

UCLA

Mester

Title

Fuentes, Carlos, Cristóbal Nonato . México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987. 569 pages.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2404x17v>

Journal

Mester, 18(1)

Author

Ibsen, Kristine

Publication Date

1989

DOI

10.5070/M3181014062

Copyright Information

Copyright 1989 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

FUENTES, CARLOS, *Cristóbal Nonato*. México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987. 569 pages.

In his masterwork *Terra Nostra* (1975), Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes shows that the New World is, in many ways, a double for the Old, and that, as such, must be destroyed in order to be re-invented. *Cristóbal Nonato*, arguably Fuentes's most ambitious novel since *Terra Nostra*, takes this idea one step further: the world must be re-invented beginning with language itself, and the vehicle for this process, significantly, is the novel. As in earlier works, Fuentes challenges the reader to play an active role in deciphering the text. Here, however, in a novel whose fundamental outline centers around the nine months from conception to birth of an unborn narrator, Cristóbal Palomar, the relationship between author, reader, and text takes on a new dimension. In *Cristóbal Nonato*, the reader is not only recognized but addressed, questioned, consulted, and, in the end, is himself implicated in the piecing together, with the narrator/novel, of a chaotic kaleidoscope of images which constitute a world on the brink of destruction.

Here, too, intertextuality assumes a newly explicit level of importance. Just as Cristóbal is the product of chromosomes and his own chain of genetic information, uniquely his but at the same time a *composite* of his genetic heritage, so, too, is the novel the result of other texts: "la novela tampoco es huérfana, no salió de la nada... *Cristóbal Nonato* busca sus novelas hermanas, amadas, extiende sus brazos de papel para convocarlas y recibir las" (151). Fuentes shows, further, that literature is not merely a fusion but an interaction, and, at times, a reaction to other texts. *Cristóbal Nonato*, then, is a descendant of *Don Quijote*, a reaction to chivalric romances; of *Tristram Shandy*, a veritable scrapbook of literary references; and, completing the cycle, of Borges's "Pierre Menard," who "authors" the *Quijote*. Cristóbal's father, Angel, who dresses as Quevedo, is renowned as a reader and views his world according to texts he has known: even Angeles, his wife, is imagined from a poem by López Velarde. The nature of literature, Fuentes shows, is one of continual interaction, a conversation between reader and text.

This dialectic is paralleled in life by the image of the Other, a relation that Fuentes considers to be of fundamental importance. All of the characters in the novel, significantly, are, or become, orphans, both literally and figuratively, in the sense that in the violated remains of México they are without history, without memory, without a country. Nevertheless, just as the interaction between reader and text makes the novel real, each character in *Cristóbal Nonato* has an Other who completes him: "Los otros nos dan su ser," affirm Angel and Angeles, their voices in unison, "—Cuando yo te completo a ti, Angeles,/ —Yo te completo a ti, Angel"

(545). The unity promised by this fusion also encompasses the idea of *mez-tizaje*: Angeles with her black eyes, indigenous, and Angel with his yellow-green eyes, European, relive the discovery of America through Cristóbal, mestizo, symbol of “la eterna obligación de completar el mundo: Nuevo Mundo!” (552).

Cristóbal himself is reflected in la niña Ba, with whom he shares the womb. This reference, along with the recurring imagery of darkness and light which permeates his consciousness, suggests the ancient image of a divine androgynous figure, an image which appears in *Terra Nostra*. In *Cambio de piel* (1967) Fuentes’s narrator describes Christ as the world’s first “psychopath,” a man whose story “es la de la energía individual, apocalíptica, como única salvación verdadera” (263). The God here is not the orthodox God of the Establishment, who oppresses, but that God of the gnostic search for true knowledge, God the Discoverer, “Cristóbal Palomar,” that heretical vision in which each man has the freedom—and the responsibility—to determine his own destiny. That the narrator of *Cristóbal Nonato* is named, precisely, Cristóbal Palomar, conceived on Epiphany and born on the anniversary of Columbus’ discovery of America seems, then, hardly coincidental. Cristóbal’s function as a Christlike figure is underscored by numerous additional references: his mother is a woman without history, crowned with a halo; the pilgrimage from Acapulco to Malinaltzin, site of indigenous pilgrimages, is on a burro; and, like St. Christopher, Cristóbal carries la niña Ba over the waves of the uterine waters. Cristóbal, however, as a heretical manifestation, is an outsider and, ultimately, a victim of a world in which even myth has hardened into dogma. Myth, once timeless antithesis and complement to the structure imposed by history, has become bastardized and co-opted by the Establishment. Even the Virgin of Guadalupe has been transformed into a mouth-piece for the PRI, through the creation of Mamadoc, a “new” mother for México. Ultimately, Cristóbal loses his battle with the Angel of Darkness, forgetting all that he has learned at his birth, which is also his death.

How, then, to re-invent the world? Through the novel, and, particularly, through the interaction between reader and text. It is the reader’s responsibility to remember and reconstruct all that he has learned, as Cristóbal affirms, “Ah, elector, mi pacto contigo no es desinteresado, qué va: Te voy a necesitar más que nunca *después* (habrá un *después*...?), al nacer...” (551). The novel is, then, the vehicle for any reassessment of the world, a reassessment that must begin by renovating language itself. Fuentes shows language to be a reflection of society: just as México was subjugated by Spain, so, too, is their language an imposed one; likewise their violation by the United States is mirrored in the corruption of language with “Spanglish.” Thus, it follows that any challenge to the Establishment must begin with the re-invention of its language. Towards this end, Fuentes

fuses words from Spanish, English, French, Italian, and Nahuatl, plays with words at length, and even invents his own punctuation.

Such verbal excesses, characteristic of the so-called "Boom" generation of Latin American novelists, have been criticized in retrospect as "petit-bourgeois narcissism." While it is true that the reader must be willing to play the author's game and even to some extent follow his rules, it is a mistake to discount this approach as self-contained. On the contrary, it is a deliberate attempt to fuse the form with the message. In Fuentes this message, furthermore, is anything but petit-bourgeois: to liberate language is a primary step not only in breaking free of the oppressive confines of the Establishment, but to destroy the very structure that fosters such oppression. The failure of the Mexican Revolution is concrete proof that it is not enough to change the class in power; the entire structure of society must be altered. At the same time, Fuentes's caustic portrayal of a reactionary lower class rebellion within the novel seems to suggest that while any revolutionary endeavour depends on collective action, ideology cannot be dictated from outside, it must begin within the individual consciousness. It is towards this end, possibly, that the active participation of the reader is such an integral part of *Cristóbal Nonato*. This approach, while certainly not without flaw, should neither be discarded completely. Furthermore, the increasingly explicit intervention of the reader is evidence that not only is such an approach a valid one, but one which continues to evolve in Fuentes's work.

Life, as with its reflection in literature, is an incessant process of re-invention: it is the New World of the individual imagination. Language, as Fuentes observes in *Gringo viejo* (1985), is that which permits us to *see*. Without the word, he affirms, we are blind. In the beginning, the New Testament tells us, was the Word, and the Word was God and it shone in the darkness of ignorance. Later, the Word became Flesh. Cristóbal is the word, he is the novel. Though defeated by darkness, he is continually re-discovered through the reader, who must complete the narrative voice of the text. It is the reader, Fuentes shows, who has the moral obligation to question and re-invent the word—and the world.

—Kristine Ibsen

University of California, Los Angeles

LOJO, MARÍA ROSA. *Visiones*. Buenos Aires, Exposición Feria Internacional del Libro, 1984. (sin mención de páginas) (Primer Premio Poesía Feria del Libro, 1984)

Es posible observar entre los jóvenes poetas argentinos, un grupo que rescata los valores estético-filosóficos del Romanticismo y que en nuestro