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The Fuentes' Interviews in Fact and in Fiction

In thinking about interviews, a first question comes to mind: is the interview a literary genre? Does it have rules of composition as, let us say, a short story, a poem, or, in the terminology of journalism, a feature article? Are there any formal principles that interviews need respect, principles by which we may judge a successful performance from a less successful one? May we even assert that an interview is fact, not fiction, and that the information that the interviewer obtains must be one hundred percent reliable?

The literary critic dealing with interviews is on relatively uncharted ground. Although we practice interviewing, we may feel out of our domain, in a land already appropriated by the popular media. What is the correct attitude to assume in questioning the famous writer? Should we attempt to elicit revelation of character or only information? Should an interview be a trial of strength, an adversary relationship in the flamboyant style of Oriana Fallaci or do we restrict ourselves to the kid gloves approach of a Bill Moyers?

In fact there seem to be no ground rules for interviewing. Certain literary magazines like the *Saturday Review* seem to favor a middle course between the personal (and possible embarrassing) questions and those of a purely literary nature. The popular magazines like *Esquire* and *El* (its Mexican counterpart) naturally favor the exposé, or what Fuentes would call "the intellectual strip-tease." *The Paris Review* interviews, at the opposite extreme, allow the interviewee to cover up any inadvertent revelation by personally editing the interview.¹ If there is any formula at all for interviewing, perhaps it is the one proposed by *Time Magazine's* Thomas Griffith:

Interviews are like riding a seesaw. If a player prevails too easily, one end bangs to the ground. There should be no automatic victors—neither overbearing interviewers nor subjects too slickly practiced in evasion. The real winner is supposed to be a third party, the public.²

But for Carlos Fuentes the standard in interviewing is even higher. His own models are Plato and Cervantes. According to Fuentes, Plato and Sancho Panza conduct book length interviews with their respective teachers for the eternal benefit of readers.³ For Fuentes, therefore, the interview is synonymous with the dialogue. But it is dialogue of a highly didactic nature. It is a tool that equally serves Fuentes' purposes and our own. Fuentes informs; we learn. At rare moments we may even learn more than Fuentes intends that we should.

But by and large his interviews contain relatively little of personal revelation. As Sara Castro-Klaren points out in her analysis of interviews

with Latin American writers, the idea of warm, personal encounter with the writer is subverted by the implicit presence of the public. Literary interviews "cannot be expected to reveal anything about the true self of the interviewee; they are only another appearance of the writer's *persona*."⁴

Fuentes is a virtuoso of what Castro-Klaren calls the "friendly interview." This is one in which the initiate interviewer poses puzzling questions born of a deep study of the master's work. Here texts are generated because questioning is a prodding for the writer to continue to develop his main or obsessive ideas.⁵ A model for this type of interview could be the one by Emir Rodríguez-Monegal, first published in *Mundo Nuevo* in July of 1966 in which Monegal asserts, "La tarea principal del entrevistador fue provocar y estimular esa energía en movimiento que es Fuentes, encauzarle invisiblemente para que produjera más y mayores exploraciones dentro de su propia y auténtica sustancia."⁶

In the "friendly" interview, so popular in Latin America, conversation does not follow a formal set of questions but allows dialogue to flow and permits long interventions by the interviewer. (According to Rodríguez-Monegal, in his prologue to *El arte de narrar*, the interviewer is even permitted to make a few insignificant editorial changes.)⁷ In the Latin American interview, therefore, the partnership becomes much more nearly equal than in the *Paris Review* interviews where it is the interviewee who is allowed to elaborate a written text out of the rough oral product.⁸

Furthermore, the typical friendly interview with Fuentes need not be confined to the Spanish speaking interlocutor. Fuentes' two interviews with Bill Moyers which were televised in June and July of 1980 were in the Latin American pattern. Although not strictly literary in scope, they contained no clash of antagonistic personalities. Like Fuentes' interviews which are published in literary magazines, his televised performances are extremely smooth. According to Marie-Lise Gazarian, who also conducted several televised interviews with Fuentes in 1980, Fuentes even rejected the opportunity to examine her questions before facing the cameras.⁹ As a professional interviewee, he could be nearly certain that they would contain nothing of a personal nature, nothing with an emotional charge that might throw him off balance. Friendly interviews, whether published or televised, are perfectly suited to Fuentes' talents for expressing his ideas on art, philosophy, politics or literature. Most of Fuentes' interviews, in fact, are largely literary criticism in dialogue format.

Nevertheless, there are exceptions. When Fuentes exposes himself to questions by an anonymous public, as he did at the Simposio Carlos Fuentes at the University of South Carolina in April of 1978, the relationship cannot always be characterized as "friendly." For example, responding to a question about his own reported statement that he was "not concerned about having readers for *Terra Nostra*," he replies, "Perdóneme las bromas que hago con los entrevistadores, en primer lugar, *because they're asking for it*."¹⁰

He also has been known to treat requests for autobiographical material by outright rejection. Asked by another member of the audience at the Simposio in South Carolina to comment on some facts of his childhood that could throw light on his current literary activity, Fuentes replies, "No soy un autor autobiográfico. Tengo mucho miedo del solipsismo. Me interesa mucho más el mundo fuera de mí . . ." And he adds, "Respecto a mi biografía infantil, creo que todavía, a mi avanzada edad, no tengo bastante perspectiva ante ella. . . ." ¹¹

Again, when asked by James Fortson in the course of a 159 page interview published as a supplement to *El* if he has ever been psychoanalyzed, Fuentes replies, "¿Estás loco? Yo, mis demonios, que los tengo, los exorcizo escribiendo . . ." Furthermore he states that he will not reveal his feelings in an interview "por buena educación y buen gusto." ¹²

If we are to take Fuentes at his word, therefore, he does not provide us with biographical information of a really personal or intimate nature in his interviews for three reasons: he is restrained by the dictates of a proper education, by modesty and finally by self-ignorance. Thus most interviews with Fuentes, unlike those with Mailer, Styron, Burroughs or in the field of Hispanic writers, those with Borges, Neruda or Cortázar ¹³ tell us relatively little about the man. Although they may provide the public with insights about his personality, the main value of Fuentes' interviews lies in their contribution to literary criticism of his work.

And yet Fuentes has serious reservations about his interviews as literary criticism. In commenting upon Jonathan Tittler's remark that the reader has to be instructed in how to read his works, Fuentes makes an implicit comparison between himself and Velasquez, Antonioni and Fellini to whom the public grants the right of explanation in a way that is begrudged writers. He laments that "this problem of language is overly explained; you run the risk of killing yourself . . ." And he adds that he does not like to talk too much about language. ¹⁴ In another interview with Regina Janes he remarks, "my books must speak for themselves. I can't be always explaining this and that." ¹⁵

The Janes' interview also reveals some of the other pitfalls of the interview from the writer's viewpoint. He states that talking about a new project is dangerous in that "if I said anything, I would never write it." He is afraid of talking himself out, a fear he shares with García-Márquez. This is one of the reasons he tells Ms. Janes that he will give no more interviews. ¹⁶ Yet Fuentes is as ambivalent about interviews as he is about almost everything. A short time later he tells Jonathan Tittler that "writing is such a solitary occupation one has a yearning to talk sometimes. So I just try to be choosy about my interviews, that's all." ¹⁷

The interviews, of course, will go on. According to Daniel DeGuzman, Fuentes is a self-confessed "talking machine." His biographer also implies that Fuentes must talk compulsively because he wishes to silence not the person with whom he talks but an inner accusatory voice. ¹⁸ However, this interpretation is DeGuzman's application of the psychoanalytical

theories of Dr. Edmund Bergler. It is not a confession elicited from Fuentes in an interview.

But the fact is that DeGuzman accurately observes Fuentes' compulsion to explain, to express the truth as he sees it. In talking to Ms. Janes, he says, "All our history is lies, and if the writers do not speak the truth, it will not be spoken . . ." ¹⁹ With Tittler he spells it out again, "Since I was twenty-one I was driven more than anything . . . by the desire to inform in my own culture, in my own country . . ." ²⁰ He repeats substantially the same message to Bill Moyers. Fuentes as a person becomes engulfed in the flood of ideas that he generates. As interviewee, he often sounds as if he were on a pulpit or a podium.

Nevertheless, when the roles are reversed, when it is Fuentes asking the questions instead of answering them, we begin to realize that Fuentes has a Platonic vision of the possibilities in the interview form. As journalist he has orchestrated at least one stunning interview with his friend, Luis Buñuel. It appeared March 11, 1973, in the *New York Times*. The interview ends with Buñuel confessing a terrible fear of dying alone in a strange hotel, of not knowing who will close his eyes. The interview almost fades out, like a Buñuel film. Although some two thirds of the article is pure Fuentes writing as a film critic, in the interview proper he allows Buñuel to have the camera all to himself. There is not even the tell-tale "C.F." as questioner.

But in contrasting Fuentes' roles as interviewer and interviewee, I intend no criticism of those critics who have supplied us with interviews of the writer. Rather the problem, if one exists, lies with Fuentes who is so careful to project the *persona*, the writer's mask. The fact is that Buñuel, with all his antics, is a more dramatic subject than Fuentes himself in that the film-maker naturally identifies with his inner, surrealistic self. Fuentes, however, is artist enough to understand this and to fashion of the Buñuel interview a tool which serves equally for exposition and for drama.

Fuentes uses this technique of dramatic interview in many of his fictional works. We may remember how in *La región más transparente* the characters' biographies and even their innermost thoughts are often transmitted through interviews with Ixca Cienfuegos, the omnipresent confidant who probably earns his living as a journalist. Cienfuegos, in the fashion of Fallaci, tries to impell self revelation and catharsis in his interviewees. He says to Rodrigo Pola, "Dilo, dilo. Dale rienda suelta a tu retórica. ¿No es esto lo que querías: un testigo? No te aprietes. Habla."²¹ The fictional interview in which we, as readers, are merely voyeurs, serves the same purpose as the confessional with Ixca as the high priest of the forbidden, secret religion.

The framework of the interview also appears in Fuentes' more recent fiction. In *La cabeza de la hidra*, for example, an unidentified narrator relates the action up to the climactic dialogue between himself and the character who has heretofore been the protagonist. And as in so many of

Fuentes interviews, dialogue does not merely deal with facts and events but also contains generous doses of the writer's views on history, politics, metaphysics, etc. Of course countless other novelists have also used the stage of fiction for their inner dialectical meditations, splitting their schizophrenic selves into many characters. Nevertheless, the process of creating interchangeable characters, of having characters generate new characters out of their own minds is carried by Fuentes to lengths that even Borges may not have anticipated. By the conclusion of *Cambio de piel*, for example, all the characters clearly represent divergent parts of the narrator's mind. The dramatic interplay of conflicting personalities is lost. *Cambio de piel* finally sinks under the intellectual weight of its narrator, of its monologues masquerading as dialogues, of novel which is really essay.

Fuentes' later novels partially correct this tendency. Although the amateur spy of *La cabeza de la hidra* retains some puppet-like characteristics, the narrator's intellectual ideas are still Fuentes', but in the novel they have emotional roots. The drama inherent in the situation of an unconfessed homosexual attachment lies beneath the disquisitions of the super-spy. The final interview in the novel, therefore, is emotionally charged in a way not to be found in most non-fiction interviews where Fuentes himself is the subject.

Fuentes, in fact, could be indulging in a little self-criticism when he has the amateur spy say to his inquisitor (who is now about to enlighten him), "Empieza por lo que te gusta, esas grandes generalizaciones, sácate eso del cuerpo primero."²³

Is Fuentes consciously thinking about an interview when he writes these dialogues? Is it accurate to designate as "interview" a private conversation not intended for publication within the fictional framework? If we refer to one of Fuentes' factual interviews, the answer is "yes." To Jonathan Tittler he says:

Many great novels are, in the final analysis, a form of the interview. . . in every novel there are several voices, there is an interview, a dialogue going on. I think Sancho Panza is interviewing Don Quijote throughout the novel. And Don Quijote, from his loftiness, is also interviewing Sancho Panza and hearing the popular voice. . . All novels are a questioning of the world and a questioning of history. In this they are interviews also.²⁴

In short, the interview for Fuentes is equally a dialogue between fictional characters or a dialogue between Fuentes and a friend. He uses the term in its widest possible meaning of face-to-face encounter. Fuentes' gregarious nature is at least one of the reasons why he can no more stop giving interviews than he can avoid processing information in his fiction through the form of dialogue. For example, although *La cabeza de la hidra* is supposed to be a novel of pure action, a spy thriller, the action is presented as having already taken place; it is action that can be blended with dialogue and metaphysical analysis.

However, dialogue in Fuentes' fiction is not always heavy and intellectual. He still has a keen ear for popular speech as several of the vignettes in *Agua Quemada* amply demonstrate. "El Día de las Madres," for example, is also a masterpiece of the interview as revelation or catharsis. The entire story builds up to the climactic moment when the father can unburden himself to his son, justify himself, explaining his relationship to his own father and to his dead wife.

Fuentes' fictional interviews, therefore, exude a sense of drama and tension that we will not find in the majority of his interviews with critics. But with or without drama, these interviews are valuable to the reader because of the clues that they furnish to the mysteries in his fictional works. As long as Fuentes continues to live and to write experimental fiction, there is no way he can be spared the role of exegete of his own texts, whether he wishes this role or not. For Fuentes, as for other members of the "Boom" generation, the interview form is the natural vehicle to bridge the gap between the writer's unconscious or metaphysical desires translated into fiction and the reader's often anguished attempts to trace pattern and meaning.

The need for some guide in the jungle of surrealist literature may help to explain the current popularity of the interview, particularly in Latin America. And just as the new mythically inspired works of fiction break with the old concepts of linear time and of restricted space in their creation of divisible characters who move in a sea of limitless, circular time, so the Latin American style interview must also be free to meander, to be spontaneous and even to tap the unconscious. The interviewer's enhanced importance in these dialogues (as explained by Rodríguez-Monegal) may be a reflection of his growing importance as a bridge between writer and the general reading public.

The writer of mythical fiction recognizes that he has no monopoly over his subject matter. He in fact invites the reader to participate in the creative process. And since the critic is no more than a glorified reader, he eagerly avails himself of the invitation. The interview, therefore, provides the setting for this new symbiotic relationship in which the critic's role is not only analytical but also creative. Between them, author and critic can generate new ideas or at least collaborate to explain old ones.

In the "friendly" interview, therefore, the roles of author and critic are no longer clearly defined. Fuentes in many of his interviews acts as co-critic rather than master, and the work of literary analysis becomes a joint endeavor. It is this joint discovery of a work of art that constitutes the drama or excitement of the "friendly" interview. It is a drama inherent in the process of creation. Since Fuentes has said, "I do not create my novels; they create me."²⁵ does it not also follow that they create his critics? (After repeated exposure to Fuentes' writing do we all not exhibit a tendency to Fuentification?) In the presence of the work of art both writer and critic tap each other's enhanced creativity. In fact it almost seems as if it is not the writer who is being interviewed but the novel itself.

And if one novel creates Fuentes, who in turn writes another novel, is not each novel the child of its predecessor? Thus to understand *Las buenas conciencias* we should interview *La región más transparente* (of course, in the presence of Fuentes). And to understand *Aura* or *Artemio Cruz*, the twins of 1962, we should have to interview *Las buenas conciencias*.

To a certain extent this is exactly what literary criticism of Fuentes has become, interviews with his previous novels. But how do we explain such disparate twins as *Aura* and *Artemio Cruz*? Once Fuentes is born again out of his novel, does he not add something of himself to the succeeding work of fiction? If he did not, each novel would be the child of the very first and not merely carry its genes. There would be no generations in his novelesque geneology.

Fuentes and his vital experiences, therefore, even according to his own scheme of creation, necessarily play a role in his literary production. For this reason the "friendly" interview with a single focus on the writer's work leaves a gap in our understanding. It is not out of prurient curiosity that we also need to know something about Fuentes, the man. This privileged information can occasionally be ferreted out by recourse to the words of his fictional characters. But in concentrated form it also can be found in the interview with James Fortson.

Although conducted as a rambling conversation between two friends, this interview is certainly not "friendly" in the context of Castro Klarén. Fortson badgers Fuentes, complains about the one thousand dollar fee that Fuentes has charged for this intrusion upon his time and repeats rumors about Fuentes' love life. He questions him about drugs, alcohol, politics, his past Don Juanesque role-playing, his current relationship with his wife, Silvia. He even tries to buy the Buñuel article from him at a bargain price. And for hour after hour Fuentes with amazingly good humor obliges by explaining and defending himself.

In his prologue to the work, Gustavo Sainz describes it as "un ratrato impresionante, fiel, inolvidable y satánico" and concludes by saying it includes "una cantidad superior a cualquier otro documento avalado por Carlos Fuentes, noticias dictadas desde la primera línea- en el frente- de su interioridad, sorprendentes noticias de él mismo, una inmersión en su masvida."⁹

It is the Fortson interview that also confirms our hypothesis that Fuentes the man and Fuentes the writer are mutually interactive. Discussing "ciertas experiencias amorosas," he says, "Una vez pasadas. . . en todo caso las puedes trasponer literariamente, que es lo que me interesa a mí. . . Allí (en la literatura) estoy diciendo lo que todo esto significó para mí. . ." (64) But he emphasizes that it is only his old, spent self that enters into fiction. Still talking about his romantic experiences, he says, ". . . esas cosas, mientras las vives, no puedes contarlas, porque las destruyes verbalmente; no tiene sentido cambiar la realidad por las palabras en estos casos, ¿verdad?" (64)

In short what we learn from Fuentes' interviews is that the writer as a man enters his novels only as history, as the ghost of his own past. Yet we realize that once Fuentes is inside his literary work, he is a ghost who breathes life into what otherwise would be disembodied ideas. The greater the role he permits himself, the more he is willing to reveal, the more convincing his novels become.

But the metaphysical content of his novels is apparently self-generating. That is, the ideas seem to reach out to shape Fuentes, his critics and his interviewers. They are the hungry ghosts of the present, which is an eternal present. They are the unseen participants in the "friendly" interview, whispering to Fuentes and to his interlocutors simultaneously. His novels are a battlefield between two ghosts, the ghost of himself and the ghost of archetypal ideas. But the "friendly" interview banishes the ghost of Fuentes. Archetypal ideas interrogate each other through the lips of writer and critic. There is equality of relationship in the "friendly" interview, but it is often an equality devoid of human content; rather it becomes a dialectic of ideas.

For the theoretically minded, such interviews are seductive in the extreme, seductive to conduct and fascinating to read. But for the fuller understanding of Fuentes they are not enough. We need the Fortson interview to supplement them. And we also need to listen to the interviews in Fuentes' fiction.

NOTES

1. Wilfred Sheed, *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, ed. George Plimpton (New York: Viking Press, 1974), IV, xiv.
2. Thomas Griffith, "Interviews, Soft or Savage," *Time*, March 30, 1981, p. 47.
3. Jonathan Tittler, "Carlos Fuentes," *Diacritics*, September, 1980, p. 46.
4. Sara Castro-Klarén, "Interviewing and Literary Criticism," *Ideologies and Literature*, I, no. 3 (May-June, 1977), 70.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
6. Emir Rodríguez-Monegal, "Situación del escritor en América Latina," *Mundo Nuevo*, no. 1 (July, 1966), 5.
7. Rodríguez-Monegal, *El arte de narrar* (Caracas: Monte Avila, 1968), p. 9.
8. Sheed, *Writers at Work*, xiv.
9. Marie-Lisa Gazarian supplied this information in a telephone conversation.
10. Isaac Jack Levy, et al. *Simposio Carlos Fuentes, Actas*. (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1978), p. 216.
11. *Ibid.* p. 219.
12. James R. Fortson, *Perspectivas mexicanas desde París: Un diálogo con Carlos Fuentes* (México: Corporación Editorial, 1973), supplement to *El*, p. 78.
13. A typical interview with Styron appears in the *Saturday Review*, September, 1980; another with Mailer can be found in the same magazine, January, 1981. Burroughs appears in *Writers at Work: the Paris Review Interviews*. Borges has given book-length interviews, as for example Richard Burgin's *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* (New York, 1968). For other interviews see Rita Guibert's *Seven voices* (New York; Knopf, 1973).
14. Tittler, *Diacritics*, September 1980, p. 56.

15. Regina Janes, "No More Interviews," *Salmagundi* 43 (winter, 1979): 94.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Tittler, *Op. cit.* p. 46.
18. Daniel DeGuzman, *Carlos Fuentes* (New York: Twayne, 1972) p. 139.
19. Janes, *Op. cit.* p. 91.
20. Tittler, *Op. cit.* p. 47.
21. Carlos Fuentes, *La región más transparente, Obras Completas* (México: Aguilar, 1974), I, 200.
22. If we are to judge by Fuentes' words, he would regard this "rooting" of character either as an error of understanding on my part or as a failure on his own. In his interview with Tittler he says:
 I tried to write this novel based on characters who are nothing but their names and actions which are nothing but verbs . . . I think that is the fashion that both formally and intrinsically best depicts the world to which I am trying to give reality . . ." p. 54.
 (Could it be that Fuentes, the novelist, has bested Fuentes, the intellectual?)
23. Carlos Fuentes, *La cabeza de la hidra* (Barcelona: Librería Editorial Argos, S. A. 1978), p. 225.
24. Tittler, *Op cit.* p. 46.
25. *Bill Moyers' Journal*, (New York, N.Y.: WNET Thirteen, Library #M-46, Show #520), p. 14. (The air date here is June 19, 1980.)