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 Patricia Burg, Executive Secretary  
 Institute for the Study of Ideologies and Literature  
 4 Folwell Hall  
 9 Pleasant Street S.E.  
 University of Minnesota  
 Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455

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# I&L

## IDEOLOGIES & LITERATURE

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## EDITORIAL

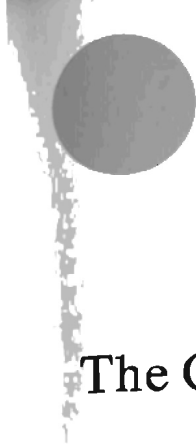
The political and socioeconomic realities which have long obtained in Spain and Portugal, in the Americas, and in Lusophone Africa oblige us, as Hispanists and Luso-Brazilianists, to develop a greater historical consciousness in our critical approach to the literatures of these areas. Specialists and teachers have often refrained from coming to terms with cultural and political ideologies in a sociohistorical context even though the literary works themselves are products of these conditions. Thus, a reading that does not question a work's ideological consensus neglects an important aspect of art's confrontation with human experience.

No serious student of literature would deny the important contributions of those critics and scholars who have insisted on the primacy of formalistic approaches whose principal aim is to reveal aesthetic structures. The problem is that these structures have been abstracted from social relations. During the 1920s and 1930s explication-oriented criticism began to raise the analysis and teaching of literature to new levels of respectability. Indeed, formalism's success in bestowing literature with autonomy resulted in excesses as explication became the end-all of criticism. To quote from Geoffrey H. Hartman's *Beyond Formalism*, "the domination of exegesis is great: she is our whore of Babylon sitting robed in academic black on the great dragon of criticism, and dispensing repetitive and soporific balm from her pedantic cup.... Explication is the end of criticism only if we succumb to what Trotsky called the formalist 'superstition of the word'."

The polemic begun before World War II on the relationship between ideology and art should be pursued in a new context. We no longer need ask whether literature and literary criticism respond to political contexts and social ideologies—but rather how they respond.

The end of long-standing dictatorships in Spain and Portugal, independence for Lusophone Africa, shifting political and socioeconomic patterns in Latin America, all contribute to the need for the development of a historical consciousness that extends to creative writing and thus to literary criticism. This sense of urgency applies equally to the rise of a bilingual literature in the Spanish-speaking communities of the United States. Although it behooves us to address ourselves to this immediacy, we must likewise reassess the past. Thus, the ideological forces that inform writing in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain, for example, command as much attention within the orientation of this journal as does the contemporary crisis of capitalism reflected in poetry, prose fiction, and drama.

Whatever the period or genre, and while stressing the exigencies of literary scholarship and close reading, we adhere to a policy that calls for an explicit knowledge of sociohistorical context and a critical awareness of ideological tenets. Basically, with no preconceived notions as regards individual contributions, we, in this journal of Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian studies, propose critical explorations leading to a holistic view of Spanish- and Portuguese-language writing.



# The Crisis of the Liberal Imagination and the Utopia of Writing\*

Jean Franco, *Stanford University*

It is as old a component of bourgeois ideology that each individual, in his particular interest, considers himself better than all others, as that he values the others, as the community of all customers, more highly than himself. Since the demise of the old bourgeois class, both ideas have led an after-life in the minds of intellectuals, who are at once the last enemies of the bourgeois and the last bourgeois. In still permitting themselves to think at all in the face of the naked reproduction of existence, they act as a privileged group: in letting matters rest there, they declare the nullity of their privilege. (Adorno)

## I

An ideological distinction is often made in contemporary criticism between literature in the established sense and *écriture*, between the text that reflects and the text that acts, between the mimetic and the non-mimetic, between the "readerly" and the "writerly."<sup>1</sup> These taxonomies are symptomatic of a crisis of the narrative in which the radical, and indeed revolutionary new criticism, challenges the very assumptions on which liberal humanistic criticism was based. The latter, now on the wane, though once dominant in Anglo-American criticism, had held literature to be a moral endeavor and the novel a genre to which "the emotions of understanding and forgiveness were indigenous, as if by the definition of the form itself."<sup>2</sup> In this vein, Lionel Trilling lamented in *The Liberal Imagination* (1950) the contemporary novel's loss of power and energy. "No connection exists," he declared, "between our liberal educated class and the best of the literary minds of our time. And this is to say that there is no connection between the political ideas of our educated class and the

\*A version of this paper was presented at a conference on Ideology and Literature sponsored by the Department of Spanish & Portuguese, University of Minnesota; the Joint Committee on Latin American Studies (Social Science Research Council) and the American Council of Learned Societies, February, 1976.

deep places of the imagination.<sup>3</sup> The breakdown of connections between the social and the literary systems which the liberal humanist regarded as an apocalyptic prophesy of coming disaster was enthusiastically fostered by the avant-garde in its campaign against the reactionary canons of the past. The French new novelists, Structuralists, post-Structuralists and others deconstructed the novel, finding that its codes, the concept of character and even the tense in which it was generally written to have been so many devices which "naturalized" the bourgeois order and thus reproduced its ideology.<sup>4</sup> Character, for instance, reflected a concept of human nature, "essential to the ideological domination and smooth economic running of society." Hence it was urgent to produce a new writing which could constitute a kind of practice that could not be reduced to reproduction and could therefore stave off and avoid recuperation by bourgeois society.<sup>5</sup> *Écriture* thus became a modal concept, distinct from literature in the old sense, and used to designate a variety of subversive practices—activity over passive receptivity, play over productive labor, the open as against the closed text. Between the new and the old writing, there was, it was claimed, a fundamental cleavage which was more than a revolt of the new against outworn conventions. Indeed the claim was made that *écriture* constituted a revolutionary practice.<sup>6</sup>

Turning to Latin America, we find a similar war between the ancient and the modern. The new novelists of the late fifties and early sixties attacked the traditional Latin American novel as "primitive" and "provincial" and promoted the new novel both as technically advanced and as a universal form of writing. However, the way that some of these new novelists distinguish their writing from the social novel which had predominated in the thirties and forties is revealing. For they stress the individual diversity and the subjectivity of the new novel as against the socially-constructed view of reality which informs the primitive novel and gives it a certain sameness. The new novelists according to Mario Vargas Llosa "no se esfuerzan por expresar 'una' realidad," sino visiones y obsesiones personales: 'su' realidad." The primitive novel, he implies, is simple and invariable because its raw material is presented in an unsophisticated manner whilst the new novel employs complex techniques and is diversified. There is no need to stress that a model of production underlies this criticism so that the description of the difference between the new and the old novel seems to be precisely that which differentiated the recently modernized economics of Latin America from the monoculture which had predominated in the past. Such a comparison might appear mechanistic, were it not for the fact that it is explicit in criticism itself. Mario Vargas Llosa, for example, asserts that the "novela de creación" (his term for the new novel) has not completely obliterated the primitive novel but that the two continue to coexist in the same culture, "como los rascacielos y las tribus, la miseria y la opulencia."<sup>8</sup> There could be no more patent association of the new novel with the ideology of

modernization, with its outward manifestations in the skyscrapers and the conspicuous consumption of the middle-classes; and the primitive novel which has its parallel in the backwardness of the marginalized sectors of the population. Just as, on the economic level, import substitution had diversified the economy, so in the novel, primitive production had been superseded by diversified and more complex techniques. "A diferencia de lo que pasaba con los primitivos, no hay un denominador común ni de asuntos ni de estilos ni de procedimientos entre los nuevos novelistas: su semejanza es su diversidad."<sup>9</sup>

This concept of diversification lends a spurious unity to writers who shared in the euphoria of the "boom." In effect, however, there were fundamental ideological differences between those liberal-existentialist writers who clung to a romantic conception of expressing their personal rebellion through their work; "revolutionary" writers who in the wake of Surrealism strove to bring about an alteration in the readers' perception of reality; and, on the extreme left (so to speak) those writers who believe that the old concepts of literature must be completely destroyed and a radically different practice which would eliminate the separation of reader from author and critic constituted. For these latter, the cultural revolution was to be inaugurated in writing itself. Such fundamental ideological differences scarcely surface openly during the sixties, perhaps because, in the immediate aftermath of the Cuban Revolution, there was a certain group solidarity, in fact, almost a syndicalist spirit. This sense of solidarity (at any rate, up to the Padilla affair in 1968) tended to overlay the very considerable differences between the new novelists. Further, the success of the new novel tended to conceal the fact that there was a crisis in the market place since the novel reached new sectors of the population only to lose a potential readership to the newer mass media. These crises and contradictions are most clearly manifested in a number of texts which reflect on writing itself. For this reason, I shall concentrate, in the present discussion, on three such narratives—*Aura* by Carlos Fuentes, "Las babas del diablo" (from the collection, *Las armas secretas* (1959) by Cortázar and *Cobra* by Severo Sarduy. Though written at different periods, and though they are quite diverse they share a common problem—that of producing a text which transgresses bourgeois society. I shall argue that in each of them a Utopian space is suggested and determined by a negation of what they consider to be bourgeois but that in each case, such a concept is based on a now-archaic stereotype—that of the individual enslaved by the ethic of work and production. And because the stage of bourgeois society to which they stand in opposition is outmoded, the textual revolution they promote may in fact be a reproduction of the mobility, freedom, metamorphosis (in other words the dance of the signifier)—which is the essence of technological society itself.

May 1968 in France which Fuentes celebrates as the vision of a Utopia, with the artist as the ideal type in the post-revolutionary society:

'L' Imagination au Pouvoir! ... Los estudiantes de Francia le dieron un contenido grave e inmediato a las palabras visionarias y rebeldes de los artistas: el hombre, cada hombre, es capaz de definir su propio destino como un artista define, creándola, su propia obra. Y como una obra de arte y responsabilidad individual es la instancia suprema de la responsabilidad colectiva y, simultáneamente, lo es ésta de aquella.<sup>13</sup>

This vision in which life becomes art and art life is not one that in Fuentes' novels, at least, emerges from a social movement or has any social outcome. On the contrary his literary Utopia turns out not to be in the future but in the past.

To find a more detailed discussion of what constitutes revolutionary art, we must turn to Cortázar who, in 1970 published his essay, "Literatura en la revolución y revolución en la literatura" in reply to the Colombian critic, Oscar Collazos.<sup>14</sup> The position he defines here is the same as that of a much earlier essay, "Situación de la novela," written in 1954.<sup>15</sup> Published when the influence of existentialism was at its height, this early essay explains why Cortázar rejected the protest novel and socialist realism, which, he argues, are motivated by conscious design and therefore do not constitute explorations of the new. The realist novel reproduces language, feeling and passions "por medio de un cuidado método racional" whilst the new (existential) novel incorporates "su propia teoría, de alguna medida la crea y la anula a la vez porque sus intenciones son su acción y presentación puras." Between 1954 and 1970, in both his critical and literary texts, he was to emphasize the superiority of the open work and of the novel as a form of cognition and self exploration. "Literatura en la revolución y revolución" is, therefore, the coherent development of a theory of writing as self discovery and of the writer as exemplary. In 1970, he explicitly states that the writer himself, in order to create great literature, must have reached a high stage of development since it is this achievement alone which allows him to address those who have not yet embarked on the journey, "incitando con las armas que le son propias a acceder a esa libertad profunda que sólo puede nacer de la realización de los más altos valores de cada individuo."

By its very nature, Cortázar's path of liberation is only open to the few; and this minority, as he wrote in 1954, could not be incorporated in public life: "no estarán instalados en el poder, ni dictarán desde la cátedra las fórmulas de la salvación. Serán tan sólo individuos que, mostrarán sin docencia alguna una libertad humana alcanzada en la batalla personal." In 1970, his earlier elitism has been modified but the literary revolution—"la revolución total y profunda en todos los planos de la materia y de la psiquis"—is more than ever necessary if the material and social revolution

is to be completed. Nor surprisingly, the truly revolutionary writer devotes himself, not simply to protest but to the creation of "una literatura de fermento y contenido revolucionarios." Cortázar thus privileges literature beyond all other forms of human activity although his ultimate vision like that of many Utopian socialists is the fusion of art and life.

An even more extreme view of the revolutionary nature of writing has however, been suggested by another generation of writers<sup>16</sup> who, in the age of the mass media, see the supreme danger of making literature into something consumable. The most theoretical of these younger writers is Severo Sarduy, a Cuban living in Paris and associated with Roland Barthes, Phillippe Sollers and other contemporary French critics. His work, however, is not simply a translation of French critical theory but is profoundly marked by the influence of Bataille and Paz and by his own personal obsessions.

Sarduy adopts a view that bourgeois society is supported by a system of writing which, because it has structured people's whole perception of themselves and the world consolidates the status quo and ensures that even literature that is revolutionary in intention reproduces its subliminal order. Thus he declares:

I believe contrary to what many of my friends think that the real support of the bourgeoisie is not an economic system, that is, not solely an economic system. I'd like to propose the following thesis: the support of the petit bourgeoisie, is a pseudo-natural system of writing. Every regime rests on writing. A revolution that doesn't invent its own writing has failed. The role of the writer is so important that I would even ask: what can be more than a writer? What's the point of all those acts of "confrontation" except for writing, because writing is a force that demythologizes, corrupts, mines, cracks the foundation of any regime. The epistemological breakthrough that everyone talks about so much has not happened and cannot happen—we know that after all of *Tel Quel's* efforts among others—unless it begins with and is nurtured in a piece of writing.<sup>17</sup>

It is hardly necessary to comment on the idealistic nature of this statement which inverts the Marxist relationship between base and superstructure, nor to stress that, like Fuentes and Cortázar, Sarduy makes the writer into the modern hero. Yet he is more specific than they in suggesting that the transgression of bourgeois society is achieved by a self-referential form of writing:

Lo único que la burguesía no soporta, lo que la "saca de juicio" es la idea de que *el pensamiento pueda pensar sobre el pensamiento*, de que *el lenguaje pueda hablar del lenguaje*, de que *un autor no escriba sobre algo, sino escriba algo*. Frente a esta transgresión,

que era para Bataille el sentido del *despertar*, se encuentran repentina y definitivamente de acuerdo, creyentes y ateos, capitalistas y comunistas, aristócratas y proletarios, lectores de Mauriac y Sartre.<sup>18</sup>

What separates different members of society from the enlightened is here neither class nor religious or political convictions but the revolution of self-referentiality; only when thought and writing reflect on their own practices, and are therefore no longer instruments for something can the "awakening" take place. The question that now arises is whether self-referentiality can be regarded as a transgression or merely an activity which registers withdrawal and disapproval like the Medieval friars' vow of poverty. It also behooves us to enquire whether that bourgeois whose prejudices are transgressed is not a mythic creation, or at least a phantom of a repressive order whose character has, since the nineteenth century, radically changed. For in present-day society, it is not a *bourgeois individual* who counts but rather a global system which is kept stable by repressive tolerance in the metropolis and by direct violence in the periphery, especially where the dominant order has been directly challenged by political action.

The answer to this and to other questions raised by these writers can however best be answered by an examination of their creative writing. Fuentes' "pure contrast" to bourgeois society, Cortázar's "revolution in literature" and Sarduy's "transgression," after all, are theories which have emerged from the practice of writing itself.

### III

Carlos Fuentes' writing is of two distinct kinds; on the one hand, there are a number of tightly-constructed allegorical narratives such as *Aura*, *Zona sagrada* and *Cumpleaños*; which are relatively brief and whose action is spatially confined. On the other hand, there are those novels which cover a historical span and move in broader spaces in an attempt to totalize the historical experience of Mexico. On further inspection, however, the novels of this second kind also tend towards enclosure. What had appeared to be historical development turns out to be a journey of life which is brought to a halt in the cell-like space of a bedroom, a pyramid or a tent where the subject confronts his own mortality. Artemio Cruz's journey from Guadalajara ends in a hospital room: the protagonists of *Cambio de piel* end not in Veracruz but beneath the pyramid. In this respect, *Aura*, with its setting of the dark house on the Calle Donceles is the analogue of the Fuentes narrative, a micromodel of the basic and obsessive configuration of all his creative writing.

*Aura* crosses the threshold between reality and imagination to offer an allegory of art. Its form departs very little from that of the traditional

narrative, except for the authorial voice which addresses the protagonist, Felipe Montero, as "tú" throughout the course of the story. This was a device which had been used by Michel Butor in some of his novels and was employed by Fuentes himself in sections of *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* which belongs to the same period as *Aura*.<sup>19</sup> The use of future tense in much of the narrative is also unusual. When the anonymous narrative voice warns, the protagonist, "Vivirás ese día, idéntico a los demás, ya no volverás a recordarlo sino el día siguiente," it situates the narrator in the position of Red Scharlach in Borges' "La muerte y la brújula" as the one who anticipates the protagonist's every move, and *who therefore has the power*. The journey that Felipe Montero takes from being a routine-bound petit bourgeois to becoming the willing prisoner of the darker forces is one that has already been traversed by the writer whose voice speaks through the text.

Far from taking the reader onto a voyage into the unknown, however, *Aura* discloses the familiar paraphernalia of the Gothic novel, a bricolage of romantic remnants and old Vincent Price movies. Descriptions insistently allude to the Gothic: "Todos los muros del salón están recubiertos de una madera oscura, labrada al estilo gótico, con ojivas y rosetones calados." The back of *Aura*'s chair is made of "madera de la silla gótica" (p. 26) and Consuelo is described as "delgada como una escultura medieval, amaciada." (p. 27) It would be a dull reader who failed to pick up and construe the clues of howling cats, drug-inducing plants that flourish in darkness, green-eyed women and sacrificed goats. And the very obtrusiveness of these clues suggests an allegorical reading.

The protagonist of *Aura*, Felipe Montero, initially leaves the "real" world and enters the magic house on the Calle Donceles because of a contractual agreement he makes with the widow of General Llorente to edit the General's memoirs. Montero belongs, by right, to the routine world of the petty bourgeois. He is "ordenado," "escrupuloso," a man for whom one day is the same as the other for he is caught in the repetitive cycle of bourgeois society. By profession he is a historian "cargado de datos inútiles. acostumbrado a exhumar papeles amarillentos, profesor auxiliar en escuelas particulares, novecientos pesos mensuales." The contract with society offers him the barest survival; his contract with Consuelo (the name is surely significant) offers him more than this for it gives him time to work on his own personal project, the description of which bears a strange resemblance to Fuentes' future novel, *Terra Nostra*:

Si logras ahorrar por lo menos doce mil pesos, podrias pasar cerca de un año dedicado a tu propia obra, aplazada, casi olvidada. Tu gran obra de conjunto sobre los descubrimientos y conquistas españolas en América. Una obra que resume todas las crónicas dispersas, las haga inteligibles, encuentre las correspondencias entre todas las empresas y aventuras del siglo de oro, entre los prototipos humanos y el hecho mayor del Renacimiento.

But the contract he makes in the house of Donceles Street has also brought him into the realm of imagination and desire which will use him as their instrument.

This allegorical reading is accentuated as I have pointed out, by the use of well-worn allusions and literary conventions. The very name of the desired woman, Aura, is a pun on a bird of prey and a gentle breeze and the use of pun for this all-important character draws attention to the device itself and ultimately to the ambiguity of desire. As allegory, *Aura* refers to the liberation of the petit bourgeois from the everyday world through his coupling with the darker forces of creation. The aged Consuelo uses Montero to recreate her own youth; their deathly nuptials, involve him in a confrontation with mortality and the immolation of self:

apartarás tus labios de los labios sin carne que has estado besando,  
de las encías sin dientes que se abren ante ti: verás bajo la luz de la  
luna el cuerpo desnudo de la vieja, de la señora Consuelo, flojo,  
rasgado, pequeño, y antiguo, temblando ligeramente porque tu lo  
tocas, tú lo amas, tu has regresado también.

What does this "también" signify if it is not the "author" situated where Eros and Thanatos are united? The witchcraft, the magic and the drugs bring about the alchemy of art and immolate Montero's ego in the work.

The division between the world of work and the world of desire and imagination corresponds, as is clear from the epigraph, to the division between male and female:

El hombre caza y lucha, la mujer intriga y sueña; es la madre de la  
fantasia, de los dioses. Posee la segunda vision, las alas que le  
permiten volar hacia el infinito del deseo y de la imaginacion... Los  
dioses como los hombres nacen y mueren sobre el cuerpo de una  
mujer... (Jules Michelet)

The force represented by woman is atavistic, directed towards the past not to change. She is the instrument of darker forces, akin to the animal world, and yet removed from it. Her goal is not change but the reincarnation of General Llorente, Consuelo's dead husband.

It follows from this that Fuentes' view of the imagination is, like Plato's, associated with the past and not with the future. At the deepest level, therefore, he allegorizes art as *re*-production rather than an exploration of the unknown. Nor surprising, the next novel he wrote would be given the title, *Cambio de piel* and the constitutive image would be that of the snake sloughing off its old skin.<sup>20</sup> *Aura* indeed reveals the contradictions in Fuentes' writing; for this author who is obsessed by the modern cannot really conceive of a future that is not the reincarnation of the past. Unlike Cortázar's leap into space, Fuentes' allegory of art makes it a reliving of what others have done. And interestingly, this is the analogue (but not a critique or an overturning) of dependency itself.

#### IV

Cortázar's "Las babas del diablo" is a critical and satirical confrontation with the absurdities of creation though altogether different in tone from his story, "El perseguidor" which appeared in the same collection, *Las armas secretas* (1959), and which he believed to be a turning point in his writing.<sup>21</sup>

The protagonist (or comic scapegoat) of "Las babas del diablo"<sup>22</sup> is Robert Michel, a photographer, writer, translator and complete bourgeois who though part Chilean lives and works in Paris. In his quest for something to be photographed, he stumbles inadvertently onto the very problem of attempting to turn reality into art and discovers that, like the cloud formations which can be called either "Las babas del diablo" or "Los hilos de la Virgen" (and which have nothing to do with good or evil), there is nothing behind the text beyond its own transient and insubstantial configuration. In the course of the story, Michel both tries to take a photograph and to tell the story of how he took the photograph. Photography is, in fact, a key metaphor since, of all the arts, it seems the most able to register momentary reality. As Michel soon discovers, however, all art mediates and invents more than it translates. There are thus, constant cross-references between photography and writing, both of which require a primal decision which is also a point of view. Thus the very choice of narrative voice involves Michel in an initial dilemma: "Nunca se sabrá cómo hay que contar eso, si en primera persona o en segunda, usando la tercera del plural o inventando continuamente formas que no servirán de nada." In fact, Michel never decisively makes the initial choice without which traditional narrative cannot begin. Though committed to the realist illusion, he constantly demonstrates its conventionality by slipping from first to third person narration and then back again.

Language and the camera, more than the artist or the subject, determine the configuration of the completed work. In "Las babas del diablo," elements which literary discourse had ordinarily concealed from the reader and those aspects of art normally hidden from the viewer jump to the foreground. When Michel confesses that he does not know how he is going to end the sentence he has just begun, it is grammar itself which resolves the problem rather than Michel. In fact, "Las babas del diablo" allows no device to appear as natural. For instance, when Michel uses the present tense to refer to events in the past, the reader is immediately aware that the present-of-the-writer is excluded. The birds and clouds which pass the window in front of which he is writing are not "present" in the text. Even translation (where there is an original text-to-be-translated) can never be faithful to an original.

"Las babas del diablo," then, opens up a gulf between the phenomenal and the conventional. When literature tries to translate reality, it simply deforms it. Thus when Michel describes a woman in the park as "delgada y esbelta," he is, at once, aware that these are not *mots justes*. On the other hand, when he inadvertently slips into the past tense and allows invention freer rein, he creates an original text. To write "sus ojos que caían sobre las cosas como dos águilas, dos saltos al vacío, dos ráfagas de fango verde" is to make that leap into space which is the function of art.

"Las babas del diablo" is, however, also a meditation on the instrumentality of art in capitalist society. For, on the one hand, Michel believes in the Utopian innocence of art, and art that is, as little as possible, different from life itself. Yet his own motives are far from pure. When he tries to take a photograph of a woman meeting an adolescent in the park, he not only reads his own moral judgments into the event but believes that he can alter reality and not simply reflect it by the mere act of photographing. Michel is thus able to rationalize his interference as a moral action which saves the innocence of adolescence from the schemes of a corrupt woman:

De puro entrometido le había dado oportunidad de aprovechar al fin su miedo para algo útil; ahora estaría arrepentido, menoscabado, sintiéndose poco hombre... Mejor era eso que la compañía de una mujer capaz de mirar como lo miraba en la isla: *Michel es puritano a ratos, cree que no se debe corromper por la fuerza.* En el fondo, aquella foto había sido una buena acción.  
(my italics)

The "entrometido" is, of course, not only Michel but Cortázar himself whose comments on Michel mirror Michel's judgments of the woman. The reader is thus put on guard against moral judgments passed off as art. Similarly the boy's flight with which Michel identifies himself is analogous to Michel's own flight when the woman and a "third-person" (a clown-like man sitting in a car out of camera focus) abruptly turn on him. The boy saves his innocence through the flight, Michel saves his photograph and Cortázar in turn uses both to create "Las babas del diablo." The act of liberation is thus turned into a commodity.

But his is by no means the final outcome. As Michel enlarges the photograph and produces the blown-up print, a new element comes into play, namely the reading of the text (whether photograph or story). For the second time Michel is forced to interfere for when the photograph comes to life, the boy is once again menaced by the woman and by a new actor—the man who he had originally excluded from the camera eye and who now becomes the real mover of events. It is this man who grows in importance until he begins not only to blot out the subject but also to erase the author himself. This pimp, clown or death's head whose face has holes in place of eyes like a photographic negative is, in fact, negation itself, the

"nothing" behind "las babas del diablo." The second salvation of the adolescent not only obliterates the author, however, but also the subject of the photograph leaving only a space, like a windowframe, looking out onto the passing clouds and the birds:

a veces, en cambio todo se pone gris, todo es una enorme nube y de pronto restallan las salpicaduras de la lluvia, largo rato se ve llover sobre la imagen, como un llanto al revés, y poco a poco el cuadro se aclara, quizá sale el sol, y otra vez entran las nubes, de a dos, de a tres. Y las palomas, a veces, uno que otro gorrión.

This is the final paradoxical innocence of art, to become indistinguishable from nature. Cortázar's irony and self-criticism ensure, however, that this is not seen as a Utopian possibility, but rather as a project fraught with contradiction. What the story does is to destroy the support on which an older form of literature has been based but it does not yet envisage anything to replace this.

Though "Las babas del diablo" is only a minor work, it can be considered representative of Cortázar's early problematic. To put the practice of writing into a critical perspective as Cortázar does, to show the conventionality of what appears natural creates a healthy disrespect for bourgeois society. On the other hand to set up this critical distance while making the reader aware of the way art "naturalizes" its conventions may not necessarily result in a revolutionary change or in the creation of the new man. In fact, at this stage of his writing, Cortázar can only conceive change on an individual basis. In "Situación de la novela," he wrote:

No en vano el mejor individualismo de nuestro tiempo entraña una aguda conciencia de los restantes individualismos, y se quiere libre de todo egoísmo y de toda insularidad. René Daumann escribió esta frase maravillosa: "Solos, después de acabar con la ilusión de no estar solos, no somos los únicos que estamos solos." (p. 242-3).

Cortázar's explorations did not, of course, stop at this point. He went on to write *Rayuela* and *Libro de Manuel* (1973)<sup>23</sup> in which there are structural incompatibilities between individual exploration and the oppressive social order. Even so, revolutionary action is still conceived on an individual basis. The "club de serpientes" of *Rayuela* and the guerrilla group of *Libro de Manuel* are individuals bound by friendship not by the social practice of the workplace; and revolution is the combination of a series of individual decisions. The very fact, however, that in these later works Cortázar increasingly has to include the raw data of political and sociological information—the testimony of torture victims and data of U.S. military missions in *Libro de Manuel*, data from the Russell Tribunal in *Fantomas contra los vampiros multinacionales* (1975) seems to suggest that the concept of the novel as an individual exploration of being has its limits since society has long since left behind the stage of the liberal summer (to



use George Steiner's expression) when, at least, there was a certain space for individuals to work for the realization of Utopia. But in the 1960's even the liberal facade of governments like those of Britain and France had been torn away to reveal state-condoned repression and torture. Cortázar's esthetic demands as its precondition a liberal society which no longer exists.

## V

Of the three works under discussion, Severo Sarduy's *Cobra* represents the most extreme break with traditional fiction. Indeed, it has been hailed both as a quite new kind of writing as well as a destruction of the concept of authorship itself. The translator of the English version declares:

he...creates *Cobra* on the basis of mutilated quotations from *Cobra*, again and again breaking down the old discourse, the old concept of authorship and of fidelity to authorship, erasing the difference between the original and the plagiarized, to indicate perhaps that all texts are one: *l'écriture*. Writing that is never finished: a book that is incessantly written.<sup>24</sup>

Roland Barthes, on the other hand, is not so much interested in *Cobra* as a destruction of the concept of authorship so much as the realization of the Utopia of the "rapture text." Indeed he puts *Cobra* outside any possibility of recuperation by institutionalized language and criticism, exclaiming:

encore, encore, encore plus! encore un autre mot, encore une autre fête. La langue se reconstruit *ailleurs* par le flux pressé de tous les plaisirs de langage. Où, ailleurs? au paradis des mots. C'est là, véritablement une texte paradisiaque, utopique (sans lieu), une hétéroglogie par plénitude: tous signifiants son là et chacun fait mouche: l'auteur (le lecteur) semble leur dire: je vous aime tous (mots, tours, phrases, adjectifs, ruptures) pêle-mêle: les signes et les mirages d'objets qu'ils représentent: une sorte de franciscanisme appelle tous les mots à se poser, à se pressée, à repartir; texte jasée. chine, nous sommes comblés par le langage tels de jeunes enfants à qui rien ne serait jamais refuse, reproché. ou, pire encore, "permis." C'est la gageure d'une jubilation continue, le moment où par son excès les plaisir verbal suffoque et buscule dans la jouissance.<sup>25</sup>

Here I shall merely note in passing that the Utopia which Barthes reads in *Cobra* is a plenitude in which there is never determination or selection; in which one choice does not cancel another. In a similarly rapturous accolade, Hélène Cixous writes:

Impossible to hold it still—what? where?, which way?—this text is on the run, slipping out the back way, swerving out of line with any

conceivable edge of text, of land, or of water—impossible to catch hold of any thread in this flying carpet slip—stitched in gold zig-zag.

What hand, what memory, what master, what law would dare boast of being able to regulate its course for an instant? *Cobra* forgets herself somewhere at the outer limits objectively and subjectively, with the unrestrained boldness of beings to come.<sup>26</sup>

*Cobra* is here placed outside the scope of criticism because of its futuristic mobility. The reader is in Utopia and must not ask how he got there.

One of Sarduy's models for the revolutionary text is, in fact, the baroque: "Barroco que recusa toda instauración, que metaforiza el orden discutido, al dios juzgado, a la ley transgredida. Barroco de la Revolución."<sup>27</sup> In its break with denotation (or the referential), baroque is analogue to the erotic:

Como la retórica barroca, el erotismo se presenta como la ruptura total del nivel denotativo, directo y natural del lenguaje-somático-, como la perversión que implica toda metáfora, toda figura.<sup>28</sup>

Thus the erotic like the language of the baroque seeks nothing beyond pleasure. The way in which the writer might break away from denotative language is best illustrated through poetry. Writing of the Surrealists, Sarduy speaks of producing a *secousse*:

A traves de ese sacudimiento del signo que lo vacía de significado el poeta restituye el mundo a su puro espectáculo, lo convierte en un catálogo de significantes.<sup>29</sup>

We recognize both in Severo Sarduy's own version of *écriture* and in the reception of *Cobra*, a recurrent contemporary obsession with mobility, metamorphosis, play and enjoyment as against the supposedly bourgeois values of organization, work and deferment of pleasure. However, it is possible that those values which appeared revolutionary in contrast to the nineteenth-century bourgeois are, in fact, reflections of a new stage of capitalism itself. For the moment, however, I wish to leave this problem aside and address myself to the manner in which mobility and metamorphosis are embodied in the text. For in one respect (and notwithstanding the supposed destruction of the concept of authorship), there is a curious and quite distinctive feature of Sarduy's style which deserves notice. *Cobra* is for the most part, written in a series of simple sentences with a minimum of subordinate clauses. For example:

Pactaron no pensar en la cita. Escondidas tomaban librium. Para que durmiera todo el día en el caldo, le dieron a Pup una pastilla. Tejian. Hablaban de las inclemencias del tiempo. Confesaron desgano. A las seis de la tarde Cobra empezó a pintarse. A las ocho, frente al espejo, aguardaba en el camarín. A las diez sonó el timbre para el primer espectáculo.

The staccato effect of the short sentences produces the impression of constant but unrelated and discontinuous activities. The metamorphosis is suggested primarily by word play, particularly punning, paronomasia and anagrams. The title of the book itself is an anagram of Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam. *Cobra* is also the third person of the present indicative of *cobrar*, and is replete with anagrammatic formations—"obrar," "boca," "barroco," some of which refer to an Octavio Paz poem "La boca habla" which Sarduy quotes. This kind of textual production eschews the referential in order to display the power of words to create new configurations. It was a procedure much favored by the Surrealists and is common in Latin American poetry.<sup>30</sup> In *Cobra*, this verbal play is used to create characters and situations. *Cobra* is a transvestite from the Lyric Theatre of the Dolls who under the egis of a Señora/Buscona (mediator) prepares for a role as "queen;" but she is also a woman with a strangely-marked face seen on the streets of Paris and in a reduced form is a dwarf castrated by Dr. Katzbob. The "white dwarf" is also an astronomical term for a dead star. Characters are, then, not separate identities but signifiers. For instance, a group of motorcyclists, are also hippies or Tibetan lamas. Thus character, like the verbal pun becomes a kind of splitting *apart* of an apparent identity to show the disparate possibilities of the signified.

It might be argued that, by removing language from denotation and instrumentality, Sarduy creates a text that stands in opposition to the rigidity of institutionalized speech and the preconceived habits of the bourgeois order. Indeed, as critics have pointed out, the text parodies traditional narrative, reveals the syntactic model of textual production and, in general, criticizes its own practice. Moreover it constantly draws attention to fictionality. The basic set of contrasts around which *Cobra* gyrates is the East/West polarity. We are never allowed to believe, however, that we are dealing with a real opposition but rather with a *bricolage* of rituals, beliefs, landscapes, and representations, including the mistaken Indies of Columbus' log book. At this point, we begin to wonder what is served by this continual foregrounding of the "arbitrary" nature of the sign since the suppression of history, the visual pun and the abstraction of sign from their original context are precisely the features that also characterize the mass media.

Before dealing with this problem, however, it is useful to remind ourselves of the close relations between the East/West polarity in *Cobra* and Octavio Paz's *Conjunciones y disyunciones*. The Spanish edition of *Cobra* indeed has, on its jacket, the very picture of the yogin whose body is a mandala which had also appeared in Paz's book. This latter is a learned disquisition on the contrast between Eastern and Western notions of the body, particularly as seen in the extremes of Western puritanism and Tantric orgy. Paz abstracts these beliefs from any historical context to present them as a pure opposition between a civilization which sublimates

the excremental and represses the body; and a civilization which worships the body and indeed, reads it as a kind of writing. In the West, the repressed body, "martirizada por el sentimiento de culpa y la ironía" took refuge in art. The supreme task of the modern artists is to recover the physicality of experience: "el poeta y el novelista construyen objetos simbólicos, organismos que emiten imágenes. Hacen lo que hace el salvaje. convierten el lenguaje en cuerpo. Las palabras ya no son cosas y, sin cesar de ser signos, se animan, *cobran* cuerpo" (my italics).<sup>31</sup> The healing of the breach between words and the body may be said to represent the Utopian aspect of *Cobra*.

Is *Cobra* an unmotivated text, a freeplay of the sign? The important East/West dichotomy suggests motivation: and there are, in fact, a number of situations which support this view. I refer here to the preparation of *Cobra* for the transvestite festival in which she is to become queen of the dolls; the "reduction" of *Cobra* who is also Pup, the dwarf, whose name, in turn, suggests *poupée* (doll) and the puppae of insect metamorphosis. In another "situation," Pup is castrated by Dr. Katzbob (to bob means to cut). There are also allusions to a journey through Spain (Córdoba-Cobra), and to Tangier. Now Tangier is a place that pioneered sex-change operations and one of the "transgressions" committed by the text is that against the institutionalization of sex roles in Western society.

Of course it can be effectively argued that this is simply one of many possible readings of the text but it is a reading encouraged by the word-play, by names and situations. In fact, the central metaphor of *Cobra* is the body as sign but a body that can be converted into spectacle. What Hélène Cixous describes as the movement of the text is, in reality, a dance of signs, the constant metamorphoses which allow no fixed point of reference and which invite enjoyment and not use.

Now although this may transgress the rigidity and institutionlization of older forms of society, this is also very much akin to that "emptying of reality" which Barthes called "myth." To be sure he is talking of representation not language, a representation in which things "appear to mean something by themselves." But this is what Sarduy attempts with language. Further the promotion of gratuitousness in opposition to the instrumentality of bourgeois society is not in itself revolutionary. It is perhaps Utopian but, as is evident, private Utopias are permissible within the world system. What is now taboo is social action.

## VI

The problem that Sarduy, Cortázar and Fuentes share is that of converting individual statement into social practice. The realist novel had an appearance of being a reflection of society. The avant-garde exposed its rhetoric and showed that even when an author appeared to be holding

society up to criticism, the very structures of the narrative reproduced its assumptions. In the attempt, however, to find new and unrecoverable forms, the new novelists value the mobile, the gratuitousness, the infinitely changeable, which are the very values promoted by a new stage of capitalism. In the case of contemporary Latin American writers, this is particularly striking and particularly contradictory. As we have seen, one of the ideals of both Fuentes and Cortázar is to create a space for individualism and implicitly Sarduy also glimpses the Utopia of this private world. The novel, once the privileged place for the exploration of the individual is, however, increasingly irrelevant on the social level. It is, in fact, the global system which has changed character leaving the avant-garde novelist tilting at the windmills of an old bourgeois stereotype who institutionalized literature and converted language into his instrument, who deferred pleasure and embraced the work ethic. To attack such an individual is anachronistic at the present time when the global system has taken on quite different characteristics. The dominant ideology is now reproduced in every facet of daily life, in the very pursuit of pleasure. It encourages the setting up of private worlds but sets taboos around politics, compartmentalizes information and, in general, flourishes on the suppression of history. Thus Fuentes, Sarduy and Cortázar embrace a dangerous kind of modernity. In the case of *Aura*, this is particularly fascinating because as an allegory for art it clearly reveals the conversion of Montero's *social* vision (his project to synthesize the history of the Renaissance) into a private dream which is a *reproduction*. In *Cobra*, the attempt is made both to attack convention and to produce a pure, unmotivated pleasure text and again this reproduces rather than revolutionizes the values of mobility and metamorphosis whilst placing a taboo on the political and the historical. Of the three writers only Cortázar attempts to convert the individual exploration into a social one, though not in "Las babas del diablo" which is a devastating *reductio ad absurdum* of art's pretense to reflect reality. Not until his latest writing would he face the incongruity of a Utopian vision of life converted into art and art into life when set beside the information produced by tribunals on torture and repression. This dichotomy in Cortázar's later writing is indeed a significant symptom, showing as it does the difficulties of converting the individual life style into a revolutionary movement or even into a significant transgression of the present system.<sup>32</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I refer particularly to Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris, 1970); Julia Kristeva, *La révolution du langage poétique* (Paris, 1974). See also Jonathan Cullen, *Structuralist Poetics* (London, 1975).

<sup>2</sup> Lionel Trilling, "Manners, Morals and the Novel," *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: Anchor Books, 1953), p. 215.

<sup>3</sup> "The function of the little magazine," *The Liberal Imagination*, pp. 94-5.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of "naturalization," see Jonathan Cullen, *op. cit.* pp. 134-60.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ecriture, Fiction, Ideologie," *Théorie d'ensemble* (Paris, 1968), pp. 127-47.

<sup>6</sup> This is the claim made by Phillippe Sollers, *Logiques* (Paris, 1968), and Julia Kristeva, *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> Mario Vargas Llosa, "Novela primitiva y novela de creación en América Latina," *Revista de la Universidad de México* (México), vol. xxiii, 10 (junio de 1969), p. 31.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> The first chapter, later revised, first appeared as "La nueva novela latinoamericana" in *Siempre*, 579 (29 de julio, 1965).

<sup>11</sup> *La nueva novela hispanoamericana* (Mexico, 1969), p. 18.

<sup>12</sup> Alberto Díaz Lastra, "La Definición Literaria, Política y Moral de Carlos Fuentes," *Siempre*, 718 (29 marzo, 1967).

<sup>13</sup> *La nueva novela hispanoamericana*, pp. 90-1.

<sup>14</sup> Julio Cortázar, "Literatura en la Revolución y Revolución en la Literatura: Algunos Malentendidos a Liquidar," *Marcha* (Montevideo, 9-16 de enero, 1970) and in Oscar Collazos, Julio Cortázar and Mario Vargas Llosa, *Literatura en la revolución y revolución en la literatura* (Mexico, 1970).

<sup>15</sup> Julio Cortázar, "Situación de la novela," *Cuadernos americanos*, año IX, vol. III, no. 4 (julio-agosto, 1950), pp. 294-297.

<sup>16</sup> I refer particularly to Salvador Elizondo (Mexico), Néstor Sánchez (Argentina) and Severo Sarduy (Cuba).

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Jean Michel Fossey, "From Boom to Big Bang," in *Review* 74 (New York: Winter, 1974), p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Severo Sarduy, "Del Yin al Yang (Sobre Sade, Bataille, Marmorì, Cortázar y Elizondo)," *Mundo Nuevo* 13 (Paris: Julio, 1967), p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> Richard M. Reeve, "Carlos Fuentes y el desarrollo del narrador en segunda persona: un ensayo exploratorio," in *Homenaje a Carlos Fuentes* (New York, 1971), p. 77-87. Butor's *Degrés* (1960), however, used the first person narrator with the narrator addressing himself to a "tú" who is his own nephew and a student in his class at the *lycée*.

<sup>20</sup> The novel was originally given the title, "El sueño," *Siempre* (29 de septiembre, 1965).

<sup>21</sup> Luis Harss, *Los nuestros*, 5 ed. (Buenos Aires, 1973), p. 273. For a discussion of "El perseguidor," see Saul Sosnowski, "Conocimiento poético y aprehensión racional de la realidad," Un estudio de "El perseguidor" de Julio Cortázar," *Homenaje a Cortázar* (New York, 1972), pp. 429-444.

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of the scapegoat character in Cortázar's work, see Alfred MacAdam, *El individuo y el otro (Crítica a los cuentos de Julio Cortázar)*, (Buenos Aires-New York, 1971).

<sup>23</sup> I omit *62 modelo para armar* which he himself described as a "laboratorio" in his reply to Oscar Collazos, *op. cit.*

<sup>24</sup> Suzanne Jill Levine, "Discourse as Bricolage," *Review* 74, p. 35.

<sup>25</sup> Roland Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte* (Paris, 1975), p. 17.

<sup>26</sup> Hélène Cixous, "'Ocoabrarooco.' A Text-Twister," *Review* 74, p. 26.

<sup>27</sup> Severo Sarduy, "El barroco y el neobarroco," *América Latina en su literatura* (second edition, México, 1974), p. 184.

<sup>28</sup> "El barroco y el neobarroco," p. 182.

<sup>29</sup> Dialogue with Tomas Segovia and Emir Rodríguez Monegal, "Nuestro Rubén Darío," in *Mundo Nuevo* (" de enero, 1967), p. 36.

<sup>30</sup> Octavio Paz, *Conjunciones y disyunciones* (Mexico, 1969), p. 84.

<sup>31</sup> Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," *Mythologies*, tr. Annetee Lavers (New York, 1972), p. 143.

<sup>32</sup> A detailed study of Cortázar's later work is outside the scope of this article. I am at present at work on a more extended discussion of the point I make here. For a historical survey of theories of revolutionary literature which envisage a Utopia in which art becomes life, see Robert C. Elliott, "The Costs of Utopia," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, CL1-CLV (Oxford, 1976).