

ENCUENTROS



Aspects of Creation in the Central American Novel

Lecture by

Gloria Guardia

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ASPECTS OF CREATION IN THE CENTRAL AMERICAN NOVEL

Gloria Guardia

When a novelist begins a dialogue with a reading audience on the intimacies of his vocation, most often it is to make a profound confession about his problems and travails, not to embark on an academic dissertation. That task, we know, belongs to the critics. Nonetheless, we are greatly indebted to critics, for the conception and elaboration of our work has close connections to questions of form and criticism. As the poet T.S. Eliot said, “[creation implies] sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing... [T]he criticism employed by a trained and skilled writer on his own work is the most vital, the highest kind of criticism.”¹

Romanticism gave rise to a new Poetic, which rejected Aristotle as overly deterministic, and instead concurred with Coleridge, Poe, Baudelaire, Heidegger, and Gadamer, who affirmed that each work engenders its own criticism and theory. Beginning in the nineteenth century, the committed author is at once a critic, theoretician, poet, and novelist because, in the name of literature itself, “po-

etry and prose, creation and criticism, all mix and melt together.”²

In my case, I must admit that for more than three decades now, I have lived daily in the skins of authors from different zones and regions: sensing them, thinking about them, scrutinizing them on the work table, and loving them. In this way I have learned practically all I know about the whys and wherefores of this absorbing occupation—the making of literary texts.

To provide a testimony about my vocation, due to my origins, it seemed most important to explore, as deeply as possible, aspects of literary creation in Central America. Many thorny problems beset anyone in this region who devotes himself to the novel, perforce exiling himself to the desert of the blank page where, in the words of Ernesto Sábato, “[the writer] must give, in a finite work, a reality that is fatally infinite.”³

It might be wise to start with *when* and *how* one becomes a novelist. Interviewers usually ask these questions first, in the

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belief—not entirely unfounded—that the answers might lead to the very depths of *why* one is drawn to a literary profession.

I would say that an authentic novelist is one who writes because he recognizes that, through him, rhetorical processes acquire a foundational ontologic dimension; he wants to seize on “the being” of “beings,” including his own. Although there is no such thing as direct communication with reality, literature constitutes a way to formulate, metaphorically, the problem of knowledge, a conundrum that humanity has pondered throughout the centuries.

The predilection for this occupation arises not from a youthful impulse to weave together lovely words, nor even from an attempt to express one’s brilliance by describing superficial intrigues. No, it is the result of a long, slow labor during which the emergent writer gives birth to his language and, in the process, is driven to discover, then to express and re-create in an authentic idiom, the enigma of being-in-time. In short, the vocation is sealed at the very moment of reaching the conclusion that there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that excites one more than tracing, describing, perhaps altering, one’s luminous, long, and mysterious “condition of being alive,” in the words of María Zambrano.⁴

From this instant of eager recognition, if the writer is sufficiently persistent, passionate, and firm in dedicating his existence to the task—knowing that innumerable obstacles and setbacks lie ahead—perhaps he will have reached the first stage of development. That stage is a preliminary way of perceiving and describing life beyond the merely phenomenological, which rises to the level of metaphor. Be-

yond that, the writer must address the fundamental themes and problems of the Other, and acknowledge the extent to which alterity is a fount of consciousness, an essential element in engendering any society. As [the Catalan writer and philosopher] Eugenio Trías has said, “an art that does not stretch toward the limits, that does not rise to the level of the symbolic, is not art...it devolves into pure narrativism...if not into stale journalistic trivialities.”⁵

A novelist is not born, but made. He is constantly observing, reflecting on his triple vital relation: with the mysteries of being; with the world and the elements of creation; and with other human beings⁶. He reads a great deal, but selectively. He writes daily, and permits nothing and no one to distract him from the obsessive need to discover and bear witness to his drama, his intrinsic solitude, his dialogic volition. This is the human essence: we are “words-in-dialogue,” as Hölderlin said and Heidegger reiterated.⁷ If these experiences erupt from an authentic root, if the novelist recognizes that instant when time “opens its dimensions to be at once present, past, and future,”⁸ then the writing that results will burst the boundaries of merely personal expression, and will, inevitably, attract general interest.

Nevertheless, this profound exploration of the human heart, together with the constant struggle to achieve an identity that will not be eclipsed over time, is an exhausting labor. It requires rational concentration, and the well-cultivated ability to acknowledge, to inhabit one’s spiritual center of gravity, as well as the surrounding circumstances, without falling into egotism or the tempting trap of the folkloric. Succumbing to the allures of the

folkloric will inevitably limit, rather than enrich it.

The Central American novelist bursts onto a scene that is ominous for his occupation, owing to a variety of circumstances: a society dispossessed of its cultural past, a lack of literary stimulation, and no tradition of freedom of expression. Needless to say, this isolation encourages writing that is excessively local within the world context. As Mario Vargas Llosa has said, it also foments "improvisation, lack of intellectual discipline, the stupid arrogance produced by a vulgar semi-culture and provincial spirit."^{9a}

To overcome these obstacles, the intellectual may resort to voluntary or involuntary exile, heading for countries with little connection to his identity and cultural background. For better or worse, this exile separates him from that which defines him: what Heidegger calls one's foundational ontologic dimension.

The resulting scenario is often discouraging. Either the writer becomes too local, limiting himself to a coarse, linear, mimetic account of his surroundings, without achieving any kind of symbolism or linguistic statement; or he endeavors to become foreign, producing work that reflects a lack of commitment to himself, to his culture, history, and authentic language. These obstacles still are the basic conundra for any Central American writer aspiring to achieve a literary metaphor for his personal and national identity.

Twenty years ago, when the Latin American novel began achieving international notice, *La Prensa Literaria Centroamericana*^{9b} did a survey of five Central American novelists. All were professionals, with a certain standing and a commitment to time and place, as well as recognition beyond na-

tional borders. The reason for the inquiry was to learn from these novelists which authors and books had most influenced their literary formation. As was to be expected, the investigation yielded valuable information.

First, the authors selected by most of these writer-respondents were Proust, Joyce, Faulkner, Mann, Camus, Hemingway, Kafka, García Márquez, Rulfo, and Guimarães Rosa—five Europeans, two North Americans, and three Latin Americans. Second, the Central American literary tradition, particularly that of the novel, was largely absent as an influence among those surveyed. Third, while the authors chosen for the survey had achieved an authentically literary body of work, it was evident that they had been served and inspired by their places of origin: they were able to shed new light on regional characteristics and also fortify their existential or ontological condition, as defined by Heidegger. The survey also established that, although the lack of a literary tradition had been a limiting factor, if the writer could distinguish the autochthonous from the alien, then he could produce writing that might reconcile the extremes, to echo the critic and novelist Miguel Donoso Pareja.

To reach this equilibrium is still a difficult task for the equatorial writer, especially because of that other constant impediment in Central American history and literature. I am referring to the lack of freedom of thought—and therefore expression—that victimized us until very recently. Most of the region has been governed, since time immemorial, by dictatorial regimes, whose very nature was to prohibit the articulate exchange of ideas. This constant censorship has produced

what the Spanish novelist Juan Goytisolo called a veritable moral genocide¹⁰—when a people is forced to live, day after day, in a situation that demands silence and dissimulation. This in turn engenders the abandonment of moral, ethical, and political principles, and leads to castrating resignation, to cynicism and disillusionment.

So it is hardly strange that Central American literary production has suffered in essence, as well as quality. When a people is trapped by hatred and panic, genuine ontological reflection can never flourish. Moreover, in the words of the author of *Marks of Identity* (*Señas de identidad*), there was an even more serious byproduct of those regimens whose power was sealed by blacklists and codes of silence. I am referring to self-censorship.

To once again quote Goytisolo, “a system of self-censorship and spiritual atrophy, [condemns a people] to the sinuous art of reading and writing between the lines. We are always aware of the existence of a censor invested with the monstrous ability to mutilate us. Freedom of expression is not something one acquires easily. I know from experience that I had to make enormous efforts to eject this unwelcome guest from my innermost self: deep within [me] the police had taken up residence without ever having been invited... One must fight externally and internally against the model of intrinsic censorship, including that which interrupts the ‘workings of the soul,’ in Freud’s famous phrase.”¹¹

Liberation, if truly it has come to our countries, has been a belated phenomenon. Most Central American societies have developed in a tragic tradition of marginality, intellectual dependence, and silence. These factors operate on a double

plane, affecting both the citizen and the writer, depriving the former of the most elemental moral and social rights, and the latter of the opportunity to develop in his profession and to realize a body of work. If we believe that the development of reflective and critical consciousness requires the permanent exercise of constitutional democracy, then it is hardly surprising that we still lack the inner freedom to explore the drama and passions arising from our transitory existence. This theme is intrinsic to any novel that aspires to be more than a well-crafted narrative, a virtuosic composition, a *costumbrista* exercise, or a consumer product aimed at pleasing the mass market.

Still and all, the panorama is not so dark as it might appear, and there are exceptions to the rule. In particular, three novelists from the region—two Guatemalans, Miguel Angel Asturias and Arturo Arias, and one Nicaraguan, Sergio Ramírez—have managed to break through the barrier of silence that usually entraps Central Americans.

In the case of Asturias and Arias, each in his particular moment felt obliged to purchase creative freedom at the high price of exile—Asturias in Paris and Arias in San Francisco, California. However, once abroad, both men (as scholars of the universal legacies of the novel, as deeply reflective individuals, and as great appreciators of their country’s indigenous traditions) conceived a literary discourse that was at once authentically Central American and universal. They managed to break with the traditional mimetic theories of the western novel, replacing the physical organizational scheme with a cultural one.

Miguel Angel Asturias’s novels *El señor presidente* (1946), *Men of Maize* (1949), *The Green Pope* (1954) and *The Mulata* (1963)¹²

capture the presence of a free man who went beyond the limits of the picturesque newspaper serial, to express that which all human beings have in common: the drama of the inevitable end. Presented with supreme clarity are the feelings and passions elicited by the prospect of our demise: stinginess, solitude, disillusionment, longing for and abuse of power, terror before death, rebellion in the face of the absurd, and the yearning for what is absolute and eternal.

In Arturo Arias's novels *After the Bombs* (1975), *La casa de la lagartija* (The Lizard's House) (1979), and *Itzam Na* (1981),¹³ we see the deft handling of new stylistic resources and the invention of a language that breaks with grammar. These novels overturn the assumptions on which that logocentric society maintained itself until mid-twentieth century. Arias's body of work reveals an author who accepted a literary discourse whose exigencies were *fictive, rather than documentary*. Arias was no verificationist.

The third author, Sergio Ramírez, from Nicaragua, presents a different profile. A Sandinista politician and idealogue, he went into exile during the last years of the Somoza dictatorship. Ramírez returned to his country when the revolution triumphed in July 1979, and became Vice President in Commander Daniel Ortega's administration.

It is especially interesting and noteworthy that Ramírez never considered himself primarily a politician, but rather an intellectual and writer committed to a particular ideology. In 1988, while still Vice President, he published the novel *Castigo divino* (Divine Punishment),¹⁴ which won the International Hammett Prize, given in Germany. Within a few

years, he left the administration, but remained leader of the Sandinista Party in the Nicaraguan Parliament. During this time, he conceived and wrote *Clave de sol* (Treble Clef) (1992),¹⁵ and *Un baile de máscaras* (Masked Ball) (1995).¹⁶

For *Margarita está linda la mar* (Margarita, the Sea is Beautiful) (1998),¹⁷ Ramírez received Spain's prestigious Alfaguara Prize for the Novel, together with Eliseo Alberto from Cuba. The 1998 Alfaguara Prize, we should acknowledge, was given in recognition not only of the Nicaraguan author, but also of the Central American novel. So we see how, for critics and readers throughout the Spanish-speaking world, the region's literature has leapt to prominence.

Margarita está linda la mar evokes by its very title the figure of Rubén Darío, the ultimate exponent of Central American literature and acknowledged paladin of Modernism, the first poetic movement the region could call its own. This play of metaphor, as conceived by Ramírez, also encapsulates Nicaragua's history over the last century. By titling the novel with a line from Darío's most famous poem, Ramírez brings the poet, his work, and epoch alive. This also connects Darío with the other central theme of the book: the conspiracy leading to the assassination of dictator Anastasio Somoza García, in the city of León in September, 1956. The point of union between the two worlds is precisely this poem, dedicated to Margarita Debayle, whose sister became the tyrant's wife and founding mother of the political dynasty years later.

Ramírez' novels push back the social and institutional boundaries of the genre, bringing together the most diverse themes and narrative attitudes. In *Margarita está*

linda la mar, Ramírez is popular, sentimental, even romantic, yet violates the boundaries between verisimilitude and the marvelous, between the real and the mythic, between the *boudoir* and the bourgeois world, without forgetting, of course, the world of politics. For the first time in Central American fiction, this work brings together those domains which for so long were considered merely horror or mystery stories and also, paradoxically, fairy tales. With the encoded *Margarita está linda la mar*, Sergio Ramírez is a postmodern novelist. He is, in other words, a “double agent,” who moves as easily through so-called reality as in the spheres of the miraculous and who is, above all, as ready to plunge into the jungle of myth as into the dimensions of the erotic, without any fear whatsoever.

In sum, with this novel, Ramírez accomplishes the most varied, pluralist conjunction of themes, characters, plots, styles, levels of culture, traditions, forms, epochs, and genres. It is precisely this hybrid character that makes *Margarita está linda la mar* a totally postmodern narrative.

All this makes clear a concrete fact: that the will of these three authors to create a novel open to a critical vision of the status quo made for a new way to write in Central America. For the first time, writers from this region were true contemporaries of other western novelists. We are also grateful to these authors for breaking down the stereotype of local authors still preaching the tenets of nineteenth-century Naturalism and Realism, as laid down by Balzac—that the novel had to be “a mirror [one passes] down the whole long road.”

Before concluding I would like to address the problems that afflict Central

American women, particularly our region’s writers. And here I’m reminded of an essay that Angel Rama wrote shortly before his death. The Uruguayan critic said that since its inception, Latin American culture has been rigorously masculine and that literature’s “urgent task was to forge the ideological change needed to make the culture integrally human.”¹⁸

When I first read these words by the critic who had awarded me the 1976 EDUCA Prize for the Central American Novel, I interpreted them as a “concession” to the feminine, especially in a society where disdain and indifference seem always to surround the publication of books by women. If the situation has been difficult for the region’s novelists, it has been worse still for women who aspired to the profession. Today, as yesterday, women who want to write in Central America run many risks. Together with the desire for recognition is the terror not just of censorship, but also self-censorship, fostered by a cultural conditioning in which “artistic temperament” is understood to mean “inferiority.”

There is no doubt that the feminine culture in our region symbolizes all that is repressed, especially within the canons of a society where tradition, the habits of daily and family life, religion, and the law are still inescapably *machista*. In general, the Central American woman is not educated with the same rigor as her peers elsewhere. Instead she is prepared almost exclusively for procreation and, perhaps, marriage. In Central America, the woman who thinks, reads, reflects, and writes is considered a threat to the established order. She is branded a know-it-all and, consequently, socially ostracized for being a pedant, for being dangerous. Even now in many of our countries, the reigning

wisdom is to isolate her.¹⁹

To pursue a literary life in centuries past, women had to enter convents, where they might dare “commit tender words to paper that was soft like a bedsheet,” as the Colombian Anabel Torres has said, not without a touch of irony.²⁰ So it is hardly surprising that among the region’s female writers there prevails an “anxiety of influence” toward our female predecessors, the mystical as well as the frivolous ones; and toward the males who, as the incarnation of authority, impose the stereotypes that encourage us to shrink from subjectivity, autonomy, and creativity, as M. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar so perspicaciously analyzed in *The Madwoman in the Attic*.²¹

For the Central American woman novelist, the struggle must be waged not just without, but within. It is extremely difficult for her to enter, with any sense of freedom, that subjective realm which holds the keys to personality and creative process. Moreover, in terms of language, she has yet to create and employ her own, which—contrary to much belief—is neither masculine and objective, nor that “sweet, veiled register” to which our predecessors were accustomed. The language of the Central American woman novelist—when we have truly forged it—will have a closer, more direct connection to the verbal play that is as metaphorical as it is meditative, as articulate as it is sensual.²² Clarice Lispector demonstrated this in her unforgettable *An Apprenticeship, or The Book of Delights*.²³

In summary, I would like to stress that the novel has validity as a genre to the degree that it functions as a cipher for consciousness, where human and linguistic concerns are paramount, and where the complexities of discourse itself can be

explored. As Central American women novelists, we must prepare to take a stronger role in our society. Our society needs our presence, as witnesses to and voices of the historic, cultural, and gender dramas that have kept us back, kept us submissive to outmoded canons of creation. As novelists we are called to bear witness, to forge the culture that gives expression to the aspirations of Central Americans, to possess the lands we walk upon and the dreams these lands engender.

We say again: a people without novelists is a people without history, without consciousness, without desire. What may seem a literary concern will over time become tradition and myth, because it is political and cultural metaphor, enriched by the wisdom gained from within and beyond our own lives.

However, the instigator of this drama, this purveyor of dreams, this utopian voice woven into the discourse of imagination, magic, and hope, is not given to us for free. Nor should this figure be kept wretched, closed off “in the miserable little room at the back of the house, where wealthy families used to keep their lunatics and consumptives.”²⁴

Let us give to our Central American narrators “a room of their own.”²⁵ Let us make contact with the world through good libraries—for reading awakens us to the need to forge our own consciousness, to claim our own dreams, and to gain therefrom a sense of what it means to be human. We must offer the appropriate stimulation—time, economic remuneration, and suitable publishers. All this will contribute to the promotion of thought, of reflection, whose fruit will be the novel: original in its meditations, enduring in its dreams, and persevering in its questions.

NOTES *

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3. Ernesto Sábato, *El escritor y sus fantasmas* (The Writer and his Phantasms), (Buenos Aires: Aguilar Argentina, 4th edition, 1971), p. 260.
4. María Zambrano, *Por qué se escribe. Hacia un saber sobre el alma* (Why Write: Toward an Understanding of the Soul) (Madrid: Alianza Tres, 1993). Zambrano has one title currently available in English: *Delirium and Destiny: A Spaniard in Her Twenties*, translation by Carol Maier, commentary by Roberta Johnson. Buffalo: SUNY Press, 1998.
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6. Martin Buber, *Qué es el hombre?* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 3rd printing, 1994), p. 107. See also *Knowledge of Man: Selected Essays*, reprint. Humanity Books, 1988.
7. Martin Heidegger, op. cit.
8. Ibid.
- 9a. Mario Vargas Llosa, *García Márquez: Historia de un deicidio* (García Márquez: Story of a Deicide), (Barcelona, Caracas: Monte Avila Editores, C.A., 1971), p. 208.

* Trans. note: English translations of the works are noted; the titles of untranslated works are given literally.

- 9b. Edited at the time by the Nicaraguan Pablo Antonio Cuadra.
10. Juan Goytisolo, "In Memoriam: F.F.B.," *La Prensa Literaria Centroamericana*, vol. I (No. 12, first epoch): 12.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Enrique Anderson Imbert, *Historia de la literatura hispanoamericana* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987), vol. II, "Epoca Contemporánea," pp. 215-128. This work is available in English: *Spanish American Literature, A History*, translated by John C. Falconieri (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963).
13. Arturo Arias, *Después de las bombas* (Havana: Casa de las Américas, 1979); translated as *After the Bombs*, by Asa Zata (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1990). *La casa de la lagartija* (Havana: Casa de las Américas, 1979). *Itzam Na* (Havana: Casa de las Américas, 1981).
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15. _____, *Clave de sol* (Treble Clef) (San José, Alfaguara, 1992).
16. _____, *Un baile de máscaras* (Masked Ball), (San José, Alfaguara, 1995).
17. _____, *Margarita, está linda la mar* (Margarita, the Sea is Beautiful), (Madrid: Grupo Santillana de Ediciones, S.A., 1998), Alfaguara Prize for the Novel, 1998. Ramírez has only one book currently available in English: *To bury our Fathers: A Novel of Nicaragua* [*Tè dió miedo la sangre?*] (Columbia, La.: Readers International, 1984).
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21. Gilbert and Gubar, *op. cit.*, p. 48.
22. George Steiner, *Après Babel* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1978), p. 51. Originally published as

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Gloria Guardia (b. Panama, 1940), fiction writer and essayist, is a Fellow of Panama's Academy of Letters, and an Associate Fellow to both the Spanish Royal Academy and to the Colombian Academy of Letters. She was educated in Europe (in Philosophy and Letters at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid and in Spanish and Ibero-American Literature at the Institute for Spanish Culture, also in Madrid); and in the United States (BA cum laude from Vassar College and MA from Columbia University).

Her literary work, which includes twelve books and numerous monographs, has been translated into English, Russian and German. She has received the Society of Spanish and Latin-American Writers Prize (Madrid: Editorial Cultural Clásica y Moderna, 1961); the Ricardo Miró National Prize in the Essay and Novel (Panama, 1966); the EDUCA Prize for the Central American Novel (Costa Rica, 1976); the *Lotería Magazine* Prize (Panama, 1971 and 1984); and the National Short Story Prize (Bogotá, 1996).

For fifteen years (1975-1990), Gloria Guardia was an international syndicated columnist for Agencia Latinoamericana (or ALA, with bureaus in Coral Gables and London), and as a columnist for the newspapers *La Prensa* and *Panamá América* in Panama City. She has also been a correspondent in Panama for ABC Television News, and a member of the Board of Directors and Trustees for Channel 13 in the Republic of Panama.

In 1990, she collaborated in the twentieth edition of the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* (Spanish acronym, DRAE; English acronym, DRSA, for Dictionary of the Spanish Royal Academy). She is the founder of the first Panamanian chapter of International PEN (Poets, Essayists, Novelists). She is currently the Secretary General of PEN in Colombia, and one of the nine members of PEN's International Executive Committee, with headquarters in London.

Since 1995, she has resided with her husband, Ricardo Alfaro Arosemena, in Bogota, Colombia.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gloria Guardia". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

LITERARY WORKS BY GLORIA GUARDIA

(The works listed below are as yet unavailable in English. Titles are translated literally.)

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Gloria Guardia has also published numerous lectures, monographs, lexicographical notes, interviews, articles, and stories.

Translated by Marguerite Feitlowitz

Trans. note: For the Archive of Hispanic Literature at The Library of Congress, Guardia read from her work and was interviewed by scholar Georgette M. Dorn. This Spanish-language recording was made on April 20, 1995, in Washington, D.C.

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