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CARLOS FUENTES'S "THE TWO SHORES":  
BETWEEN COUNTERFACTUALISM AND  
CULTURAL ALLEGORY

ALBERTO RIBAS

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CARLOS Fuentes's short story "The Two Shores" was written in 1991 and published in *The Orange Tree* in 1992. The Fifth Centennial of the Spanish arrival to the Americas compelled many Hispanophone intellectuals at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to reinterrogate critically the significance of this event. In consonance with the discursive politics of post-modernism (see Hutcheon 66), such reinterrogation paid attention not only to its negative effects, but also showed an interest in recovering the voices and discourse of all those who were traditionally marginalized from or oppressed by historical and political processes. The clearest sign of this interest – far beyond the anthropological – for the marginal individual who had been victimized by established power structures in the Latin American nations, was the Nobel Foundation award of the 1992 Peace Prize to a Maya-Quiché woman named Rigoberta Menchú. In this intellectual context, "The Two Shores" represents Fuentes's own contribution to revising the significance and impact of the Spanish arrival to the Americas.

Fuentes's marginal narrator is a talking dead man, a sort of Derridean *revenant* who casts a doubt over the conceptual foundations of the discourse of the present and to whom the reader owes a "hospitable" welcome as a way of doing justice to the voices that have disappeared from the historical record (Derrida 175). But this narrator is, remarkably enough, not a voice representative of the victims of the genocide, but a Spaniard. Having been captive among the Mayas, Jerónimo de Aguilar has become an acculturated subject, a traitor to the Spanish imperialistic project, and a self-appointed secret champion of the voices silenced by

history. Neither dead nor alive, neither Spanish nor Maya, rooted neither in the present nor in the past, and yet showing all these traits partially, Aguilar manifests the liminal, borderline condition of what Homi Bhabha calls the "freak social and cultural displacements" that epitomize contemporary literature (12).

Through this "freak," post-mortem voice of the transculturated Jerónimo de Aguilar, "The Two Shores" illustrates the dialectical conflict at the fictional foundation of post-Columbine culture. The story's representation of the conquest of New Spain in a reverse narrative order portrays the birth of modern Mexico in terms of the clash between the Spanish invading force and the Mesoamerican tribes. Thus, the foundational act of the modern nation is represented as an inherently traumatic event:

Europa le ha arañado el rostro para siempre a este Nuevo Mundo que, bien visto, es más viejo que el europeo (14)

Dominick LaCapra defines "foundational trauma" as that extreme event, real or imaginary that, paradoxically, may turn into the basis of an individual or collective identity (57). LaCapra adds that this trauma may generate an identity-based communion between subjects and enable the vindication of history with a transformative finality over oppressions and abuses in the present:

Insofar as [the foundational trauma] fixates one obsessively on old grievances or dubious dynamics and even induces a compulsive reenactment of them, it may also function to undermine the need to come to terms with the past in a manner that constructively engages existential, social, and political demands and possibilities of a current situation. (58)

Chapter 0 narrates the "alternative possibility" of an indigenous American invasion of the Iberian Peninsula. The invasion, aiming to "edificar el templo de las cuatro religiones, inscrito con el verbo de Cristo, Mahoma, Abraham y Quetzalcóatl" (62) ("to edify the temple of the four religions, inscribed with the word of Christ, Muhammad, Abraham, and Quetzalcóatl") has been diversely commented with an emphasis on the perception of "alternative history." Alfred MacAdam sees the story as a consolation, a sort of "transitory refuge from facts," (440), and Gonzalo Celorio perceives in it a tragically futile attempt to rewrite historical dialog that contrasts with an Aztec cosmology in which history is predetermined (294). Paul Jay sees the text as a performance

"inverting and unmaking [Bernal Díaz's] earlier chronicle by rewriting it." (408), which Julio Ortega describes as a festive gesture, "the merry probabilism of what could not be but that, in the writing, comes to be" (Ortega, "Sumar" 75, translation mine).

Is "The Two Shores" an exercise in alternative or, to use Niall Ferguson's terminology, *counterfactual* history, as these critics point out? Counterfactualism is a historiographical method that consists in establishing hypotheses about the immediate consequences of the absence of a determining factor in a causal chain of events. For example, what would have happened if Father Hidalgo had not retreated at Cuajimalpa? Or what if Moctezuma had sent troops to stop the Spanish-Tlaxcalan advance instead of waiting for them in Tenochtitlan? To Ferguson, this is not an exercise in history-fiction<sup>1</sup> but an attempt to question what he claims is the prevailing deterministic paradigm in historiographic discourse. This paradigm has roots in Hegel, to whom history is an absolute universal indifferent to the will and actions of individuals, to the point that "the great individuals of world history (...) are those who seize upon [the] higher universal and make it their own" and that "[w]orld history moves on a higher plane than that to which morality properly belongs" (Hegel, quoted by Ferguson 30). Ferguson argues how (mainly leftist) Hegelianism has created a vision of history where ample social and economic processes *determine* the course of historical events. Individual acts only contribute accidental variations. That is: the conquest of Mexico would have taken place, with or without Hernán Cortés; the American colonies would have emancipated from the Spanish crown regardless of the French invasion of Spain and the actions of Ferdinand VII upon his restoration.

Notwithstanding his allegations about the predominance of the deterministic paradigm, Ferguson supports himself on renowned classics in the field of history to propose that determinism is incompatible with the historian's need to make value judgments about the "character, purposes and motives of individuals" (Berlin 320, cited by Ferguson 83). Therefore, he proposes simulations based on calculations about the relative probability of plausible outcomes in a chaotic world (Ferguson 85; see also Trevor-Roper 363ff.) in order to reestablish the "true (. . .)

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<sup>1</sup> In Ferguson's view, this would be the case of Robert Harris's acclaimed *Fatherland*, a thriller in the background of a Europe under control of the III Reich in the mid 60s.

'historical form' of causation where 'that which is caused' is the free and deliberate act of a conscious and responsible agent" (Ferguson 86; see also Collingwood 400ff.).

It is tempting to see chapter 0 as a counterfactual inquiry, but the historical conjuncture under discussion fails to meet the two basic pre-conditions of counterfactual thought experiments outlined in Ferguson's work: first, Mesoamerican peoples did not have the "means" and the "incentives" to undertake an expedition or conquest of lands beyond the sea (85); second, there is no contemporary evidence showing that such an alternative was ever considered (86). However, there exist in Fuentes's short story resonances with Ferguson's thought at other levels.

One such level is the inversion of narrative sequence. While not a counterfactual in itself, Ferguson acknowledges that this narrative technique implies an interrogation of the causal chain and actual necessity in the occurrence of events: "historians should never lose sight of their own 'uncertainty principle' – that any observation of historical evidence inevitably distorts its significance by the very fact of its selection through the prism of hindsight" (74). Similarly, Aguilar's narrative reminds us that "Siempre pudo ocurrir exactamente lo contrario de lo que la crónica consigna. Siempre" ("The exact opposite of what appears in the chronicles could always have happened. Always," 16). Therefore, it would be reductionist to consider this story a mere escapist fancy of imagination. "The Two Shores" claims to contest the *necessity* or the inevitability of the Spanish landing on the Americas and its catastrophic consequences for the indigenous population.

Thus, Aguilar's statement resonates with the philosophical concerns at the base of Ferguson's inquiry, that is, the dichotomy between contingency and necessity, or, in historical discourse, the question over the power of individual acts to define events in the context of wider structural processes. Aguilar's narrative concurs with Ferguson's belief in the transformative capacity of the individual will and free choice upon historical development – or at least of the will and free choice of those individuals in power, considering the case studies exposed in *Virtual History*. Thus, the perception that the fall of the Aztecs was due to Moctezuma's passivity is extensively developed; Gonzalo Guerrero, who appears in the guise of a redeeming, unifying military commander, reminds of the discursive hagiography around the *caudillos* of the wars of independence and afterwards; by contrast, the active resistance of the

Mexicas against the invasion receives only one mention in passing by Cortés when addressing the vanquished leader Cuauhtémoc. Consequently, the emphasis on contingency and free will may mask a personalistic view of history like that in the myth-making, heroic, and generally military narratives of history textbooks that target the formation of national consciousness of school pupils in many modern nation-states.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, and as long as one does not lose sight of the potential for such a pitfall, the idea that "always" something different could have happened implies an ethical declaration of the responsibility of the individual before larger determining forces. The act of claiming responsibility face to phenomena that others claim to be inevitable can, after all, be what turns each individual into a potentially active social force against the politics of *faits accomplis*.

Beyond counterfactualism, the events in chapter 0 fall under that magical realism tradition where literary imagination creates a supplement to the interpretation of history, discovering the shapes and peculiarities of a Latin American world that a dry and biased collection of facts fails to acknowledge (Simpkins, 148-49). The narrator muses, "Me pregunto si un evento que no es narrado, ocurre en realidad. Pues lo que no se inventa, sólo se consigna" ("I wonder if a non-narrated event does actually happen, for what is not invented is merely registered," 67). When, earlier on, Aguilar refers to the "final parade of the ghosts" in which Bernal Díaz registers every man and horse that joined the Mexican expedition, he claims that the chronicler has "prodigious memory" but "lack of imagination" (14-15).<sup>3</sup> From Aguilar's perspective, recording establishes an "official history," but only a discourse that combines myth, open lies, and the act of myth-making can bring an *image* of past events relevant to the present.

Gonzalo Celorio suggests that "The Two Shores" might be a discourse working through, confronting and accepting the burden of the past through a dialogue with canonical texts on both sides of the Atlantic (293-94). The narrative treatment of the story consists precisely in the

<sup>2</sup> Ray Raphael sums up the educational power of these narratives in the introduction to his brilliantly researched *Founding Myths* (1-7).

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, Díaz writes "pasó," meaning that they "moved across" from Cuba to Mexico but that can also mean "happened". Díaz intended his chronicle to vindicate the travails of the Spanish conquerors, but, ironically, his strenuous mnemonic exercise at the end transforms these men into objects that merely "happen".

search for a cultural formula that may overcome the original trauma of the Mexican subject and recognize this origin in forming a structure that redefines both culture and identity. Close to its end, the discourse of "Las dos orillas" becomes self-referential, calling attention to the reverse sequence of chapters. Aguilar calls this sequence a "cuenta al revés" ("countdown"), which might remind the reader of "explosiones mortales (. . .) ocurrencias apocalípticas" ("deadly explosions . . . apocalyptic events," 68) but instead signals the return to a "new beginning." Jerónimo de Aguilar's mnemonic and myth-making discursive act does not merely re-enact the fall of the Mesoamerican cultures. His reverse narrative claims to provide the foundations for a redefinition of Hispanic culture.

Founded on a tight intertextual framework, the story's extensive and rather explicit references to diverse Hispanic texts support interpreting this discourse as a panhispanic allegory. In addition to the theme of the talking dead present in María Luisa Bombal and Juan Rulfo, and a temporal structure drawn from Alejo Carpentier's "Viaje a la semilla" ("A Journey to the Origins") further discussed below, "The Two Shores" presents the concept of betrayal under an unfamiliar slant that mirrors and is superposed to the more traditionalistic view of the conquest of Mexico as enabled by the "treacherous" Malinche. A glance at Fuentes's dedication of "The Two Shores" to Juan Goytisolo brings to mind the Spanish author's *Reivindicación del Conde Don Julián* (*Reivindicación of Count Don Julián*). The main character in *Reivindicación* is a Spaniard exiled in Tangiers who contemplates the betrayal of his country of origin as a form of self-recreation through which he questions and rejects the foundational myths and narratives that construct Spanish culture and simultaneously erect ideological barriers that exclude him as a homosexual, a dissident, and an expatriate. Replicating the legendary betrayal of Count Don Julián, a key theme of the more traditionalistic perspectives of Spanish history, the narrator performs a symbolic opening of Spain's gates to a North African force led by his lover Tarik. This invasion will lay the foundation of a new culture that may overcome the retrograde Spanish national values. The "reverse invasion" at the end of Fuentes's story shows also an interesting parallel with the novel *Paraules d'Opòton el Vell* (*The Sayings of Old Opoton*) by Avel·lí Artís-Gener "Tísner," who was a Catalan exile in Mexico. First published in 1962 but opportunely reedited in Spanish in 1990, the novel is a reverse

caricature of the Spanish conquest through the narrative of the ascent of a Mexican (Aztec) potter to naval commander in search of the mythical "Old Aztlan" who accidentally lands in the Northern Spanish region of Galicia.

The more conspicuous source of "The Two Shores" is Bernal Díaz's *Historia verdadera* (*A Truthful Account*), from which the text quotes explicitly with slight variations. This monumental chronicle was intended as a *correction* to other historical chronicles that were more widely read at the time (such as Francisco López de Gómara's *Historia de México*) that glorified the role of Hernán Cortés as commander of the Spanish contingent. Bernal Díaz focuses on the collective aspect of the conquest of Mexico and invites the reader to contemplate it as a result of the individual merit of each of the soldiers involved. Although he did not conceal the many atrocities committed by the Spanish forces and their allies, the chronicler's biased, imperialistic perception was hardly questioned until the cultural crisis of modernity and the rise of political *indigenismo* in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. From a postmodern vantage point, Fuentes's discourse brings yet another correction – his own – upon Bernal Díaz's correction by recreating the story of the two Spanish castaways of Cozumel island, Jerónimo de Aguilar and Gonzalo Guerrero, recontextualized in the debates over the significance of the Fifth Centennial.

The temporal retrogression that structures Fuentes's narrative is similar to that in Carpentier's "Viaje a la semilla" where the retrogressive direction of time undoes fruitless life of Marcial, Marquis of Capellanías, and liberates him from the tyranny of written and spoken discourse that is also the foundation of the legality of the colonial/creole enterprise.<sup>4</sup> In the same ritual of temporal retrogression, all the household's construction materials return to their original geographical location in Europe and Africa, so that the material restoration of Africanity

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<sup>4</sup> Some examples of this imperial justification on written documents are Alexander VI's Papal bull authorizing the crown of Castile to evangelize the territories discovered West of the Azores, or the infamous *requerimiento* (requisition) in the name of queen Juana. Much of Bartolomé de las Casas's diatribe against the Spanish conquest in his monumental *Historia de las Indias* can be understood in his view of the violation of the terms of Alexander's bull. Similarly, las Casas's defense of *cacique* Guarocuya in the story generally known as "Historia de Enriquillo" is framed in terms of the colonial authorities' own violation of instituted colonial law.



becomes the metaphorical answer to the question asked to the black sorcerer in the beginning of the story ("What do you want, old timer?"). Fuentes's story is founded on a similar regenerationist argument: there is a "scratch," a traumatic scar in the origin of New World history. Since, as Aguilar claims, the culture of the New World was built on the grounds of defeat and disappointment, temporal retrogression is a form of intro- and retrospection: a poetic discourse that creates an alternative history as a metaphor of the future restitution and regeneration that could follow in the New World as long as it recognizes the value of those "alternatives of liberty, possibilities not carried out": multiculturalism, syncretism, and tolerance as the underlying values of a hybrid, multiracial culture.

Aguilar's belief in the performative potential of words, along with the particularity of the retrogressive order, make his account an actual vindication, a demand for the materialization of an alternative cross-cultural contact beyond war and genocide resulting from the Spanish arrival. The narrator adds: "La narración disputa el orden de las cosas. El silencio lo confirma" ("Narrative disputes the order of things. Silence confirms it," 67). Silence before the discursive order of the chronicler-historian implies an acceptance of the order imposed by the conqueror. Aguilar's treacherous and subversive use of language is combined with his narrative act of "reversing" a sequence or chronological order, questioning the chain of events that have already occurred, and therefore inviting, metaphorically, to subvert the silent order of things, the sour cultural and racial divide between the conqueror and the conquered founded in the original trauma.

In a parody of the colonizer's rhetoric, Aguilar minimizes the atrocities committed in a military enterprise, describing ritual execution and rape, and suggests they were undertaken for a "greater good" (63-64). The double act of minimizing and justifying in an unfamiliar narrative like "the American conquest of Spain" reveals the lack of argumentative soundness in the colonial discourse, the "official" discourse of the Spanish conquest of the Americas. Nonetheless, Aguilar presents the Mesoamerican conquest as a *cultural conquest*. The invaders create a new temple "inscrito con el verbo de Cristo, Mahoma, Abraham y Quetzalcóatl" ("inscribed with the word of Christ, Muhammad, Abraham, and Quetzalcóatl," 62), they abolish the infamous blood purity laws of the Catholic kings so that Jews and Moors may return, and the eclectic mingling of

songs and instruments from the four cultures represents their harmonic integration. The Amerindian presence restores the mythical substrate of Spanish culture and reanimates the "forgotten gods" of older cultures.

The repetition with variation of Díaz del Castillo's chronicle, along with the reverse conquest at the end of the narrative are consistent with Ingeborg Hoesterey's concept of "postmodern pastiche", defined by characteristics such as "negative homage paid to an overpowering cultural presence" and "hybridity through anachronistic manipulation" (Hoesterey 86). Carrie Chorba, however, sees in Fuentes's vision of a unified transatlantic culture a "problematic overvaluation of Spanish" as a "unifying (or uniform) factor of the Hispanic culture and identity [that] depletes the text of the very heterogeneity it proclaims" (480). Aguilar is unambiguous:

La lengua española ya había aprendido, antes, a hablar en fenicio, griego, latín, árabe y hebreo; estaba lista para recibir, ahora, los aportes mayas y aztecas, enriquecerse con ellos, enriquecerlos, darles flexibilidad, imaginación, comunicabilidad y escritura, convirtiéndolas a todas en lenguas vivas, no lenguas de los imperios, sino de los hombres y sus encuentros, contagios, sueños y pesadillas también. (65-66)

Chorba analyzes Fuentes's story at length to conclude that "because of an inherent contradiction in Fuentes's thoughts about cultural plurality and continuity, 'The Two Shores' does not fully bring about the inclusivity that the author advocates so energetically" (494-95). We still lack, however, a more extensive analysis discussing how the rhetoric of Fuentes's later works shows a return to the ideology of national "mestizaje" sanctified by writers such as José Vasconcelos and Octavio Paz during the so-called "cultural phase" of the Mexican Revolution.

To sum up, then, the narrator of "The Two Shores" is an acculturated white male whose discourse resorts to foundational authors such as Bernal Díaz del Castillo (whom Fuentes acknowledges as the "foundation" of Mexican literature in *Valiente mundo nuevo*, 75) and to recognizable Latin American *topoi* such as the dead narrator (*La amortajada*, *Pedro Páramo*). These intertexts imply support for the established canon of the Hispanic cultural tradition. Furthermore, Fuentes uses themes such as betrayal, temporal reversal, and inversion of roles recurrent in 20<sup>th</sup> century narratives such as "Viaje a la semilla" or *Reivindicación* that also convey a regenerationist cultural message. The story's intertexts suggest that "The Two Shores" is less an exercise in alterna-

tive history, as others have suggested, and more a cultural allegory that sees in the validation of Hispanophoné culture a remedy to the haunting traumatic foundations of Latin American culture.

While the story is not a counterfactual exercise, it is nonetheless clear that Fuentes shares with Ferguson a classical liberal belief in the capacity of a willing individual to engage in actions that might change the course of history. However, from a political standpoint this position contrasts with the more collectivist appeal to the value of the Spanish language as a unifying cultural bond over all the other tongues, classical and indigenous. Therefore, further analysis of this short story by Fuentes, as well as much of his later work, should be aimed at determining whether his cultural propositions are consistent with the political principles on which it claims to be founded, and/or whether they are democratically plausible once their social and political implications have been carefully examined.

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