

Novel and social change.

Analysis of a decade

*«The written novel is a social fact and the writer,
Whatever he does, is compromised».*

Jean Paul Sartre

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By way of an introduction

With the triumph of the Cuban Revolution on January 1st. 1959, a new era is opened that, at the same time, offers new opportunities and transformations in the field of culture, it's not exempt of contradictions.

Culture is an active phenomenon and revolutions are too, because their changes and rhythms are the mark of the moment and the cultural policies that are applied leave their clear imprint in the cultural development of revolutions.

Very early, the Cuban Revolution made clear its cultural policy. In the meeting held at the "Jose Marti" National Library, as a closing of the meeting among Cuban intellectuals and Commander Fidel Castro, the basic principles of the new cultural policy were established. This document, known as "Words to Cuban intellectuals" has kept its validity up to our days, precisely because it takes into account that active character of the culture we were talking about.

It is beyond doubt that creative climate that characterizes the decade of the 60's, is marked by this document and that other congresses, events, etc., haven't modified, in essence, the foundational statements for Cuban culture that are in it.

Armando Hart referring to the application of the cultural policy of the Revolution says:

I don't doubt that we have made mistakes in the application of the cultural policy, although, at the same time, I don't believe that they have been of essence; If we had made any strategic mistake, we wouldn't have the cultural development that we now have¹.

1. The novel

The novel, within the evolution process of Cuban literature, is a late result.

In the 17th Century already, the poem Espejo de Paciencia and the sonnets that accompanied it were proof of the birth to what has been known as the first manifestation of conscience of the Cuban Creole people, but it is not until the end of the first half of the 19th Century that the so called "Novels of Slavery" appear. I prefer to call them "Novels with slavery theme", because this expresses in a better way their content and the desire of the authors, because if the theme is about the slavery social problem, only one of them, Anselmo Suarez Romero, is the voice of a slave, the others are, mostly, slave owners. It doesn't minimize the importance and impact of the treatment of the theme inside the Cuban proslavery society of mid 19th Century.

Although the late arrival to the cultural happening, it is precisely in this genre where we find the most complete of the Cuban chores. The Cuban narrative itself, which

fulfills an analytical and social function, it reveals the complex world of relations that it created. Enough examples are the romantic novels about the slavery theme themselves mentioned before, *Cecilia Valdes* and *Mi tío el empleado*, important legacy to the understanding of our cultural being. From then on, it has continued being a faithful exponent of the national happening. Lucrecia Artalejo in her book *The mask and the cashew (The Cuban national identity)*,² states in regards to this:

The works of these historians³ deal with the great events of Cuban history without entering as literature does, in the most intimate worries that those events created or in the feelings of the community that experimented them. It is narrative [...] what shows the intimate repercussion of those great events in the common man [...] history and literature contribute in the definition of the Cuban national identity.⁴

The change of century and the irruption of the Republic, instead of meaning the achievements of the utopias of the founding fathers, meant not only the frustration of the biggest longings for which Cubans had fought for more than thirty years, but also a new reality in the political and individual aspects. In the first republican decades the writer was found facing two situations that distinguish them: the lack of perspectives before the national reality and the absence of new forms capable of expressing the historical moment that the nation is living.

The second decade of the 20th Century brings renovation currents inside a confrontation panorama and change desire in the political and social aspects. The airs of the vanguards are expressed in a plurality of expressions that go from “pure poetry” to the afro-Cuban and the militant compromise. It’s a convergence moment where the artistic vanguard is a political one too.

During the decade of the 40’s and the 50’s, social, political and economic factors that prevail on the island constitute a restraint to the achievement of a cultural speech that expresses the needs and longings of the men construct a history day by day.

2. Social change.

The decade of the 60’s

The triumph of the Cuban Revolution, more than 50 years ago, is one of the most outstanding events of our rich national history and the novel produced since 1959 is a testimony of the social and cultural activity of the Cubans at the same time expression of need of renovation of expressive ways from a new context where everything is transformed both in reality and in the individual aspect.

Alejo Carpentier, in *Tientos y diferencias* demanded a complete function of the novelistic:

[...] that [this] consists in violating constantly the shy principle of being a story led to cause “aesthetic pleasure to the readers, to become an instrument of inquiry, a way of knowledge of men and eras” – way of knowledge that goes over, in many cases, the author’s intentions [...] the novel should get further than narration, the story, it is good to say: about the novel itself, in all time, in all epoch, comprising that what Jean Paul Sartre calls “the contexts”.⁵

This “demand” from one of our highest representatives of Cuban literature is found in the decade of the 60’s where the novelist establishes a dialogue with its context. Unlike the previous decade, the sustenance of this period’s novelistic is created from the confrontation and appreciation of the new and the old, of the past and the present. But above all, the change is based on the renovating project from the social transformation that makes the author’s perspectives possible. There is an acceptance attitude toward the revolutionary experience. New relations are opened between the author and his social surrounding that become more harmonious, he feels included.

Literary production in general and narrative in special acquire a boom without precedence linked to an editorial activity that, in general terms, reaches the figure of 8 millions of copies and 600 titles a year. The novel reaches editions never seen before: between 2 000 and 10 000 copies. In the period about 55 titles are published compared to less than 30 in the previous decade. This editorial movement and

the significant edition figures are close related, among others, with the most important cultural project of the Revolution that was the National Literacy Campaign that opened the roads of knowledge to hundreds of thousands of Cubans that never before dreamed with the privilege of the delight of reading.

Some of these texts were written before the triumph of the Revolution, but most of them correspond to works produced after that date. The authors had been born, mainly in the 1930's.

Lourdes Casals in her study about the novel in Cuba between 1959 and 1967 quotes Jorge Mañach when he states that "the development of a true Cuban novelistic would be a matter of insistence, consistence and resistance"⁶, and it is precisely in this epoch where this begins to be fulfilled, because before the challenges of all kinds that the novelist came across to, they insisted on creating, breaking the presuppositions linked to representative values of a world that had remained in the past, presenting works of high aesthetic meaning and assuming the new social change without it affecting the excellence of the literary work.

Three topics rule the first part of this period:

- The testimony of the insurreccional struggle against Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship, as the case of *Bertillon 166* (1960).
- The confrontation of values between the pre-revolutionary society and the new society, expressed in novels like *La situación* (1963), by Lisandro Otero.
- The change in the individual, where the own writer is included, and his political and social compromise. *No hay problema* (1961) and *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (1965) by Edmundo Desnoes.

During those years, the novelist faces the not always solved problem of the aesthetic need of a renovating perspective and the social need of getting to a new reading public. Besides, there is his own existence finding himself

before the alternative of the legitimating of his activity before a past of which he was participant. In this regard, Lisandro Otero gives us a view from inside this moment when he states: "In the fight for destroying a world in which we were educated and for constructing a world in which we didn't have a place yet, we experienced great breach".⁷

Some critics and scholars of Cuban literature in that period have insisted in establishing two lines and trends: the so called "realistic", where there are authors as Jose Soler Puig, Edmundo Desnoes and Lisandro Otero; and the so called "experimental" where are author as Severo Sarduy and Guillermo Cabrera Infante.

The first one is associated to the novelist's "compromise" in the social change, while the second one is in the narrative structures and in the evasive attitude of the novelist before the events that take place in his environment.

But any enclosing when valuating the work of writers and artists isn't enough and implies dangers that mean absences and partial views about what we are trying to classify. The main danger in this case is in the dichotomy that is established and its absolute character.

In the Cuban novel produced after the triumph of the Revolution there are other considerations to take into account, as, among others, that the reflection of reality, of the revolutionary epoch, that spears in the works of the novelists of this first trend does not differ from the assimilation of the experiences of the vanguard, above all, from that that comes since the third republican decade and from the north American and European novelistic of the 1950's and the beginning of the 1960's; and, above all, it is necessary to consider that the author's testimonial compromise does not appear divorced at all from formal experimentation; but, on the contrary, compromising with his reality and presenting it in his work, almost always means the restating of the forms, and, thus, to experimentation.

In the same way, experimentation not necessarily means evasion in regards to the social environment of the novelist. *Tres tristes*

tigres (1964) by Guillermo Cabrera Infante, expresses the will of apprehension of a world in crisis, both social and ethical. In this work we can find the 1950's Havana as in few novels that are presented to us, at the same time that it adopts new narrative resources. *Gestos* (1963) by Severo Sarduy is inscribed, in a very personal manner, inside the search of that that is Cuban before the national situation that exists in the previous decades starting from a formal game and from new languages very influenced by the French aesthetics.

The French novel writing of the first decade of the 1960's is a complex phenomenon, full of over crossings and contradictions that flow into new ways of expression that have the seal of his epoch. *Bertillón 166* (1960), *El derrumbe* (1964), *No hay problema* (1961), *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (1965), *La situación* (1963), *Gestos* (1963) and *Tres tristes tigres* (1964) represent an and important milestone in the Cuban novel writing and they have withstood the judging of time.

The second half of the 1960's brings us an emphasis in formal experimentation. Proceedings that come from oratory, the story, poetry are included. An example of this is *Vivir en Candonga* (1966), a novel by Ezequiel Vieta and *La Odilea* (1968) (by Francisco Chofre, an excellent parody of Homer's work where the sense of humor and the imagination of the Cuban is shown.

If *La situación* (1963) by Lisandro Otero turns out to be the most outstanding novel of the fist have of the 1960's, *Los niños se despiden* (1968) by Pablo Armando Fernandez, represents the paradigm of the second have of the decade, characterized, above all, by the rescue of the continuity of the historic memory and the aesthetic of the previous decade, full of memories and nourished by myths and believes that reveal the daily life. It's the recovery of identity, an appreciation of the social project and is projection toward the future.

On the other hand, even though it is true that McCullers, Dos Passos; Hemingway, Goitzolo and Sartre are the reference of the narrative models of the first years, it's undeniable that from the second half of the 1960's, there is a turning toward models coming from the new

Latin American novel and Juan Rulfo, Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, together with Alejo Carpentier and Jose Lezama become the reference paradigms of the period. So some novels like *Presiones y Diamantes* (1967) by Virgilio Piñera, *Siempre la muerte su paso breve* (1968) by Reynaldo Gonzales; *La rebelión de los elefantes* (1968) by David Buzzi and *El mundo alucinante* (1969) by Reinaldo Arenas; novels that are characterized by presenting topics which should be given attention to in the new social context, for just mentioning a few are published.

We cannot forget, inside the novelistic panorama of the period, the publishing of two of the most important literary works of our literature: *El siglo de las luces* (1962) by Alejo Carpentier and *Paradiso* (1966) by Jose Lezama Lima, that at the same time represent the highest conceptual and artistic degree of achievement, are the expression of continuity of the renovating project the 1960's, combining an excellent exercise of experimentation and an entering in the conscience of *being a Cuban*.

The Cuban critic, Rodriguez Coronel, referring to novel production of the decade, especially to what has been produced since 1967 says:

They are eloquent demonstrations of the signals that are established with the narrative modes mobilized by the new Latin American novel and the expressive needs of the moment; besides the greatest part of them, gather topics that call for attention in the new social context. Probably there would exist neither in number nor in quality, a set like this in the national literature of the continent.⁸

One of the most important characteristics of the second half of the 1960's is the emergence of generic modalities without precedent in the Cuban novel and that appear, for the first time, in this period. *Biografía de un Cimarrón* (1966) and *Canción de Rachel* (1969) opened the testimony-novel, in agreement with the repercussion of the identity created from the reconstruction of lives of outcast people that form synthesis characters because they

summarize in themselves many men and women with the same situation.

Since 1966, with the publication of *El libro fantástico de Oaj* by Miguel Collazo the science fiction novel that gets to its best moment later in the 1980's, emerges. Its main feature is the emphasis in the ethical and social reflection that distinguishes it from similar efforts in the continent.

Finally, by the end of the decade and with large emphasis in the following decades, the detective story *Enigma para un domingo* (1968), which presents topics referring to, above all, the transformation of man and his context, the defense of the Revolution and the fight against criminal actions. This novelistic is influenced by the English and American schools, but with the characteristic that the solution to the conflict is not owing to an individual main character but to the collective action of the different factors of the revolutionary society.

Something that impacts the decade in a special way is precisely the migration phenomenon and so, it is necessary to make a brief approach to what is happening with the novel written by Cuban authors out of the nation's boundaries. But it is not until the end of the decade that novels worth of attention are published. The first years are marked by the expression of their personal experiences and subjectivities and their themes deal with, almost exclusively, homesickness and politics. They appeal to tendencies from the 1940's and the 1950's. They are, according to the critic, narrations that are too close to the facts that they document, with the eagerness of giving credibility that obstructs "imagination and creative capacity [...] at the level of structure, style and conception of characters that prove feeble".⁹

By the middle of the decade, new themes appear that are already related more directly with their experiences with the migration as the cultural clash when they try to enter in the leading society, the "sexual disorder" and drug addiction in the American society, etc.

It is not until the 1980's that what we could call "the immigration novel or the Cuban Diaspora" arrives.

The Cuban-American critic Carlos Espinosa en *Peregrino en comarca ajena* referring to these first authors defines them like this:

[...] those who signed them (the novels) were, in many cases, inexperienced and even amateur writers that approached literature in an accidental way, as the fact that later they did not insist anymore demonstrates. A promotion that was born ballasted by rush and voluntarism, and too much influenced of passionate resentment and partidism.¹⁰

We leave the summary and synthesis of the novel and the social change in the 1960's in the hands of the Cuban critic and essay writer Ambrosio Fonet who, referring to this epoch said:

Up to now History itself has contributed the conflictive center of the Cuban novelistic. The social cataclysm that was sinking the old society was providing the structural content of the novel: the main character, in conflict with the past, denied it, and recognized in this way as higher the values of the revolutionary society. But in that denial it denied a part of itself and its breach came from there. The theme of the revenge (with the past), the consciousness (of the present), and the purification of the charge of skin (for the future) has been the dominant theme, not the only one, of the Cuban novels of the 60's.¹¹

Notes

- 1 Armando Hart: *To change the rules of the game*, p. 24.
- 2 Lucrecia Artalejo: «Introduction», in *The mask and the marañón. (The Cuban national identity)*.
- 3 It refers to the work from Ramiro Guerra, Leví Marrero, Manuel Moreno Friginals, Charles Chapman, Hugs S. Thomas and Herminio Portel Vilá.
- 4 Lucrecia Artalejo: *The mask and the marañón*, p. 11.
- 5 Alejo Carpentier: *Tempts and differences*.
- 6 Lourdes Casal: «The novel in Cuba 1959-1967. An introduction», p. 186.

- ⁷ Lisandro Otero: *Laid out*.
- ⁸ Rogelio Rodríguez Coronel: «Panorama of the novel from 1959 to 1988», in *The history of the Cuban literature. The Revolution (1959-1988)*, p. 164.
- ⁹ Carlos Espinosa: «1960-1969: Between homesickness and the denunciation», p. 7.
- ¹⁰ *Ibíd*, p. 5.
- ¹¹ Ambrosio Fornet : «With regard to Sacchario», p. 184.

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