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A COMPANION TO JUAN RULFO

TAMESIS

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Introduction

Life and Literature

Juan Rulfo was born in 1917, in rural Jalisco, western central Mexico, to a family of landowners, lawyers, bureaucrats and politicians.[1] He came into the world towards the end of the Mexican Revolution and in a turbulent period during which his family lost most of their land, and he lost most of his family. At a young age he was exposed to the bloody horrors of the Cristero Wars, a Catholic backlash against the Jacobinism of the early Revolutionary state. In the 1950s, when the modernizing and aggressively capitalistic government of Miguel Alemán was building the new industrialized urban Mexico at the expense of a neglected and impoverished countryside, Rulfo published a book of short stories and a novel of a hundred or so pages: *El Llano en llamas* in 1953 and *Pedro Páramo* in 1955.[2] Both are deeply embedded in the brutal and often sordid world of the peasant farmer of Jalisco and share a dark poetic intensity and a laconic, seductive and disturbing intractability. The novel is marked by a greater lyricism and metaphysical resonance than the stories. Rulfo was an extraordinary photographer and an enthusiastic participant in many aspects of cinematography. From the publication of *Pedro Páramo* until his death in 1986, as a state bureaucrat, an employee of the Goodrich tyre company and an editor in the Mexican Indigenist Agency, he published virtually nothing apart from *El gallo de oro*, prompting obsessive speculation and even the dramatic reflection by Evodio Escalante that 'Rulfo, en tanto escritor, murió hace treinta años [...] Desde entonces se convirtió en un fantasma reticente, en uno más de sus espectrales personajes' (García Bonilla 291).[3]

1 The biographical information offered in this chapter is taken from the works listed in the Bibliography by Nuria Amat, Juan Ascencio, Roberto García Bonilla, Reina Roffé and the only authorized biography, that of Alberto Vital.

2 I quote Rulfo's works in the original Spanish in the main text and provide an English translation in the footnotes. I use Ilan Stavan's not consistently reliable version of *El Llano en llamas* and Margaret Sayers Peden's very good translation of *Pedro Páramo*. On the occasions when I have disagreed with these translations or needed a more literal version to illustrate points I am making about the original, I have offered my own translation or modified that of Stavans and Sayers Peden. All other translations from Spanish are my own unless otherwise indicated.

3 'Rulfo, as a writer, died thirty years ago [...] After that, he became a reticent ghost, one more among his own spectral characters.'

Rulfo's brief main texts, the realm of inarticulate tortured mutterings and death, of beautifully poetic yearning and death, were published in an extraordinary decade for Mexican literature between two weighty and supremely articulate literary landmarks by the poet and essayist Octavio Paz, who hated Rulfo and largely abstained from writing about him, and by the brilliant and prolific novelist Carlos Fuentes, who immediately proclaimed the importance of *Pedro Páramo* and wrote admiringly about it throughout his life.[4] Paz's 1950 *El laberinto de la soledad* is the culmination of decades of philosophical speculation in Mexico about national identity. In dazzling oxymoronic poetic prose, with bold and compellingly totalizing analyses of Mexican intellectual history and being, Paz theorizes what might also seem to be the base of Rulfo's literary universe: solitude, orphanhood, otherness, the oedipal drama of the castrating or absent Mexican father, humiliation and annulment through abuse of power, the sly silence of the oppressed. Fuentes's 1958 novel *La región más transparente* is an exciting and ambitious polyphonic novel where the languages and music of all the social groups of the rapidly modernizing and cosmopolitan Mexico City converge, where Nahua mythology, Nietzsche and the lessons of Anglo-American literary modernism meet the classic realism of the novels of Balzac, where social classes rise, fall and realign after the upheavals of the Revolution. It shares with *Pedro Páramo* the central preoccupation with the corrupt and powerful individual who absorbs and destroys all around him: Fuentes's tycoon Federico Robles is the urban cousin of Rulfo's rural *cacique* Pedro Páramo.

It was not long, however, before *Pedro Páramo* was celebrated throughout the Spanish-speaking world and beyond as one of the most significant literary works of the century. The Argentine Jorge Luis Borges considered it 'una de las mejores novelas de las literaturas en lengua hispánica, y aún de la literatura' ('Juan Rulfo' 83). In a shrewdly succinct summary of the disparate approaches within Rulfo criticism, he comments that 'nadie ha logrado, hasta ahora, destejer el arco iris, para usar la extraña metáfora de John Keats'.[5] Fuentes, discussing what he called 'la mejor novela mexicana de todos los tiempos' ('Formas' 13), wrote that it had closed forever, 'y con llave de oro', the thematics of the cycle of novels on the Mexican Revolution, turning the seeds of these texts into 'un árbol seco y desnudo del cual cuelgan unos frutos de brillo sombrío: frutos duales, frutos gemelos que han de ser probados si se quiere vivir, a sabiendas de que contienen los jugos de la muerte' ('Los grandes

4 For an excellent account of Fuentes's engagement with Rulfo's work over many years, see García Gútiérrez.

5 'one of the best novels in Hispanic literature, and even in literature'; 'nobody has managed, so far, to unweave the rainbow, to use John Keats's strange metaphor'.

mitos' 16).[6] Gabriel García Márquez, around 1961, was given *Pedro Páramo* by his friend Álvaro Mutis, with the injunction '¡Lea esa vaina, carajo, para que aprenda!' ('Breves nostalgias' 902). After reading it feverishly twice that night, he claims he was soon able to recite the whole work word-perfect. Of Rulfo's whole output, he concluded at the Homenaje Nacional to Rulfo in Mexico City in 1980: 'No son más de 300 páginas, pero son casi tantas, y creo que tan perdurables, como las que conocemos de Sófocles' ('Breves nostalgias' 903).[7] The famous first lines of *Cien años de soledad*, 'Muchos años después, frente al pelotón de fusilamiento, el coronel Aureliano Buendía había de recordar aquella tarde remota [...]' (9), are a discreet homage to *Pedro Páramo* and a reworking of the sentence: 'El padre Rentería se acordaría muchos años después de la noche [...]' (*Pedro Páramo* 135) (Weinberg 323).[8]

In reading the testimonies regarding Juan Rulfo's character, one must exercise a degree of caution, as many are tainted with malice and have done much to colour his reputation. Most commentators agree on his oblique and double-edged manner of speech and thought. His contemporary from Jalisco, the short story writer Juan José Arreola, said of him:

> Siempre fue retraído, sí, y tímido. [...] Era al mismo tiempo un poco huraño, cazurro, ladino. [...] Percibí en Rulfo lo que puedo describir como una fuerza oblicua, semejante al trote del coyote. Tanto él como sus personajes parecían ver las cosas, juzgarlas, de una manera oblicua, al sesgo, yo diría que en *bies*. No había una recta en su pensamiento o en su modo de contar las cosas, sino un diagonalismo, un espíritu de alfil. (119)[9]

Perhaps the word most frequently associated with him, by for example the perspicacious writer and chronicler Elena Poniatowska, is *socarronería*, a sort of sarcastic sly humour. In his introduction to the beautiful recording of Rulfo short stories read by the author in the collection *Voz viva de México*, Felipe Garrido cleverly catches his double game with meaning and intention:

6 'the best Mexican novel of all time'; 'and with a golden key [...] a dry bare tree from which hang fruits of sombre sheen; dual fruits, twin fruits which one has to taste if one wants to live, aware that they hold the juices of death'.

7 'Read this stuff, damn you, to learn how to do it!'; 'They are not more than three hundred pages, but they are almost as many, and I believe as lasting, as those we know of Sophocles.'

8 'Many years later, facing the firing squad, Coronel Aureliano Buendía would remember that remote afternoon [...]'(One Hundred Years of Solitude); 'Years later Father Rentería would remember the night [...]' (*Pedro Páramo* 67).

9 'He was always withdrawn, yes, and shy. [...] At the same time he was a little unsociable, surly, sly. [...] I made out in Rulfo what I can only describe as an oblique force, like the gait of a coyote. Both he and his characters seemed to see and judge things in an oblique, slanted fashion, on the bias as I'd put it. There wasn't a straight line in his thought or his way of talking about things, but a taste for the diagonal, the spirit of the chess pawn.'