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

with Jon Beasley-Murray

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Juan Rulfo is probably the most important Latin American writer that you have never heard of.

“Knowing Juan Rulfo’s work 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.” (García Márquez)

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.


For all Rulfo's importance in laying the groundwork for the Bpp,, he does not fit comfortably within the framework that it 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 books 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.

“The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born: in this interregnum, morbid phenomena of the most varied kind come to pass.” (Antonio Gramsci)

Rulfo outlines a moment at which things could still have turned out otherwise.



**LIFE, DEATH,
AND WHAT LIES
IN BETWEEN**

Pedro Páramo is a story driven by
ghosts and spectres.

“Make him pay for the way he forgot us.” (1)

“There’s a beautiful view when you get to Los Colimotes. You’ll see a green plain. . . . It’s yellow when the corn is ripe. You can see Comala from there. The houses are all white, and at night it’s all lighted up.” (2)

“But what about the village? It looks deserted.’

‘That isn’t how it looks it is. Nobody lives there any more.’

“But what about the village? It looks deserted.’

‘That isn’t how it looks it is. Nobody lives there any more.’

‘And Pedro Páramo?’

‘Pedro Páramo died a long time ago.’” (5)

“When I was passing a corner I saw a woman wrapped up in a rebozo, but she disappeared as if she didn’t even exist.” (5)

““My mother. . . my mother is dead.’
‘Oh, then, that’s why her voice sounded so
weak. As if she were a long way away.
Now I understand.”” (8)

The distance between death and life is apparently minimal, almost indiscernible.

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Are *all* the people that Juan Preciado is meeting really ghosts?

Comala is the site of a permanent afterlife,
of tales that continue to be told long after
their tellers are dead (but not gone).

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.

What was your experience? Did you find the book confusing? What do you think the text is telling us about life, death, and the relationship between them?

A photograph of a meal consisting of a bowl of soup and three bread rolls. The soup is in a brown ceramic bowl with a dark floral pattern, sitting on a white plate with a brown border. The bread rolls are golden-brown; one is plain, and two are topped with sesame seeds. The background is a green textured surface with a yellow horizontal line.

What was your experience? Did you find the book confusing? What do you think the text is telling us about life, death, and the relationship between them?

What might otherwise confuse the reader
seems to occasion no great concern
among the characters themselves.

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They mostly take it in their stride that they could be talking to ghosts, or even be ghosts themselves.

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.

Ultimately, the reader just has to go with the flow: the point is to recalibrate our expectations, so that we, too, accept that not everything requires or merits further comment or justification.

The boundary between death and life
is porous and far from final.

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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.

This 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.

“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.” (115)

“Pedro Páramo wouldn’t speak,
wouldn’t leave his room. He swore
he’d get revenge on Comala:

“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)

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.



THE SHADOW OF THE CACIQUE

Pedro Páramo is also about
the afterlife of power.

Preciado's story is cut short, never reaches its conclusion.

Preciado's story is cut short, never reaches its conclusion.

Páramo's stubborn will still shapes the entire landscape, both physical and social.

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.

The book can be read as a delineation of the hold a local cacique may have on a Mexican village, and so more generally of the hold that generations of such figures have on both the imaginations and the everyday circumstances of Latin Americans as a whole.

But it can also signal the frustrated
powerlessness of their powers.

But it can also signal the frustrated
powerlessness of their powers.

It points to alternatives
that are still struggling to be born!

“He struck a feeble blow against the ground
and then crumbled to pieces as if he were
a heap of stones.” (123)

“I know Abundio 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. I’ll have to listen to him until his voice fades away with the daylight. Until his voice dies out.” (122-23)

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?

“A spectre is haunting Europe—
the spectre of communism.”
(Karl Marx and Frederick Engels)

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.


Juan Preciado finds a community among the dead that refuse or simply do not know how to die, holding on to their memories and chatting among themselves.

“For me, Juan Preciado, Heaven is
right here where I am.” (64)

There is an equality in their common death,
and death is after all what we all
have in common.

There is an equality in their common death,
and death is after all what we all
have in common.

Perhaps it is this commonality that could be
the basis for whatever new may emerge
from the sovereign's demise.



MUSIC

Fósforo,
“Cochabamba”



PRODUCTION

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