

## Fuentes' "Chac Mool": Its Ancestors and Progeny

With more than three decades of writing behind him that include almost a dozen novels plus theater, short stories and essays, Carlos Fuentes has easily attained the pinnacle of success that was early predicted for him. While he is widely acclaimed for his efforts in producing and publicizing the so called Latin American "New Novel," his excellent contributions to the short story still remain relatively unrecognized. As a student he practiced composing short tales<sup>1</sup> and at the age of twenty-one published his first story, the little known "Pastel rancio."<sup>2</sup> Five years later Fuentes achieved early prominence in Mexican literary circles with a collection of short fiction entitled *Los días enmascarados* (1954). The volume, as with most of his writings, was soon the center of a storm of controversy. Alí Chumacero called it the most debated book of 1954: "sus cuentos fueron comentados con la misma pasión que si se tratara de una obra didáctica literaria o de desatinos políticos."<sup>3</sup> The collection's initial story was "Chac Mool." Although strangely enough it has not, to this writer's knowledge, been translated into English, it remains a great favorite of many readers and at last count had been included in at least a half dozen anthologies of Mexican and Latin American literature. Also up to this time apparently no extended analysis has been made of the piece, something that this brief study will only in part attempt to remedy with an emphasis that will be on the work's development and influence.

The history of "Chac Mool" really begins with another story, "Pantera en jazz," which Fuentes published in the January-February 1954 number of the relatively obscure journal *Ideas de México*.<sup>4</sup>

"Pantera en jazz" follows the ill-fated adventures of a man pursued by a jungle beast. The unnamed protagonist awakens one morning only to think he hears strange growls coming from behind the closed door of his bathroom. Upon seeing huge newspaper headlines warning of the escape of a black panther from a nearby zoo, our hero avoids his bathroom and instead hurries off to work. That evening a visitor complains about the sounds and is summarily expelled from the apartment. Days pass in which the man becomes increasingly obsessed with the mystery behind the locked door. (Fuentes offers no clue about how the man can live without his bathroom!) He forgets his job, seldom strays from his room and in desperation even kidnaps a child and tosses her into the bathroom as a kind of expiatory sacrifice. The final scene finds the protagonist scratching the walls and his own body as he, like the animal he fears, lies in wait for the enemy footsteps coming up the stairway and closer and closer to his door.

It seems obvious that Fuentes' purpose in writing "Pantera en jazz" is to portray modern man in his confrontation with the natural world. No

one is ever named; characters are simply "el hombre," "la divorciada," "el carpintero" and "la niña." Neither does the black panther appear and the reader soon begins to question the animal's very existence. As with many horror tales, there is no escape, no logical way out. At no time does the man ever consider the natural reaction of calling the police or the zoo. It is as if we were witnessing the life and death struggle of naked and weaponless primitive man with the beasts of the jungle. In "Pantera en jazz" we have our first example in Fuentes' fiction of a theme that he will treat with increasing frequency in later years—the isolation of modern man and his inability to communicate.

Five years separate "Pantera . . ." and Fuentes' first short story, "Pastel rancio," and in that interim our author demonstrates a steady improvement in his style and narrative technique. Descriptions are richer and metaphors are more daring and experimental. We have before us the writer who in the next decade or more would complain of the fossilized and archaic Spanish tongue that he and his generation of writers were forced to utilize.<sup>5</sup> The recurrence of anglicisms ("toughguy," "indian summer," "collegeboy") recalls Fuentes' early years spent in Washington D.C. during which his father served in the Mexican embassy. The location of the story's action is ambiguous, but the anglicisms and the life style suggest the United States, the same locale of "Pastel rancio." A further autobiographical note can be observed in the humorous description of bureaucratic office life. Fuentes had only recently returned from Geneva where he had worked for some time in the offices of the Mexican delegation to the United Nations.<sup>6</sup>

An intriguing question is why Fuentes has never included "Pantera en jazz" in any of his volumes of short stories, and in particular in *Los días enmascarados*, which would appear only a few months later. The obvious answer lies in its close similarity to the lead story in the above-mentioned volume, titled "Chac Mool." In reality, there are two versions of "Chac Mool," an earlier one published in the August 1954 issue of the *Revista de la Universidad de México*, and the later piece in *Los días enmascarados*, which arrived in the bookstores of Mexico City in late November of 1954. The differences are not marked: there is really more of a polishing of style.

Filiberto, the protagonist of "Chac Mool," is a minor Mexico City bureaucrat in the same mold as "el hombre" in "Pantera en jazz." He recalls his student days and the prevailing optimism for the future: "Otros, que parecíamos prometerlo todo, quedamos a la mitad del camino, destripados en un examen extracurricular, aislados por una zanja invisible de los que triunfaron y de los que nada alcanzaron."<sup>7</sup> Filiberto's office responsibilities are minimal, and the major event of the day is when a co-worker pours red dye in the water cooler as a practical joke.

The protagonists of both stories lose their jobs, "el hombre" because of his obsession with the panther and Filiberto through dismissal after "una

recriminación pública del Director, y rumores de locura y aún robo."<sup>8</sup> The motive for the robbery and apparent madness, as we later learn, is Filiberto's purchase of a life-size statue of a Mayan idol that eventually comes to life. For a passing moment the narrator had cherished dreams of fame: "Debo reconocerlo: soy su prisionero. Mi idea original era distinta: yo dominaría al Chac Mool, como se domina a un juguete . . ."<sup>9</sup> But his hopes are dashed; with no money the water to his house is cut off, and he is forced to carry it by bucket from a public fountain to keep the rain god amply supplied. One night when the Chac Mool has gone out, Filiberto escapes hurriedly to his old vacation spot in Acapulco to make plans for a new life. But he drowns in the surf forgetting that the Mayan god controls all waters, those in the heavens and those on earth.

One theme that runs throughout "Chac Mool" and "Pantera . . ." is the conception of reality. In the first the unnamed narrator creates his own reality with his vision of evil behind the door. But we never see, nor does he, the black panther. Filiberto recalls the famous Coleridge speculation of a man dreaming about paradise and receiving a flower in heaven only to awaken and find a flower in his hand. As in reading "Pantera . . ." we remain doubtful about the sanity of our hero only to have Fuentes surprise us with the appearance of the Chac Mool in the final scene. A friend has just brought the body to Filiberto's house, supposedly in preparation for the wake, when the door is opened by an ancient Indian:

—Perdone . . . no sabía que Filiberto hubiera . . .

—No importa, lo sé todo. Dígale a los hombres que lleven el cadáver al sótano.<sup>10</sup>

Thus the narration comes to an end. The surprise conclusion changes our categorization from a psychological story to one of fantasy. As the Mexican critic Emmanuel Carballo observes: "Comienza estrictamente apegado a la lógica . . . todo parece indicar que se trata de un cuento realista."<sup>11</sup> Fuentes makes good use of the diary technique to tell his tale: a narrator, an old friend of the victim, reads the notebook in which Filiberto has recorded his most intimate thoughts. Until this moment the friend has no inkling of the torment his office companion was suffering. Once again we see the problem of communication that had plagued "el hombre" in the earlier story and that will be developed to a finer pitch in Fuentes' next novels: *La región más transparente* (1958), *Las buenas conciencias* (1959) and *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962).

Fuentes' growing genius for writing can be detected in his ingenious choice of time and setting for "Chac Mool." "Pantera . . ." in trying to depict an "everyman" in "Everyplace" had been too diffuse. "Chac Mool" would be universal but also intensely Mexican. North American readers who tend to live and think in the present may find unbelievable this curious blend of the past and present which permeates the Mexican way

of life. Mexico is a land of contrasts, a land with an ancient past that one can still witness in the grandiose monuments throughout the country. Even such seemingly twentieth-century activities as excavating a subway only unearth more treasures from the Aztec past. The modern Mexican also unites the duality of present and past in his physical makeup: his unique mestizo bloodline.

Fuentes recalls that the inspiration for "Chac Mool" came from a newspaper article he read that described a traveling Mexican art exposition in Europe and the torrential rains that began with the disembarking of the Mayan god of rain, the Chac Mool.

Los datos de la nota roja artística enfocaron mi atención en un hecho evidente para todos los mexicanos: hasta qué grado siguen vivas las formas cosmológicas de un México perdido para siempre y que, sin embargo, se resiste a morir y se manifiesta de tarde en tarde, a través de un misterio, una aparición, un reflejo.<sup>12</sup>

Comparing the two versions of "Chac Mool," the earlier one in *Revista de la Universidad de México*, and the definitive text in *Los días enmascarados*, we do not note any radical changes in the story line, but rather the later version shows stylistic polishing as the author has had time to review his work. The Hispanicized word for the German food "sauerkraut" is changed to the masculine form, while the Latin "en memorandas" becomes "en memoranda." The arid zone in Mexico where Filiberto wants to use the god's powers to bring rain changes from the specific "Altata" to the more general "el desierto." Several phrases are added, but onomatopoeic words reproducing sounds in the street are now omitted.

Finally, an even different climax to the tale is suggested in an interview that Fuentes gives some ten years later. The book and magazine versions conclude with the surprise meeting and brief conversation between the friend of Filiberto and the idol. On the other hand, Fuentes tells interviewer Luis Harss: "In the end, the owner replaces the god in the flea market."<sup>13</sup> If indeed these are Fuentes' words and not just a generalized summary by the interviewer, they represent a further evolution, and a most effective one for a horror story as we would follow the friend through the streets of Mexico City and view his astonishment at finding in a store window a statue of a Chac Mool with a face resembling Filiberto's. Perhaps, though, Fuentes is only suggesting one possible line of action, which an imaginative reader might further develop.

One almost immediate descendent of "Chac Mool" is another story found between the same covers of *Los días enmascarados*. This is "Por boca de los dioses," and since no earlier published version of the piece exists, it seems likely that it was composed after "Chac Mool," perhaps in the fall of 1954, since Fuentes recalls writing frantically to finish the manuscript and have the book ready for the November-December book

fair.<sup>14</sup> From the very beginning the critics have recognized the similarity in theme and plot between the two pieces; but they are also unanimous over the inferiority of "Por boca de los dioses." It has yet to be included in any anthology, including a recent volume in Spain done in 1972 combining stories from *Los días enmascarados* and *Cantar de ciegos* (1964).<sup>15</sup>

In "Por boca de los dioses" Oliverio, the predestined victim, creates his own problems by capriciously defacing a painting by Rulfino Tamayo hanging in the Palacio de Bellas Artes. It represents a portrait of an Indian, and Oliverio takes such a liking to it that he cuts off the lips from the painting and after killing an observant guard, makes good his escape. The lips come to life and converse with him as the two begin an odyssey through the streets of Mexico City fleeing from a band of avenging gods. Oliverio discovers an ancient pantheon of gods in the basement of his hotel: Tepoyollotl vomiting fire, Tezcatlipoca, the smoking mirror, Izapaplotl with her court of butterflies and the serpentine Quetzalcóatl. After barely escaping to his room, our anti-hero is lured into opening his door to an Aztec goddess who depreciates his "machismo." He is stabbed in the heart with an obsidian stone knife, a death which while far removed from the Aztecs in time is but a repetition of the human sacrifices performed on top of the pyramids.

"Por boca de los dioses" has its bright moments—especially in its satire of the modern Mexican society—but sins in its overuse of the metaphor and its complicated structure. As in the earlier stories, Fuentes reexamines the persistence of old traditions that have not yet completely disappeared. Filiberto as a lover of antiquities does not seem to deserve his fate, while Oliverio in damaging a work of art is a worthy recipient of Indian justice.

The avenging past, although a more immediate one, surfaces in a final story in *Los días enmascarados* that we will cite in passing, "Tlactocazine, del jardín de flandes." Nineteenth-century Mexico in the form of the phantom of Empress Carlota comes back to lure a modern inhabitant of Mexico City to his death. Some years later Fuentes will successfully rework this vein again in his classic gothic novelette, *Aura* (1962).

Mexico's Indian heritage also returns with a vengeance in Carlos Fuentes' first novel *La región más transparente* (1958). The four years separating the publication of the novel and *Los días enmascarados* can be deceptive. In reality, *La región* . . . probably dates from 1954 and 1955 in its composition since fragments of the novel were published during those years.<sup>16</sup> Two characters in the novel are in the tradition of the avenging Indians of the short stories: they are the mysterious Teódula Moctezuma and her so-called son, Ixca Cienfuegos. As the high priestess of an ancient religion, Teódula pleads with Ixca to provide her with a human sacrifice. Her goals are accomplished when the wife of a famous banker is burned to death while the chanting Teódula tosses jewelry into the blaze. Upon the completion of his mission Ixca, whose face is described as that of an "eloquent idol," begins to age rapidly. It recalls the ending of "Chac Mool" where the rain god, falling prey to human temptations, has wrinkles appear on his face. Ixca Cienfuegos debates with Mexican

philosophers and businessmen who look to the country's present and future. He, however, sees Mexico's only salvation in a return to the past.

La salvación del mundo depende de este pueblo anónimo que es el centro, ombligo del astro. El pueblo de México, que es el único contemporáneo del mundo, el único pueblo que aún vive con los dientes pegados a la ubre original . . . o se salvan los mexicanos o no se salva un solo hombre de la creación.<sup>17</sup>

Although it is possible to discover reminiscences of the past in later novels, particularly in *Cambio de piel* (1967) and *Terra Nostra* (1975), it is perhaps even more enlightening to pass on to the possible influence of "Chac Mool" in other important writers from Mexico and Latin America. Although Argentine, Julio Cortázar was living in Mexico in the mid fifties and with the help of Juan José Arreola would publish a volume of short stories titled *Final del juego* in the Los Presentes series, the same series what had done *Los días enmascarados* two years earlier. Cortázar would soon set up residence in Paris, but would remain in close contact with Mexico and his friend Fuentes.<sup>18</sup> The Mexican influence and in particular the Indian avenging past are especially evident in one of Cortázar's most famous tales, "La noche boca arriba," in which an injured motorcyclist swings back and forth between two realities. The first is a modern metropolitan hospital while the other is the marshland surrounding ancient Mexico City. While recovering from a serious injury the feverish man dreads his frequent nightmares that always picture his running from Aztec warriors intent on capturing him. The time switches occur with growing regularity until he realizes to his terror that the correct reality is pre-Hispanic Mexico, and he is about to be sacrificed on the pyramid's altar.

Exactly one decade after *Los días enmascarados*, Elena Garro, then wife of Fuentes' good friend, Octavio Paz, would publish an important collection of short stories, *La semana de colores* (1964). Included within its pages was a piece that was quickly recognized as a modern masterpiece, "La culpa es de los Tlaxcaltecas." In it the female protagonist is also stalked by Mexico's Indian past. But in contrast to previous works where the pursuit brought destruction, here the power of love extends its influence across the centuries. Her husband from a previous existence is an Aztec warrior involved in the final defense of Tenochtitlán. In spite of the tragedy and bloodshed that await her, the woman recognizes her true place and goes back with him.

A more recent literary descendent of "Chac Mool" can be detected in the writings of young Mexican novelist, poet, short story writer and critic, José Emilio Pacheco. Pacheco, although a decade younger than Fuentes, has long been his enthusiastic admirer. In later years the two worked together on several publications, and Pacheco has often been included in the so-called Mexican literary mafia ostensibly captained by Paz and Fuentes. Pacheco's *El principio del placer* appeared in 1972 and contained

six short stories most of which can be classified as fantasy. "Tenga para que se entretenga" recalls Fuentes' "Tlactocazine . . .," but instead of the empress Carlota returning to lure the modern Mexican to his doom, in this case it is the Hapsburg emperor himself, Maximilian. Even more striking in its resemblance to Fuentes' early stories is "La fiesta brava." This artful piece, certainly one of the finest short stories produced in Mexico in recent years, is structured as a story within a story. It begins with a short newspaper notice requesting information regarding Andrés Quintana, a missing person. Next follow twelve pages of typescript titled "La fiesta brava" written by the above-mentioned Quintana. "Fiesta . . ." is a mediocre and melodramatic tale of avenging Aztec gods who in the subway of Mexico City capture an American tourist who had once fought in Vietnam.

The third and final section of the story follows a day in the life of Quintana, a struggling translator who was once a Mexican writer of promise. A friend from the past now working for a prestigious publishing house asks Quintana for a story to launch their new magazine and "La fiesta brava" is the result. The manuscript is rejected and while returning home late at night Quintana sees the hero of his story riding in the same subway car. Before he can warn the North American they are both abducted by Aztec warriors.

In the friend's rejection of the story Pacheco places in one character's mouth some interesting observations on Fuentes' works: "Tu anécdota es irreal en el peor sentido, muy *bookish* ¿no es cierto? Además, esto del 'sustrato prehispánico enterrado pero vivo' como que ya no. Fuentes hizo cosas muy padres con ello y al hacerlo también agotó el tema."<sup>19</sup> The friend goes on to cite Cortázar's "La noche boca arriba" and Rubén Darío's "Huitilopochtli" as possible precursors of the same theme. What makes Pacheco's story so unusual is that he has given us an analysis of an obviously second rate piece and at the same time "borrowed" a plot from his former mentor, taking it one step further in its development.

In reviewing a continuing motif running throughout more than two decades of Fuentes' writing, we have been able to observe the various manifestations that it has taken both within his own creations and in the literary pieces of several close acquaintances.<sup>20</sup> "Chac Mool" deserves its ranking as a modern classic but has never received the recognition or distribution of Fuentes' novels. It is significant that a decade after the publication of *Los días enmascarados*, such illustrious critics in South America as Emir Rodríguez Monegal and Mario Benedetti had still not seen the book. Another significant conclusion is that in spite of Pacheco's fictional critic believing that the theme had been used up, such is definitely not so. Three cases in point are the masterpieces: "A noche boca arriba," "La culpa es de los Tlaxcaltecas" and "La fiesta brava."

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## NOTES

1. Carlos Fuentes, *Obras completas I*. Mexico: Aguilar, 1974, p. 70.
2. Fuentes, "Pastel rancio," *Mañana*, 36, 326 (26 noviembre 1949), pp. 226-227. See also my analysis in "El primer cuento de Carlos Fuentes: 'Pastel rancio,'" in *Hispanía*, 4/5 diciembre 1973, pp. 65-69.
3. Alí Chumacero, "Las letras mexicanas en 1954," *Revista de la Universidad de México*, IX, 5-6 (enero-febrero 1955), p. 9.
4. Fuentes, "Pantera en jazz," *Ideas de México*, 1,3 (enero-febrero 1954), pp. 119-124.
5. Many interviews quote Fuentes' thoughts on the Spanish language. Perhaps the most accessible is the chapter "Un nuevo lenguaje" in *La nueva novela hispanoamericana*. Mexico: Joaquín Mortiz, 1969, pp. 30-35.
6. Fuentes offers us a different view of the life of a young Mexican in Switzerland in his short story "Un alma pura."
7. Fuentes, *Los días enmascarados*. Mexico: Los Presentes, 1954, p. 10.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
11. Emmanuel Carballo, *El cuento mexicano del Siglo XX*. Mexico: Empresas Editoriales, 1964, p. 74.
12. Carballo, "Conversación con Carlos Fuentes," "La Cultura en México" in *Siempre*, Num. 465 (23 mayo 1962), p. V.
13. Luis Harss, "Carlos Fuentes. Mexico's Metropolitan Eye," *New Mexico Quarterly*, XXXVI, 1 (spring 1966) p. 34. This interview later appears in the volume *Into the Mainstream*.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
15. Fuentes, *Cuerpos y ofrendas*. Madrid: Alianza, 1972.
16. See my annotated bibliography on Fuentes in the October 1970 number of *Hispania* for a detailed listing of the novel fragments.
17. Fuentes, *La región más transparente*. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1958, pp. 367-368.
18. See for example his letter to Fuentes on the publication of *La región . . .* which is included in the above-mentioned *Obras completas*.
19. José Emilio Pacheco, *El principio del placer*. Mexico: Joaquín Mortiz, 1972, pp. 107-108.
20. We hesitate to use the word "friends" here. Elena Garro was acquainted with Fuentes through her husband Paz. But her devastating review of *La región . . .* quickly earned her the nickname of "la garra" among Fuentes' circle.