

# The New Historical Novel: History and Fantasy in *Los recuerdos del porvenir*

DANIEL BALDERSTON

Tulane University

In its classic form, the historical novel would seem to exclude fantasy. The world evoked, whether through what Amado Alonso called historical or archaeological means, is assumed to have been a real one, and the evocation is realistic at least in the sense of not worrying the reader with the possibility that it is a fundamentally unreal one.

The historical novel in Latin America has been characterized by a heightened realism, characterized by the ostentatious use of detail. In his essay 'La postulación de la realidad' Borges seizes upon a detail from Larreta's *La gloria de don Ramiro* which may serve as an example of this kind of realism: the soup pots in Larreta's Golden-Age Spain are secured with locks, to defend the soup from the hungry servants.<sup>1</sup> The existence of such pots may seem improbable in historical terms, yet the very excess of the detail serves as guarantor of a textual reality. Even in a novel like *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, in which extraordinary events occur, such events do not serve to make problematic the high seriousness of the novelist's attempt to portray the modern history of Mexico. More recent historical novels, however, notably Roa's *Yo el Supremo* and Piglia's *Respiración artificial*, suggest that the historicity of the events narrated may itself be called into question, and with it the privileged status of history. These novels are metahistorical in the best sense: they use historical material in a dialogue between fiction and history, a dialogue which centres on the question Joyce asked years ago: how to narrate real events.

An interesting historical novel of a different kind is Elena Garro's 1963 masterpiece, *Los recuerdos del porvenir*. Garro's novel, though not metahistorical in the sense that Roa's and Piglia's are (through an intellectual discussion of the nature of historical truth), is strikingly different from the historical novels of the time, in that instead of taking the historical record of the Mexican revolution as given, Garro calls it into question at every turn. To undermine the historicity of her fictional world, Garro uses the fantastic, in a way I do not think it has been used often, at least not in historical fiction.

The narrator of the novel, the town of Ixtepec, tells us from the start: 'Sólo mi memoria sabe lo que encierra. La veo y me recuerdo, y como el agua va al agua, así yo, melancólico, vengo a encontrarme en su imagen cubierta por el polvo, rodeada por las hierbas, encerrada en sí misma y condenada a la memoria y a su variado espejo . . . Yo sólo soy memoria y la memoria que de mí se tenga' (9).<sup>2</sup> The town (masculine noun, the self) sees its memory (a feminine noun) and remembers itself, or better yet, recognizes itself in its memory, as when it affirms its identity with that memory at the end of the above quotation. Memory is death ('su imagen cubierta por el polvo'); it is a thing but also an activity ('La veo y me recuerdo'). Above all, it is reflection, image, mirror: not a direct approach to reality but the representation of it in another medium.

Antonio Castro Leal has written that the Mexican revolution provided novelists with 'la visión directa de una realidad nueva e impresionante',<sup>3</sup> and that the novel of the Revolution is based on impressions which are somehow 'directas y penetrantes'.<sup>4</sup> We would say now that these 'impresiones directas' are no more than the result of an attempt to so appear through a complex process of textual inscription; in any case, an evident purpose of the novelists of the revolution was to provide *impressions* of direct experience. Such is no longer the case, however, in the works of more recent novelists, whether by their use of fragmentation (in Rulfo) or the fantastic (in Garro) or parody (in Ibargüengoitia). These techniques call the reader's attention to the *mediate* character of literature, as Borges would say,<sup>5</sup> evoking not direct impressions of past experience but a reflection of and on it.

In Garro's case, the presence of the fantastic elements is crucial to the work,<sup>6</sup> as these elements break the seemingly historicist and realist scheme of *Los recuerdos del porvenir*. If the novel as a whole assumes the history of the revolution, particularly the period of the dictatorship of Plutarco Elías Calles and of the Cristero uprising, it assumes it as background, not directly as theme. John Brushwood has written that *Los recuerdos del porvenir* is the best novel written about the period of the Cristero rebellion,<sup>7</sup> and Harry Enrique Rosser has proposed that Garro sometimes blurs the boundary between appearance and reality to make more palpable the alienation and anguish suffered by the people of rural Mexico during the Calles dictatorship.<sup>8</sup> Both critics, it seems to me, err in an important and fundamental way when they declare that the author's purpose is to write of the Cristero uprising. This event serves, rather, as a pretext for the presentation of a conflictive or *dual* reality, as Garro has defined it in an interview with Joseph Sommers: 'En México hay una dualidad . . . Son dos culturas . . . [Los de la ciudad] disfrutamos de la cultura occidental, y la gente del campo vive en una realidad mágica.'<sup>9</sup>

Ixtepec is a theatre of war. Its people consider themselves *spectators* (121), not actors; the actors are those who have come from outside (the army officers, their mistresses, Felipe Hurtado), who have come to represent for them a spectacle which breaks the static or 'petrified' time of the town (34). This theatrical aspect is recognized explicitly by Felipe Hurtado, who proposes to found a theatre, since according to him what is lacking in Ixtepec is illusion (72). In the whole of the novel there is an oscillation between reality and fantasy, an ambivalence which is never resolved.

I have said that the scheme of the novel is seemingly realist and historicist. The fantastic detail is the exception, not the rule, although the fact that the two parts of the novel have dénouements which are clearly fantastic forces us to search for the textual foundations for these endings. The fantastic dénouement of the first part of the novel consists of Felipe Hurtado's flight with the mistress of General Francisco Rosas, Julia Andrade, at the very moment when the general and his soldiers were about to apprehend them. Time stops and the lovers magically depart, reaching daylight at the edge of the town, although Ixtepec remains shrouded in the magic circle of night. This motif of frozen time<sup>10</sup> is justified numerous times in the story in an apparently more limited sense: Ixtepec is a town lost in time where nothing happens, where days seem as if petrified, where the Moncada family has the custom of stopping the clock each night, and so on.<sup>11</sup> The fact that the general cannot capture Julia is a new avatar of the idea that he has never been able to touch her: an adjective that is often used in reference to her is *intacto*. Indeed, what most astonishes the people of Ixtepec is the fact that she remains somehow aloof to everything and innocent despite her condition as the mistress of the hated general. General Rosas complains that Julia lives in another world (77), and this seemingly innocent phrase justifies her escape to another world at the end of the first part.

If we compare the motif of frozen time in the first part with the ending of 'El milagro secreto', the Borges story, we note that in Garro's novel the miracle is presented as if somewhat distanced: we are in Ixtepec at the moment when the soldiers are about to

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capture the lovers; and a moment later find ourselves with the muleteer who observes from without the night which covers the town, and who greets Felipe Hurtado and Julia when they emerge from the magic circle. In contrast, in the Borges story the miracle is presented from the eyes of the main character, who is, in fact, the only one to perceive it. If Borges focuses on the miracle, Garro presents it as one more incident of everyday life: strange, yes, and disquieting, but capable of being viewed as it were somewhat obliquely. The novelist's task seems to be that of normalizing the marvellous or the supernatural.<sup>12</sup> However, the odd events are so very odd that they make the textual reality somewhat problematical (as Ana María Barrenechea has suggested the fantastic tends to do).<sup>13</sup>

The reality of Ixtepec is put into doubt numerous times, above all when General Rosas thinks, with regard to the disappearance of the body of the sacristan, that 'Nada tenía cuerpo en Ixtepec; ni siquiera el sacristán que había muerto sin dejar cuerpo. El pueblo entero era de humo y se le escapaba de entre las manos' (181). Rosas insists that the sacristan's body has to appear, and clings 'a sus palabras como a la única realidad en aquel pueblo irreal que había terminado por convertirlo a él también en un fantasma' (181). This 'unreality' of the town is not a product of the intrusion of dreams into reality (as in Borges), but rather of the convergence of different realities,<sup>14</sup> the ordered world of the soldiers, the magic one of Felipe Hurtado, the secretive one of the *cristeros*, the world of superstition of the pious women. If the general clings to his words it is because only in them does reality exist as he would have it.

Other examples of this 'unreality': when Felipe Hurtado arrives at the hotel for the first time, two lit cigarettes suddenly appear in his empty hand (39). The hotel keeper 'no estaba en condiciones de sorprenderse y el hecho le pareció natural' (39). Similarly, Hurtado comes to Doña Matilde's house in the middle of a storm, dry, a lighted candle in his hand. 'Mucho después, cuando ya Hurtado no estaba entre nosotros, los invitados de doña Matilde se preguntaron cómo había atravesado aquella tempestad con el candil encendido y las ropas y el pelo secos. Esa noche encontraron natural que su luz permaneciera encendida hasta el momento en que llegó a lugar seguro' (105). As with the motif of the frozen time, this fantastic event is based on a commonplace phrase taken literally: 'andar en la lluvia sin mojarse'.<sup>15</sup> Once again, Hurtado moves in a reality which is somehow *natural* to him, but the nature of which differs from the reality that surrounds him. The others notice this difference 'cuando ya no estaba entre nosotros': after his departure in the magic circle of night.

Of Isabel we are told in the fourth chapter of the first part that she is not one person but two: 'una que deambulaba por los patios y las habitaciones y la otra que vivía en una esfera lejana, fija en el espacio' (29), that is, one mobile and the other static, one who is part of time and life and another who is outside time. Her father observes that the second Isabel 'podía convertirse en una estrella fugaz, huir y caer en el espacio sin dejar huellas visibles de ella misma, en este mundo donde sólo la grosería de los objetos toma forma' (30). This doubt about the materiality of Isabel will culminate at the end of the second part of the novel when she is turned to stone (perhaps the meteorite left of the shooting star her father saw in her), the very stone on which Ixtepec is sitting at the beginning of the novel.

There are similar doubts about Julia Andrade. Her lover, General Rosas, feels that there is one Julia whom he possesses and another who remains somehow intact, alone in her memories. He thinks that 'el día de su encuentro con Julia tuvo la impresión de tocar una estrella del cielo de la Sierra'—once again the image of the shooting star—'de atravesar sus círculos luminosos y de alcanzar el cuerpo intacto de la joven' (78). Later, however, he recognizes that in everything that matters that body remains intact within Julia's invisible memory. His 'dolor irremediable' was 'no poder ver lo que vivía adentro de ella' (78), that other Julia who always escapes him and who will in fact escape him materially at the end of the first part of the novel.

The motif of the double exists on various planes: in the difference between the self who thinks and the other who remembers (duplication in time), between one who is present and another who is absent (absent-minded, dead, vanished), between the one everyone knows and some aspect of him or her that escapes them. Once again we observe that the fantastic use of doubles is anticipated by a more mundane or commonplace one: thus, Luchi, when she says that 'Las putas nacimos sin pareja' (99), thinks that for her 'los hombres desnudos se convertían en el mismo hombre', a man who is no one (99). This Borgesian reflection reduces all men to the *other*, who is no one. By way of contrast, at other points in the novel the motif of the double is used to differentiate: the Nicolás who is remembered has nothing in common with the Nicolás who awaits his death, the Julia who allows herself to be touched hides the other *intact* Julia. The most interesting example of this kind of doubling: when Isabel Hurtado leaves with General Rosas (who has already killed her brother Juan and is preparing the execution of her other brother Nicolás), she manages by her very presence to force the collapse of the general's neat universe, since her (present) body erases from his memory the (absent) body of Julia Andrade (251). She erases Julia's images but at the same time exacerbates her absence. The repetition of the same body, in slightly different forms, is intolerable: one or another of them, or both, must turn out to be simulacrum.

If the reality of Ixtepec is oppressive, it can be avoided through memory and illusion: thoughts turn to the past (before the coming of the soldiers) or to the future (when it is hoped they will have gone). But given the non-linear time of the novel, it is not surprising that there should be memories of the future, or fantasies directed toward the historical past. The Moncada brothers play a game they call Rome against Carthage (11), making that remote war present in their games. The 'recuerdos del porvenir' of the title turn out to be in many instances memories of one's own death: so it is in the cases of Martín Moncada, of his son Nicolás, and even of Ixtepec itself. In much the same manner as in Silvina Ocampo's story 'La autobiografía de Irene', in which the character loses all memories of the past and is filled with precise images of the future, Isabel tells General Rosas: 'Francisco, tenemos dos memorias . . . Yo antes vivía en las dos y ahora sólo vivo en la que me recuerda lo que va a suceder' (253). Her father also lives between two memories: that of a past he never lived, which seems unreal to him, and that of the acts and images of the future (19).

On the most commonplace level, the 'recuerdos del porvenir' are simply the 'qué dirán de nosotros' of those who will come after us, as General Rosas observes (78). Or, for the narrator, the 'recuerdos del porvenir' of the title are negative: they are the oblivion that will come when the town has disappeared (250). As previously with the motif of the frozen time, Garro works with the multiple levels of language, exploring not only the extraordinary connotations of the commonplace (as we saw in the case of the frozen time) but also the perfectly ordinary connotations of an odd phrase (here, the memories of the future).

All of the connotations of the phrase in the title come together in the last sentence of the novel, the sentence which is written on the 'aparente piedra' which once was Isabel Moncada.<sup>16</sup> 'Aquí estaré a solas con mi amor como recuerdo del porvenir por los siglos de los siglos' (295). The 'aparente piedra' will in the future recall Isabel, but the phrase of her epitaph also gives us an impression of what she was thinking at the moment she turned to stone. She realizes that she is the cause of her parents' misfortunes and the deaths of her brothers, knowing at the same time that she loves the author of these misfortunes: 'Cuando venía a pedirle a la Virgen que me curara del amor que tengo por el general Francisco Rosas que mató a mis hermanos, me arrepentí y preferí el amor del hombre que me perdió y perdió a mi familia' (295). The words written on the 'aparente piedra' are, as the narrator says, 'cohetes apagados' (295), one more variant of the image of the shooting star: like the meteorite, they are light converted to stone. The past is equivalent to what is to come, the 'siglos de los siglos' are already present in this eternal moment.

In *Los recuerdos del porvenir* the fantastic touches the central concepts of time, the body, memory, history. All of these are rendered problematic in the course of the novel. Linear time stops, the body is petrified, memory turns from the past toward the impossible future, history is coloured with the impossible and the improbable. The 'aparente piedra' proclaims: 'Aquí estaré con mi amor a solas como recuerdo del porvenir por los siglos de los siglos' (295). 'Con mi amor a solas', 'recuerdo del porvenir': the paradoxes make plain the deceptive nature of appearances in the world of the novel. Garro discovers for us a world firmly anchored in the reality of her fiction, a world comparable in its fascinating complexity to García Márquez's Macondo, Onetti's Santa María, and Rulfo's Comala. Her Ixtepec is recognizably Mexican and Latin American, yet simultaneously the stuff of dreams. The curious conjunction of the fantastic and the historic makes this one of the most original and powerful of historical novels in Latin America.

## NOTES

- 1 Borges, *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974), 220.
- 2 References in the text are to the second edition of *Los recuerdos del porvenir* (Mexico City: Joaquín Mortiz, 1977). I am grateful to Manuel Cachán for conversations about this novel.
- 3 Castro Leal, preface to *La novela de la Revolución mexicana* (Mexico City: Aguilar, 1967), I, 25.
- 4 Castro Leal, I, 27.
- 5 *Obras completas*, 217.
- 6 Robert Anderson has already observed the presence of 'realismo mágico' in Garro's stories: see his article 'La cuentística mágico realista de Elena Garro', in *Selecta* (of the Pacific Northwest Council on Foreign Languages, Corvallis, Oregon), III (1982), 117-21. Walter Langhorn says in his book *The Mexican Novel Comes of Age* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1971) that *Los recuerdos del porvenir* 'combines realism with fantasy (or "magical realism")', but characterizes this mixture as 'the least consistent element in the work . . . somewhat difficult to follow and accept' (187).
- 7 *Mexico in its Novel* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1966), 53.
- 8 Rosser insists that the Garro novel is about the Cristero revolt in his article 'Form and Content in Elena Garro's *Los recuerdos del porvenir*', *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*, II (1978), 282-95: 'Basing her novel on the period of social unrest in Mexico known as the Cristero Wars, which raged in the 1920s following the first armed phase of the Revolution, Garro makes a masterful evocation of the spiritual and psychological anguish experienced by many people when the regime of Plutarco Elías Calles resorted to a campaign of violence in its attempts to curb the power of the Roman Catholic Church. On occasion she blurs the distinction between appearance and reality in order to dramatize a sense of human alienation' (284). In his more recent book *Conflict and Transition in Rural Mexico: The Fiction of Social Realism* (Waltham, Massachusetts: Crossroads Press, 1980), he shifts his emphasis to the universal nature of Garro's novel, but still insists that it is essentially a realist novel of Mexico: '*Los recuerdos del porvenir* is a pessimistic protest integrated into an artistic portrayal of provincial Mexico in the 1920s. The critical thrust of Elena Garro goes beyond that stage in the Mexican historical process, however. While she calls attention to the injustices of the early decades of the Revolution, her novel has implicit meaning for contemporary Mexico as well . . . Beyond the context of the Cristero Wars, *Los recuerdos del porvenir* has a universal projection' (41).
- 9 This interview is included in Beth Müller and Alfonso González, *26 autoras del México actual* (Mexico City: Costa-Amic Editor, 1978), 201-19.
- 10 The time of the novel has been studied by Frank Dauster in his article 'Elena Garro y sus recuerdos del porvenir', *Journal of Spanish Studies*, VIII (1980), 57-65, and by Robert Anderson in his article 'La realidad temporal en *Los recuerdos del porvenir*', *Explicación de Textos Literarios*, IX (1980), 25-29.
- 11 For an astute analysis of the use of the commonplace in Rulfo, see María Luisa Bastos' article, 'Clichés lingüísticos y ambigüedad en *Pedro Páramo*', *Revista Iberoamericana*, XLIV (1978), Nos. 102-03, 31-44.
- 12 Rosser observes: 'Each event is subject to a highly individualized interpretation of reality but is presented as though there were absolutely nothing extraordinary about it' (287).
- 13 Barrenechea, *Textos hispanoamericanos* (Caracas: Monte Avila, 1978), 89.
- 14 Adriana Méndez Rodenas has seen a further conflict between divergent concepts of time: see her 'Tiempo femenino, tiempo ficticio: *Los recuerdos del porvenir*, de Elena Garro', *Revista Iberoamericana*, LI (1985), Nos. 132-33, 845.
- 15 Roa Bastos uses this phrase twice in a figurative sense in the short story collection *Moriencia* (Barcelona: Plaza y Janés, 1984), 82 and 91.

16 Brushwood has already observed: 'The "apparent stone" is explained at the end of the novel when we discover that it is magically a "recuerdo del porvenir"' (*Mexico in its Novel*, 53). Méndez Rodenas notes (849-50) that *Los Recuerdos del Porvenir* was the name of a bar in the small jungle town in Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos*, published in 1953, some ten years before the Garro novel.

## PHILOSOPHICAL FORUM

The latest number of *Philosophical Forum* Vol. XX, Nos. 1-2 [Fall-Winter 1988-89]) is a double issue devoted entirely to 'Latin American Philosophy Today'. This special issue, guest-edited by Professor Jorge J. E. Gracia of the State University of New York at Buffalo, scheduled to appear in December 1988, includes these articles:

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