

## INTRODUCTION

Art is impotent.

—W. H. Auden in “The Real World”

El poder se funda en el texto.

—Carlos Fuentes in *Terra nostra*

Any volume on literature that bears the title *Structures of Power*, particularly in the context of Spanish America, is obliged to establish its parameters from the outset: this book is not about “literatura de compromiso” (only); neither does it seek to be geographically nor historically representative, as a glance at the list of contributions will confirm. Moreover, it does not seek to add another to the many volumes that find it perfectly acceptable to write about politics and literature, or literature and revolution, rather than restrict oneself to a discussion of literature on the purely aesthetic level.<sup>1</sup> What it does offer is a collection of essays devoted to issues of hegemony as manifested in modern Spanish American fiction. The themes of political, social, military, religious, economic, and familial power have been mainstays of Spanish American literature since the discovery, while gender, gay, and even genre issues have risen to prominence in recent years, not only in creative writing, but in critical discourse as well. Generally, critical and theoretical volumes that have been concerned with hegemony in Spanish American literature have been restricted to carefully defined perspectives, offering, for example, Marxist, feminist, or gay readings of a number of texts, or tracing the history of a particular type of socially committed literature; or they have focused on a narrow region or historical period; or they have done both.<sup>2</sup> What is sometimes lost in such discussions is an awareness of just how complex the issue of power in Spanish American society is, and more to the point, how complex it can become in its literature. The

issue of power ranges from the traditionally notorious (the conquest, slavery, *caciquismo*), through the nouveau notorious (misogyny, homophobia, “dirty little wars,” death squads), down to quite significant, but often overlooked issues of how a fictional father treats his children, or an author struggles to create literature by “exorcising” his demons, temporarily gaining the upper hand over language, or replacing the real world with a new fictional creation.<sup>3</sup>

*Structures of Power* is open to all such issues, and its contributors have made the most of this freedom. We do not assume that power in literature is necessarily ideological, but allow also that hegemony may depend on relationships of control or complicity between fictional characters, between author and reader, or even between author and text. Whether interpersonal or strictly personal, as one of our essayists points out, power is always relative, never absolute. Or, as Foucault would have it:

Power in the substantive sense, ‘*le pouvoir*, doesn’t exist . . . . The idea that there is either located at—or emanating from—a given point something which is a ‘power’ seems to me to be based on a misguided analysis, one which at all events fails to account for a considerable number of phenomena. In reality power means relations, a more-or-less organised, hierarchical, co-ordinated cluster of relations (*Power/Knowledge*, 198)

Some of our essays offer original insights into traditional questions of the relations that exist between author and country, art and politics. Some are equally concerned with the wielding of social and economic power as reflected thematically in fiction. Others explore the often subtle, yet enormous power of the struggle between the sexes, and still others the subversive nature of literary creativity itself. The essays thus range from rather traditional studies of institutional or personal ideologies, through matters of technique and literary vision, into questions of gender, into pressures brought about by institutionalized artistic expectations, into the power struggles that inevitably arise between the artist, the created work, and the reader. Their common purpose is to investigate, through the close analysis of specific fictional texts, ways in which Spanish American authors have addressed issues of hegemony, how these treatments and these issues have affected literary works for better or worse, and how, in some cases, the creative struggle entailed has itself effected literary works of the highest order.

The questions that seem to arise from the apparently contradictory quotations with which we began are these: of quite what can literature be said to be impotent?; of what does the power Fuentes sees as vested in the text consist? We see these comments as posing theoretical questions at a high level of generality, as much as culturally specific ones. Thus, while the essays that follow deal in depth with texts by Spanish American writers of our century, and the analyses evidently reflect and depend upon certain local cultural realities, they explore issues that go beyond the geographical confines of Spanish America; collectively, the essays attempt to provide a sense of the complex notion of the powers of fiction.

In "La palabra enemiga" ("The Enemy: Words"), the final chapter of his *La nueva novela hispanoamericana*, Carlos Fuentes tells how a shipment of copies of a novel was sequestered by the Argentine authorities on the grounds that it was subversive Marxist propaganda. The novel in question was Stendahl's *Le rouge et le noir*; the mere mention of red in the title had sufficed to have it banned. There is a certain irony in the fact that it was none other than Stendahl who asserted that politics in literature was as welcome as a gunshot during a concert, and perhaps, too, there is irony in the fact that Marx himself (though not all his followers) saw that many periods of great artistic development had no direct link with the general development of society. However, recognizing that words speak as loudly as actions, authoritarian régimes, whether of the right or the left, have often sought to limit free speech, suppress or control the printed word, and, more recently, the mass media. The list of hounded or silenced writers, even in the present century, is a long one.

The tradition of suppression is also long. The Spain of Columbus, a country monolithic enough in its thinking to have forced its minorities to convert to Catholicism or go into exile, plundered a new continent with crusading fervor, backed by the Inquisition: books were banned, burned, bowdlerized. The emerging countries of Latin America shook off the Spanish yoke, often only to fall prey to the north; and where revolution occurred it turned sour, became institutionalized and authoritarian, imitating the excesses of the many military dictators. Small wonder, then, that writers in Latin America have often been persecuted, forced into exile, or made to capitulate like a new generation of *convertos*. Even those writers who are treated more gently tend to see their role in much more social terms than do their counterparts to the north or in Europe; for most of them it is simply inconceivable to write exclusively for self-satisfaction, for purely literary ends. Faced with daily evidence of political

and economic abuse, with the awareness that poor masses subsist surrounding the privileged few, with the marginalization of the indigenous non-Latin Americans, peoples whose roots run deepest and who might be thought to be most deserving of the benefits their lands have to offer, many intellectuals demand that writers explicitly make propaganda for reform. Claribel Alegría, writing in reference to the role of literature in her native Nicaragua and in El Salvador, and “fully aware of the pitfalls of attempting to defend a transient political cause in what presumes to be a literary work,” nevertheless concludes that “if there be no place for ‘pure art’ and ‘pure literature’ today, then . . . so much for pure art and pure literature . . . . It matters little whether our efforts are admitted into the sacrosanct precincts of literature” (Meyer, 309, 311).

Yet, in its most unpalatable form, this attitude often smacks of the same authoritarian intolerance that those who express such views seek to undermine. Thus literary activists are able to dismiss a writer like Borges, who, with his bookish universalism, is dubbed disloyal or even an “anti-Latin Americanist”: “almost ingenuously Eurocentric, ethnocentric, phallogocentric, a vicarious militarist and imperialist contemptuous of tribal cultures and native peoples everywhere: in short, an anti-Latin Americanist ashamed, like a significant stratum of Argentinian and Uruguayan society, to share the continent with Bolivians and Paraguayans, an idealist, an ideological perpetuator of the civilization-barbarism dichotomy (your barbarism confirms my civilization), and thus a brilliant player of the double game, duplicitous as well as dualist” (Martin, 161–162). In a similar way, the voluntarily exiled writer can become outlawed by the Latin American intellectual community, despite the fact that some of the most deeply felt and powerful indictments of Latin American societies have been written by Spanish American writers living as refugees. Such was the fate that awaited virtually all of the major Cuban writers who sought refuge in Europe and the United States. Even Mario Vargas Llosa, once he began to drift noticeably to the right, was roundly condemned by the literati.

As André Gide pointed out, good sentiments tend to make for bad literature. Julio Cortázar argued that good artists do not need to fly the colors of their political commitment in their creative writings, and that, in fact, emphasis on political “correctness” may be used to try to compensate for inferior talent: “Sólo los débiles tienden a enfatizar el compromiso personal de su obra, a exaltarse compensatoriamente en el terreno donde su aptitud literaria los vuelve por un rato fuertes y sólidos

y del buen lado.” [Only the weak use their literary aptitude as compensation to make them seem strong and solid and on the right side. (Cortázar, *Vuelta*, 2, 192)]. For his part, Octavio Paz asserted that his duty as a writer was to keep his distance from the State, from political parties, from all ideologies and even from society itself (Paz, 306). No one, however, can claim immunity from the historical process: isolation is, in itself, a posture, as Manuel Maldonado Denis points out (Zavala and Rodríguez, 290). In 1964, with Franco very much in power in Spain, Juan Goytisolo spelled out the position rather uncompromisingly:

When there is no political freedom, everything is politics, and the split between writer and citizen vanishes. In this case, literature agrees to be a political weapon, or ceases to be literature and becomes an inauthentic echo of the literature of other societies situated at different levels (the proliferation of Spanish, Mexican, Portuguese or Argentine Robbe-Grilletes, following upon hosts of Faulkners and Kafkas, is a good example of what I mean) (Goytisolo, 36).<sup>4</sup>

For those writers who enjoyed a certain degree of freedom, however, including all of the major figures of the “Boom,” foreign authors provided badly needed inspiration. José Donoso’s *Historia personal del boom* provides a compelling insider’s account of the transition from parochial literature to the “Boom,” one of the most important literary phenomena of the twentieth century. Early successes in experimental narratives gave the Spanish Americans the confidence they needed to carry out even more radical experiments, to the point of questioning the very authority and identity of the author (one thinks of *Terra nostra*, *El obsceno pájaro de la noche*, *Yo el Supremo*, and, on another scale, of *Crónica de una muerte anunciada*). The dictatorial omniscience of traditional writers (an authoritarianism that in some cases may have served to mask a sense of cultural inferiority vis-à-vis the European masters) gives way to fictions that willfully undermine their own authority, shifting narrative perspective, giving conflicting versions of the “truth,” obliging the reader to be part of the creative process. Ultimately, the writer may enjoy a Godlike status, but he or she spends much time suggesting otherwise. Thus, the notion of power in literature takes on a different guise: such texts, which can at first appear to be self-servingly literary, may in fact be read as analogies addressing questions of power in a broader sense: the desire of El Señor in *Terra nostra* to become master over certain manuscripts is in fact a desire

to confirm his absolute authority: "knowledge, power and authority become inseparable" (Kerr, 80).<sup>5</sup>

How, then, is a writer concerned with aesthetic quality to confront the fact of historicity or to deal with the pressures exerted by the advocates of literature as a means towards sociopolitical reform? What of the pressures of commercial interests? Can a way be found to marry literary aims with sociopolitical ones? Can a successful writer resist the temptation to write to formula or to the demands of the marketplace? These problems are, to a greater or lesser degree, faced by all Latin American writers; few, however, have been able to reconcile their sensitivity to the need for change with the potential conflict between that need and aesthetics, most eloquently demonstrated by Julio Cortázar in his open letter to Roberto Fernández Retamar (*Ultimo Round*, 2, 265–280).

Along with many intellectuals and successful writers of the "Boom," Cortázar supported the Cuban Revolution until it became clear that it was beginning to curtail the freedom of the citizens it claimed to represent. The limits of tolerance of artistic freedom were officially defined in 1971;<sup>6</sup> in particular, the spectacle of the poet Heberto Padilla being forced publicly to recant and denounce even his wife led many intellectuals to part company with a revolution they had once enthusiastically backed. In the case of some writers, it is not altogether clear to what extent this withdrawal was independent of the undeniable fact that they were becoming very successful personally and leaving the ranks of the have-nots. In a case such as that of Vargas Llosa, at one time a Marxist and one of the most insistent advocates of the notion of the writer as rebel, the disaffection with Cuba must be seen in the context of his personal evolution towards his current stance as hero of the Peruvian haves, and a surprisingly conservative presidential candidate.<sup>7</sup> But many continued to be of the left, although recognizing the Cuban oppression. García Márquez maintained his support for Cuba, if only on the grounds that it was the lesser of two evils. Cortázar, for all his reservations over Cuba, became active in support of the Sandinistas and gave the royalties of some of his books to them. Yet, though Cortázar the polyglot wrote in a very *porteño* Spanish, his literature is in many ways amongst the least obviously Latin American of all, second only to that of Borges, who, as we have noted, was much criticized because of his "Eurocentrism." On the other hand, Vargas Llosa invariably writes of things that are palpably Peruvian. The early Vargas Llosa advanced the theory that great literature could only come about in societies in crisis. In the relative

comfort of stable and developed countries, he claimed, literature would decline into sterile formal experimentation and self-contemplation ("En torno a la nueva novela en Latinoamérica," 122–123). If that were true, one could expect wonders from a continent characterized by political upheavals and economic uncertainty. The more urbane and never uncomfortable Carlos Fuentes expressed a similar view: the historical circumstances that generated the admixture of cultures in Latin America, coupled with the inescapable horrors of everyday life there, should, at very least, make for interesting literature ("En torno a la nueva novela," *passim*). Alejo Carpentier's *real maravilloso* recognized that reality is larger than life, and that the extraordinary is somehow less so in the literature of Latin America. It becomes axiomatic that anyone who writes about Latin America, or who writes as a Latin American, whether exiled or not, cannot claim immunity from the sociopolitical realities of the continent. Some writers openly embrace this fact, others reflect it in a more subtle manner.

These realities notwithstanding, the present book goes beyond biography and the manner in which writers have used the pen to strike out against traditional institutions (social, economic, political, religious, familial) that, by their very nature, seek to curtail individual freedom, exacting a price of conformity in exchange for belonging—"Isn't disloyalty as much a writer's virtue as loyalty is the soldier's?," asks Eduardo Mallea quoting Graham Greene (97). Nor is our only concern with the Gramscian idea of the "organic" intellectual engaged with ideological change, with political movements or parties, with literature "as an active force invoking [revolutionary currents]" (Beverley and Zimmerman, 49).<sup>8</sup> Our topics thus range from examining the literature of dictatorship to the dictatorship of literature. As far as the former is concerned, García Márquez shows us in *El otoño del Patriarca*, and Roa Bastos in *Yo el Supremo*, that part of the power of an authoritarian régime is that it controls information and spreads favorable myths (stories) about itself. The antidote is literary: "Hoy . . . la palabra posible del escritor demuestra que las palabras del poder son imposibles" (Fuentes, *La nueva novela*, 88); ["Today . . . the writer's valid words prove that the words of Power are invalid" (*Literature in Revolution*, 114)]. As to what we have dubbed here the dictatorship of literature, the quasi-divine authority of the writer is the result of creating empowering literary structures; the reader, who, upon opening the book, tacitly declares his willingness to be dictated to, is somewhat like the ordinary person at the pleasure of the powerful.



In some instances, authorial ideologies are of primary concern, as, for example, when José Carlos González Boixo delves into Rulfo's critical portrayal of the abuses of "caciquismo" in rural Mexico, or when Terry J. Peavler explores the entanglement of sociopolitical, personal, and creative obsessions in the work of one of Cuba's most renowned refugees, Guillermo Cabrera Infante. On the other hand, the essays by Rosemary Geisdorfer Feal and David William Foster deal with issues of feminism, gender, and sexuality. Geisdorfer Feal demonstrates "how Valenzuela's presentation of the politics of 'wargasm' posits strategies for feminine subversion of dominant sexual, social, and political orders," while Foster's central concern in his study of Alejandra Pizarnik's *La condesa sangrienta* is her "meditation on the horror of absolute power . . . expressed in sexual terms."

Many of the essays deal with authors and works that are central to the "Boom." In "Monuments and Scribes: *El hablador* Addresses Ethnography," Sara Castro-Klarén traces what she calls the "inextricable web of the poetic and the political." Rosalía Comejo-Parriego examines García Márquez's undermining of authority in "The Delegitimizing Carnival of *El otoño del patriarca*," and Peter Standish explores the ramifications of "the managed, staged performance and the extent to which it can be read as a metaphor of a number of strata of authority" in "Magus, Masque, and the Machinations of Authority: Cortázar at Play." This last essay and several others examine the manner in which major authors have undermined or at least questioned their own authority. In "Politicizing Myth and Absence: From Macedonio Fernández to Augusto Roa Bastos," Todd S. Garth concludes that for the Paraguayan, "privileging the social dynamics—the political *presence*—of cultural creation . . . is the only viable way to protect the space of absence, of mythmaking, of cultural creation, from the presence of individual identity and the self-ish structures imposed by it." Sharon Magnarelli, in "See(k)ing Power/Framing Power in Selected Works of José Donoso," argues that "each time we think we have relocated power, found it where it did not seem to be, we discover that it is situated still elsewhere, for that power is contextual, transactional, and always unstable."

Thus, a central concern with the internal and external dimensions of literary power unifies a collection of studies which range from traditional treatments of socio-political concerns to innovative discussions of the powers of literary discourse and its ramifications in Spanish American fiction, from the mainstream to the offbeat, from Macedonio Fernández,



who died before the “Boom” even began, to some of the most prolific and important authors of the “new” novel, and on to figures who are only now gaining recognition for the significance of their contributions. Even so, we have been less concerned with coverage than with quality, and make no apology for the omission of the many writers whose works could equally well have claimed a place in a volume such as this. What brings our contributors together here is their shared passion for the subject, the keenness of their thought, and their possession of what may well be the greatest power of all, that of persuasion.

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### Notes

1. Internationally, the political turmoil of the 1960s produced many worthwhile studies, including a lengthy double issue of *TriQuarterly* in 1972, in which Noam Chomsky, Frederick Crews, Carlos Fuentes, Harry Levin, Raymond Williams, and other luminaries debated “to what extent does the study and practice of literature in a particular time relate to contingent current social and political upheaval, and, conversely, to what extent do such events (or, in fact, their absence) influence the way we *do* literature?” (4). Closer to the point, at least geographically, the famous debate involving Oscar Collazos, Julio Cortázar, and Mario Vargas Llosa, *Literatura en la revolución y revolución en la literatura*, appeared in 1970. The topic continues to be a heated one, having recently yielded, among many other works, a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* devoted to “Politics and Poetic Value” (Spring 1987) in which the editors proclaim that, “The Arnoldian notion that criticism, or even poetry, is ever disinterested is now fully discredited in American academic circles” (416), and a book entitled *Nation and Narration* (1990), which “explore[s] the Janus-faced ambivalence of language itself in the construction of the Janus-faced discourse of the nation.”

2. Obviously, studies need not limit themselves to only one or two of these concerns, as a fine new entry into the discussion, Cynthia Steele’s *Politics, Gender, and the Mexican Novel, 1968–1988: Beyond the Pyramid*, illustrates.

3. Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa has made this phrase famous. He sees the art of the novelist as a process of “exorcism” in which the author replaces the real world with one he or she creates. See especially *García Márquez: Historia de un deicidio*.

4. For a recent account of attitudes among Spanish American writers, see Enrico Mario Santí: "Politics, Literature and the Intellectual in Latin America," *Salmagundi*, 82-83, 1989, 92-110.

5. Lucille Kerr bases her lengthy disussion of Fuentes' novel on Foucault's view of power "not as property but as a strategy . . . its effects of domination [being] attributed not to 'appropriation' but to dispositions, manoeuvres, tactics, techniques, functionings" (Foucault, 94).

6. Regarding the attitudes of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, of which he was a member, Sergio Ramírez writes:

I always feel like a writer on loan to the revolution. And I think that its a much more serious road than that of the politician on loan to literature; they've never made very good writers . . . . We're going to have a new culture here . . . with lots of creative freedom, without dogmatism, without sectarianism, encouraging freedom which is the very dynamic of the revolution. This is something that seems very important to me, that no one sits down to write recipes about what literature should be, what sculpture should be, what painting should be. Here we simply try to provide the possibilities for creativity (Randall, 39-40).

7. The subsequent dismissal by Vargas Llosa of many of his fellow Latin American writers ("la mayoría baila aún obedeciendo a reflejos condicionados") as corrupt, citing García Márquez, Cortázar and Benedetti among them, provoked an indignant yet generous reply from the latter in "Ni corruptos ni contentos" (*El desexilio y otras conjeturas*, 153-156.)

8. Their argument that "literature has been in Central America not only a means of politics but also a model for it" (xiii) may well be valid for all of Latin America.

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