

## ***Pedro Páramo*: Juan Rulfo on Persistence and Transition**

Juan Rulfo is probably the most important Latin American writer that you have never heard of. Not that he is unknown in the region, still less in his native Mexico—far from it. But further afield he has not achieved the visibility of authors such as Gabriel García Márquez or Mario Vargas Llosa, Jorge Luis Borges or Roberto Bolaño, or even Isabel Allende or Paulo Coelho. Yet many of these more renowned figures point to Rulfo as an influence: García Márquez in particular repeatedly acknowledged his debt to the Mexican, claiming that it was “knowing Juan Rulfo’s work [that] gave me the way forward that I was seeking for my own books. I’m always coming back to it and reading it all over again and I’m always finding myself once more the innocent victim of the same astonishment as when I read it for the first time” (“Juan Rulfo en 10 reflexiones”). Indeed, such is Rulfo’s significance to subsequent generations of writers that, if he is known at all, it is often simply as their precursor, rather than in his own right.

Perhaps one reason why Rulfo’s star did not rise further with the phenomenal success of the Latin American “Boom” of the 1960s and 1970s is that, for all his importance in laying the groundwork for it, he does not fit comfortably within the framework later established for what Latin American literature “should” look like. Rulfo’s writing is less flamboyant, less excessive, more muted than many of the texts that followed his. His output was slim: during his lifetime he published just one short novel, *Pedro Páramo* (1955; another, equally brief, *El gallo de oro* or *The Golden Cockerel*, was published posthumously in 1980) and a collection of short stories, *El llano en llamas* (1953, variously translated as *The Burning Plain* or *The Plain in Flames*). They depict rural Mexico in the aftermath of the Revolution, weighed down by a past that is rapidly becoming history but with no obvious future in sight. They describe an uncertain transition without clear resolution—in the words of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, a time at which “the old is dying and the new cannot be born” (*Prison Notebooks* 33). And perhaps Rulfo, too, is a writer of transition or interregnum, which is both why he is not better known and why it is worth returning to him. For he outlines a moment at which things could still have turned out otherwise.

### *1. Life, Death, and what lies In Between*

*Pedro Páramo* is a story driven by ghosts and spectres. It opens as a man called Juan Preciado (though his name is not given at first), travels to the remote village of Comala

in the wake of his mother's death. One of her last wishes was that her son should search for his father, "a certain Pedro Páramo," who she tells him is living there. "Make him pay for the way he forgot us," she urges (1). And so, reluctantly, he goes. But as he approaches the village, the place hardly seems to match his mother's description: she had spoken of a "beautiful view," a "green plain," and a collection of "white houses" that at night are "all lighted up" (2); he finds an abandoned settlement that is scorching hot and so deserted it seems dead. A man herding donkeys whom he meets on the road tells him that "nobody lives there any more." As for the object of his search: "Pedro Páramo died a long time ago" (5). Nonetheless, Preciado proceeds onwards, down into Comala, "past the empty houses with their broken doors and their weeds" (5). There are at least some slight signs of life: he sees "a woman wrapped up in a rebozo" and although at first "she disappeared as though she didn't even exist," she then returns and directs him to the house of Doña Eduvigis, who the donkey-herder had said might be able to offer a place to stay for a while.

Strangely enough, Doña Eduvigis seems to be expecting the newcomer: she explains that his mother had told her that her son would be coming. "My mother. . . my mother is dead," Preciado replies. "Oh, then," responds Eduvigis. "that's why her voice sounded so weak. [. . .] Now I understand" (8). What is more, his host tells him, the man he met on the road to Comala was also dead. "Didn't he tell you?" she asks (14). Here, the distance between death and life is apparently minimal, almost indiscernible. Are *all* the people that Juan Preciado is meeting really ghosts? There is even a ghostly horse, Soon enough, he too dies—"It was the voices that killed me," he reports (56)—but his story hardly stops there. In the pages that follow, he carries on a conversation with another lost soul, a woman named Dorotea, beside whom he finds himself buried. Comala is the site of a permanent afterlife, of tales that continue to be told long after their tellers are dead (but not gone).

In fact, it is not always clear whether the characters we meet as we read are dead or alive. It can be hard to tell whether the figures populating Comala are survivors barely clinging on to life among the ruins, or ghosts who cannot seem to tear themselves away. But what was your experience? Did you find it confusing? And what do you think the text is telling us about life, death, and the relationship between them? Write down some ideas in your notebook. While you do that, I'll have a hot chocolate, but I'll be right back.

### Drinks Pairing: Hot Chocolate

There is not all that much eating or drinking in *Pedro Páramo*. The *patrón*, Páramo, determines that the town of Comala will starve, and although its inhabitants linger on to rebuke him from their graves, the dead here can speak but they still do not eat. As for the living, they have barely the resources to toast those who are dying all around them: the man we eventually discover kills Páramo does so after spending his final few centavos on a “pint of alcohol” after his wife dies (118). Among the few who are provided for are the revolutionaries who pass through town and are bought off by Páramo, who gives them money and loans them reinforcements, after first feeding them tortillas and beans and chocolate to drink. Chocolate itself was a pre-Columbian delicacy in Central America and what is now Mexico—it was unknown to Europeans before the conquest of the Americas, and the word “chocolate” is derived from the indigenous language, Nahuatl. It was consumed, in liquid (and unsweetened) form by both the Maya and the Aztecs, sometimes for ceremonial purposes. Among the Aztecs, it was highly prized, and cocoa beans could be used as currency for other transactions. It was also associated with human sacrifice and violence—drinking it was compared to drinking human blood—and so its image was far from that of the homely nightcap with which we associate hot chocolate now. No wonder the warriors drink it in Rulfo’s novel.

Perhaps what is at first sight most perplexing about *Pedro Páramo* is the fact that what might otherwise confuse the reader seems to occasion no great concern among the characters themselves: they mostly take it in their stride that they could be talking to ghosts, or even be ghosts themselves. And in so far as the narrative continues on regardless, we may find ourselves turning back a paragraph or page or two, seeking to ascertain what really just happened. Here we can see the germ of what will later be termed magic realism: the way in which extraordinary happenings are narrated as though they were entirely everyday. Indeed, we will find in García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* characters who either apparently return from the dead, picking up where they left off without batting much of an eyelid, or who carry on a dialogue with the dead, or who live in such seclusion that they might as well be dead long before their life comes to an end. Ultimately, the reader just has to go with the flow: the point in part

is to recalibrate our expectations, so that we, too, accept that (for narrative purposes at least) not everything requires or merits further comment or justification.

In Rulfo's portrayal, the boundary between death and life is porous and far from final—although the dead remain dead, they inherit many characteristics from the living, while the living are surrounded by both echoes and anticipations of their own mortality. We might say that this is a book about death, but it is as much also a book about life, about the ways in which the living struggle and succeed in persevering even beyond the end of their “natural” lifespan. Which is not to say that death is somehow unimportant or unmarked in the novel. Indeed, in the parallel narrative that emerges between the fragments of Juan Preciado's story, we learn why things are as they are, and the village is so different from his mother's recollection: it was precisely because the villagers did not mark, or did not mark with sufficient respect, the death of his wife, Susana, that Pedro Páramo turned against them and swore his revenge. They take the ringing of the church bells as prompt for a party such that:

Susana San Juan was buried in the graveyard, but hardly anyone in Comala even knew about it. Because of the fiesta. The cockfights and the music. [. . .] Pedro Páramo wouldn't speak, wouldn't leave his room. He swore he'd get revenge on Comala:

“I'll fold my arms and Comala will starve to death.”

And that was what he did. (115)

Insufficiently attentive, Comala's inhabitants are to be taught the importance of the transition between death and life, but as a result the village is caught in permanent transition, endless mourning for which the dead cannot fully die, while the living can no longer fully live. So the difficulty in telling the two apart is not mere narrative whimsy, let alone some kind of peculiarity inherent to the Mexican people, but rather is determined by a particular history, a histrionics of power that feels itself spurned and sets out to ensure that its presence should never again be forgotten.



Cemetery in Yucatán, Mexico

## 2. *The Shadow of the Cacique*

*Pedro Páramo* is then also about the afterlife of power. The book begins and ends with an assertion of the chieftain's death. Pedro Páramo is dead, and there is nobody come to replace him, but he still gives his name to the book and ultimately it is his story, which emerges in fits and starts between the fragments of Preciado's own tale, that comes to dominate the narrative such that the encounter between father and son that originally motivates the plot never comes to fruition. Preciado's story is cut short, never reaches its conclusion. Páramo's stubborn will still shapes the entire landscape, both physical and social. There is no getting away from him, as though this were his revenge for the fact that the one thing he wanted in life—Susana, the girl of his dreams from his youth onwards—eluded him, however much he tracked her down and made her his wife, even killed her father (or had him killed) to ensure there would be no obstacle to come between them. But Susana is wrapped up in visions and hallucinations, memories and dreams, “as if something were destroying her from within” (93). She escapes him, tragically for him but also for her, obsessed with her first husband, Florencio, now dead, and imagining

she might be able to “give [her]self up to the sea. . .” (94). Mortified, Pedro Páramo is determined that nobody else will now evade the consequences of his displeasure. His long shadow lies across the barren land that Preciado finds has replaced his mother’s memories of Comala.

But if the book can be read, from one perspective, as a delineation of the hold a local *cacique* or regional strongman may have on a Mexican village, and so more generally (allegorically, as the novel’s subtitle, “A Novel of Mexico” suggests) of the hold that generations of such figures have, and continue perhaps to have, on both the imaginations and the everyday circumstances of Mexicans and even Latin Americans as a whole, it can also signal the frustrated powerlessness of their powers. It points, in other words, to alternatives that are still struggling to be born.

It is not just that Páramo is responding to his failure to win Susana in any meaningful sense, or to the village’s blithe disregard of his mourning that failure—to the failure, in other words, of any hope for hegemony, for rule by consent as much by violence. At the novel’s conclusion, fatally wounded but determined to deny the fact, to act as though nothing had happened (“pleading within but not speaking a single word”), he is, quite literally, petrified: turned to stone and full of fear; “He struck a feeble blow against the ground and then crumbled to pieces as if he were a heap of stones.” Why is he afraid? He is seized by ominous dread because he knows that his (drunken, almost inadvertent) killer, Abundio, who turns out to be the same man as the donkey herder Preciado meets at the novel’s very outset, “will be back here in a very little while with his bloody hands, to keep begging for the help I wouldn’t give him. And I can’t lift up my hands to cover my eyes and not see him.” Worse still: “I’ll have to listen to him until his voice fades away with the daylight. Until his voice dies out” (123). In short, Pedro Páramo anticipates being haunted by Abundio even after his own death, in the interminable twilight as day refuses to cede entirely to night, and life refuses to admit its final extinction.

Who haunts whom in *Pedro Páramo*? Who has most to fear from ghosts, especially if we think of them as much as ghosts of the future as ghosts of the past, along the lines of Marx and Engels’s famous dictum that “a spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of communism” (“Manifesto of the Communist Party”)? Here, the signs and impact of the sovereign, the legacy of a bitter past, are everywhere to be seen. But he is haunted by murmurs, voices, that never entirely go away. And Juan Preciado, come to Comala

looking for his wayward father, finds instead a sort of community among the dead that refuse or, perhaps, simply do not know how to die, holding on to their memories and chatting among themselves. In the words of Dorotea, the town beggar who most people think is crazy and who ends up being Preciado's unlikely bedfellow in the tomb: "For me, Juan Preciado, Heaven is right here where I am" (64). There is a kind of equality in their common death, and death is after all what we all have in common. Perhaps, Rulfo may be suggesting, it is this commonality that could be the basis for whatever new may emerge from the sovereign's demise.

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Song: "Ghosts" (Japan)