, and mental climates." Confusion of course implies anarchy; thus, Mexico is known to be ruled by the kind of order that prevails in the misnamed Third World: a jumbled orchestration of earthly things, a fractured legal system, the eagle and the snake: voraciousness and wrath.

But chaos, we are beginning to learn, is an alternative form of order, at once sophisticated and enigmatic. In Mexico a different order, intricate, unconventional by western standards, prevails. Add to it the fact that beyond its borders, the country emanates another image: that of innocence and primitiveness. Look at the fiction about Mexico by writers in Europe and the United States. Katherine Anne Porter, the author of *Flowering Judas and Other Stories*, who lived in Mexico for long periods of time in the early decades of our century, once commented, "Mexico seems a simple place . . . a region not far from Eden." Truth is, the neighbor south of the Rio Grande is anything but simple; few Mexicans would perceive themselves as innocent, primitive, and naïve. Things are much more complex: the crossroad where hope, purity, and blood meet the green, white, and red of the flag is always painful. In Mexico reality and fiction, history and fantasy, braid in a mysterious, labyrinthine way and nothing is simple.

Torn between these extremes, Mexico's traumatic birth, its chaotic origin in 1523, has not yet healed. The suffering that resulted when Hernán Cortés and his army of Spanish conquistadors viciously subdued the imperial Aztec metropolis of Tenochtitlán, refuses to fade away. Two empires with distinctive world views and disparate understandings of chronological time, totally incapable of accepting each other's essences, collided in apocalyptic battle. Loss and destruction gave place to the *mestizo* people: what José Vasconcelos, an early twentieth-century scholar and education minister, called *la raza de bronce*, the bronze race neither Spanish nor Aztec. Bronze is an amalgam of copper, phosphorous, tin, zinc, and other elements—a hybrid, a mongrel, a sum of heterogeneous parts. Similarly, Mexico, in a relentless struggle to understand its collective identity, oscillates between loyalties to Spain, France, the United States, and the autochthonous self that refuses to die, one that flourishes in the elevated plateau where Tenochtitlán was built—a region characterized by broad, shallow lakes and transparent air, where the itinerant Aztec people, so the legend claims, found the eagle devouring a snake, an irrefutable sign that the land was theirs and they were the land's.

History in Mexico is asymmetrical, non-progressive. No matter how much people hope for a redemptive future, the past always returns to haunt the living and no clear lesson is ever learned. This cyclical rhythm is evident in the Calendar Stone, sculptured in a huge round flat rock segmented into multiple cubicles, each with Aztec symbols of time and the natural elements, inspired by the myth of eternal return. Indeed, the Aztecs prophesied that a white, bearded man, a messianic figure, would come from distant oceans to begin history anew: Hernán Cortés's annunciation. Consequently, since early days diplomats, artists, and intellectuals are occupied in understanding the many sacrifices Mexico ought to make to become modern; the road is uncertain, the answer unclear.

The United States and Mexico: progressive time and cyclical time, democracy and ideological uncertainty, tomorrow and yesterday. Nowhere in the whole globe do more dissimilar neighbors share a common border. The Spanish soldiers were bachelors inspired by renaissance chivalry values, enamored

with Machiavelli's philosophy as expressed in *The Prince*, knights equipped with copies of Leon Ebreo's *Dialogues of Love*, who raped maidens and subdued entire armies. The pilgrims that arrived in the Mayflower and eventually configured the British Colonies had very different goals in mind. Their sense of destiny was unequivocal. While copulating with Indian women and thus gestating a new progeny, the Spanish soldiers never dreamed of building up a new society; under a missionary banner, they forced Catholicism on the native population, attempting to erase idolatry. And they gave way to syncretism: Mexico, still today a land where witchcraft will not perish, where Jesus Christ and Quetzalcóatl cohabit, where fantasy is to be found in the colorful way people eat and make love, and in daily newspapers, where the government-sponsored news never quite matches with reality. On the other hand, the Anglo-Saxon puritans, self-proclaimed "the New People of Israel," arrived at Plymouth silently wishing to distance themselves from Great Britain to find the Promised Land, an utopian geography where they might construct an improved version of the mother land: the Old World in the New World, England in America. Unlike Mexico's, time in the United States is lineal, teleological; its population is obsessed with its collective mission: to be the best among the best. Mexico is stuck in its traumatic past, committed to untangling its baroque national identity.

Ironically, the most resourceful way for us Mexicans to untangle ourselves, to decipher our collective identity, seems to be through fiction. One senses a deep desire to exorcise ancient ghosts through novels and stories. As Carlos Fuentes once asked: Why is it that our writers are so imaginative and our politicians so unimaginative? Fiction is a fiesta of possibilities, an improvised gathering of assorted guests wearing masks to hide a true identity. Not surprisingly, the mask is Mexico's most ubiquitous symbol. Octavio Paz, winner of the 1990 Nobel Prize for Literature, writes in his 1950 masterpiece, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*: "The Mexican, whether young or old, *criollo** or *mestizo*, general or laborer or lawyer, seems to me to be a person who shuts himself away to protect himself: his face is a mask

* A person of pure Spanish blood living in the Americas.

and so is his smile." Indeed, we hide ourselves from the world; we pretend to be somebody else; we assume different roles. Isn't that what fiction is about? Fiction is at the core of the relationship between man and history in Mexico: the hero, the assassin, the lover never die: eternal masks, they inhabit a time outside time, a dimension beyond history.

Most readers in the United States have been misguided to believe that the novel is Mexico's favorite literary genre, the best theatrical stage for the never-ending fiesta of the collective mind. Actually, fiction seems to find an incomparable vehicle in the short story. Its evanescent brevity, the challenge to find just the perfect amount of words to convey its message, the chance to use it as a mirror to the collective soul, make it a beloved genre. Mexico has produced outstanding stories: Alfonso Reyes' "The Dinner," Juan José Arreola's "The Switchman," Salvador Elizondo's "History According to Pao Cheng," and Juan Rulfo's "Luvina," to name just a few outstanding examples. Fables, legends, rumors, folktales, and whispers, present at the birth of the nation and never eclipsed, are the recurring substance of short fiction.

An incredibly popular genre since the turn of the century, the story has been practiced by almost every writer of note. Its genealogical tree can be easily traced. During colonial times, the written confession often evidenced the enviable structure of an autobiographical tale. Before and during independence and the 1910 Revolution, *corridos*, folksongs about legendary events and heroes, had the structure and shape of brief tales. Then come the border legends celebrating the adventurous life of bandits like Tiburcio Vásquez and Gregorio Cortez. Mariano Azuela and Martín Luis Guzmán, among many other early-twentieth century literati, practiced a naturalist type of short story, conveying the customs and beliefs of the lower class and the rebel armies. Many subsequent practitioners, from Arreola to Rulfo, from Rosario Castellanos to Ángeles Mastretta, have renewed the genre focusing on alternative topics: urban dwelling and rural life, unhappiness among rebellious student and blue-collar workers, as well as the plight of women in Mexican society.

Unfortunately, very few outside the nation's borders are acquainted with the vitality and heterogeneity of the story. Allow

me to speculate why this is so. The most obvious reason is that literature north and south of the border are the result of opposing traditions; fantasy and history talk to each other differently. In Mexico it tends to be lavish, politically conscious, self-absorbed, ornamented, with a surrealist edge, directly linked to the source of sources: Miguel de Cervantes. In the United States, on the other hand, the writer of fiction is primarily perceived as an entertainer.

This anthology serves a threefold purpose: to introduce Mexican fiction writers to a broad audience in the United States; by doing so, to present a convincing mosaic of contemporary Mexico; and to demonstrate the incredible stamina of the short story in an environment where writers are perceived as discoverers of hidden facets of reality. A few issues should be kept in mind while traveling through the forthcoming pages. First and foremost, the reader ought to understand the complex role literary figures play in Mexico, and for that matter in Latin America as a whole. As in Eastern Europe, art and politics are entangled: they are often understood as faces of the same coin. In a society where a large segment of impoverished citizens have no voice in the national debate, the writer is asked to become a speaker, a mediator, an interpreter between suffering and the ruling powers. As a result, literature carries enormous weight: it opens up new venues, it facilitates dialogue between opposing groups, and more than anything, it gives fantasy a place in daily life. It goes without saying that not all writers take seriously this social responsibility. Practitioners of Latin American letters could easily be divided into two groups: those like the Argentine Jorge Luis Borges, dreaming perfect intellectual worlds for us, isolated in what the Nicaraguan modernist poet Rubén Darío used to call *torres de dios*, a celestial ivory tower; and those like Eduardo Galeano, using literature to advance political causes. The separation between the two groups is sometimes foggy.

Another important aspect to pay attention to is the heterogeneity of styles displayed in *Pyramids of Glass*. Since the end of World War II, as a result of the immediate availability of translations, literary influences have been crossing linguistic and cultural borders. Today writers everywhere respond to