

The [Im]possibility of Theory: Critiquing *Pedro Paramo*

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The generic affiliation of ‘Theory’ with Deconstruction, as perceived by the academia, and literary criticism as based on ‘theory’ in a literature classroom in the University often ignores, and thereby, stands in contradiction to Derrida’s other proposition that ‘The law of Genre,’ is “a law of purity, a law against miscegenation.” (Frow 26) The application of a theory for interpretation of a literary work anticipates an absolutist and primordial state of a text and its meaning. As an alternative to such a critical practice this paper attempts to read Juan Rulfo, the Mexican novelist’s *Pedro Paramo* (1955) as a complex narrative that destabilizes any possibility of reading the text from a singular theoretical perspective. Paradoxically, though when we question the possibility of ‘theory’ we are also engaging in a critical act that deconstructs itself, thereby, reinforcing theory and getting caught in its own aporia.

A collection of 70 “fragments” Juan Rulfo’s novel *Pedro Paramo* is designed as a text that dismantles its own structure. Yet, paradoxically it exists within its frame of the novel. The strategic but liminal position, the aporia in which the characters and narrators exist marks the thin line that exists in the encounters between the real and the illusory, the spatial and the temporal, life and death, past and present. The discursive nature of the text makes it impossible to pin it down to a single meaning, even as it is impossible to make meaning without theorizing. I argue that *Pedro Paramo* dramatizes the complex readerly act of engaging in theory, and simultaneously disengaging itself from any such reductive perspective. Questioning the limits of theoretical paradigms it suggests the permeability of those limits, that the reader’s fetish for

stable meanings is blinkered, and ironically absolutist and authoritative like its central character, Pedro Paramo.

The novel traces the rise of a *Cacique*, or a local Governor in Comala, a town in Mexico, and his death. A non-linear narrative, it moves in flashbacks and flash forwards, as Susan Sontag puts it: in “the Comala of the present and the Comala of the past.” (vii) The two worlds are presented in two parts. Part one ends with the death of Juan Preciado, who has ventured out in search of his father, Pedro Paramo. The second part ends with the assassination of Pedro Paramo. Comala, thus, is a dead town, where the person who is undergoing the journey as well as his destination is dead. It is, as Alan Bell calls it “an ultimate blending of the man and land,” and I would add, the text, Pedro Paramo being an eponymous character. The names also are suggestive: ‘Pedro’ (originating from the Latin word ‘petra’) means rocks or stones, and ‘paramo’ in Spanish refers to a piece of barren or waste land. ‘Comala,’ similarly, denotes the scorched situation of an earthenware pot used for cooking tortillas, symbolically referring to the scorched situation of the town.

The novel was originally titled *Los Murmullos*, or “The Murmurs.” It is worth considering what stories these murmurings have to tell us. Each of the seventy fragments narrate an event, with vivid and memorable descriptions of people, places and incidents all contained within the eerie atmosphere of a ghost town—in a typically magic realist tradition. These images come forth as first person and third person perspectives, grumblings of the dead from under their graves, and sometimes as commentaries or conversations. It is ‘real life’ dramatized, of dead people when they were living —the reality of a world infested with violence, cruelty, incest, prostitution, religious hypocrisy, capitalist incursions, revenge and guilt, strangely dissonant voices of conflicts and contradictions confronting each other. What is at work is a complex interweaving of lived reality as here and now, and gone next, and the tricks that memory plays in narrating those. In such a fictional world, where content, form, art, technique and point of view interweave into a whole, no reading can be final, no meaning can be conclusive. Here, every event, every narrative, every

fragment is determined by a theory that fails its veracity, proves itself false in the next.

The novel begins with questioning 'home' as the place of origin. A short novella, it starts with epic proportions with the Odyssey of the search of a son for his father. The search is, however, initiated by the mother, who is now dead. The father happens to be the eponymous character, Pedro Paramo. Since meaning is invested in the text, Preciado's search for his father is by allusion a search for meaning. But again, since Pedro Paramo also happens to be the cacique, logically speaking, meaning is implied to be authoritative. The search for meaning is further complicated when Preciado deliberately creates ambiguity, first, by stating that the reason for his search was the promise made to his mother. Then, denying, "I never meant to keep my promise. But before I knew it my head began to swim with dreams and my imagination took flight." (3) Every attempt at arriving at meaning then is only imaginative, fanciful. And if at the end the reader thinks s/he has succeeded in collecting the fragments to unravel the mystery of Pedro Paramo, it is the conundrum of the man and the text that is finally asserted. For remove one fragment, and the entire text begins to collapse "like a pile of rocks" (124) that must be rearranged.

Meaning/s exist/s. But the issue is whether there is only one meaning, and one approach to it. The desire for a single and final meaning may be natural. But that cannot deny the possibility of other meanings. And mode of approaching them may not be limited to deconstruction, or the traditional new criticism. If the reader is important, so also is the author, his text and the context. Some prior knowledge, even esoteric knowledge becomes necessary for interpretation and appreciation. Preciado's imaginative pursuit must be nourished by his mother's memories as the repository of existing ideas without which his journey would be 'meaningless.' Therefore, memory must be nourished by imagination. Otherwise, there is the fear of 'arrival'—the end of the journey, and hence, the tale. This would entail the death of the author, as well as the reader. The former when there is no tale to tell, the latter in the absence of meaning.

Two things happen in the course of the novel: 1) The journey/ search for Pedro Paramo begins. The maternal injunction, “don’t ask him for anything. Just what’s ours.... Make him pay, son,” (3) according to Patrick Dove, calls for restitution of meaning, “a demand for justice.” (36) And, a demand for justice is “undeconstructible.” (36) The originary myth delimits the plenitude of possible readings. Actually, the novel begins, not with the journey, but with Juan’s arrival: “I came to Comala because I had been told that my father, a man named Pedro Paramo lived there.” (3) Juan has arrived even before his journey begins. Hence, the wasteland of meanings. For meanings to arise, the journey must actually be undertaken. It was only Preciado’s imagination that had led him on. He fails to find Pedro Paramo, and dies. Juan dies, and along with him the author and part-narrator too dies. Both, after all share the same first name, like K in Kafka’s novels. 2) Susana takes over the narrative. Perspective changes. Juan becomes the listener/ reader. And the plot progresses. So, long as there is a perspective, there is a tale. So long as Juan exercises his authority there is the fear of losing the way. He, as the author/ity must die to become part of the narrative and subject to interpretation if the plot must progress. He gives up his old position, and must now allow for ‘other’ voices from the margins— the illegitimate, sinful ones. These voices will “little by little ... beg[i]n to build a world around a hope centered on the man called Pedro Paramo.” (3) The mutation of the author into the reader opens up possibilities of several interpretations. Carmen Boullosa sums up the novel as an ideal example of the art of storytelling by calling attention to its “innumerable interpretations.” It has been said to

represent, embody, allegorize and illuminate: the times of Porfirio Diaz’s dictatorship, the social context of the Revolution, patriarchal rancher culture and the repression of women, the poetic qualities of rural speech, Mexico’s relationship with death, the lingering influence on Mexicans of Aztec cosmology, Mexican deruralization and the ghost towns it created, Mexican culture, Mexican history,

Mexican modernity, universal myths and archetypes.
All these interpretations are right, except those
asserting that they alone are right.

We may identify interpretations based on the perspectives of Juan Preciado, Dolores, his mother, Dorotea, Susana, Pedro's last wife, Eduviges Dyada, Father Rentaria, the priest, Donis and his sister, other unnamed voices, and even third person narrative voices:

1) From Preciado's perspective, the novel depicts an individual's search for the self, a legitimate identity in a State where, it is insinuated that every citizen is a bastard child. Abundio, one of his bastard sons who kills Pedro Paramo declares: "We're Pedro Paramo's sons, all right, but, for all that, our mothers brought us into the world on straw mats. And the real joke of it is that he's the one carried us to be baptized" (7). Dove would point out that this return to the primal scene will "take shape as an aporetic encounter," (94) that will stimulate further search.

2) Dolores Preciado, Pedro's wife and Juan's mother, who Pedro had married so that he could clear his debts to her father; Susana, Pedro Paramo's only love, but someone who he forcefully takes to wife, Dorotea, the woman who the heavens had mistakenly given "a mother's heart but the womb of a whore" (60), the sterility of Comala, present the novel as a study on the oppression of women. One cannot avoid feminist considerations. Beardsell points out that in his quest for the father, Preciado re-encounters his mother, in Dolores, Eduviges, Damiana, Dorotea, and Donis' sister.

3) To a Marxist, Comala is "the town of [Preciado's] mother's memories," its "green plain tinged with the yellow of ripe corn," (4) is "like a piggy bank filled with memories." (58)—the story of a Capitalist order replacing an old feudal structure. When Porforio Diaz became President, he encouraged foreign investments to help the economic situation in Mexico. Investors were pleased with Mexico's cheap labour force. The Mexican Indian labourers worked under cruel conditions. Susana's father's lowering her into an abandoned mine is symbolic.

4) Susana's memories of her lover, Florencio, a dead soldier of the Peasant/ Mexican revolution, and Father Renteria's voice are

reminders of the muffled protest of Mexicans against the Cacique. Ernesto Franco calls *Pedro Paramo* “a page of history without any date or hero.” (855). Pedro’s accumulation of land as a rancher parallels the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz (1876-1911). The novel also refers to the Cristeros War (1926-29) when Father Renteria joins the revolution: “Years later Father Renteria would remember the night when his hard bed had kept him awake and driven him outside.” (68)

5) These lines will echo in Marquez’s opening of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: “Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendia was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice”—the line that would introduce to us the epic tale of several generations of Buendias to narrativise a turbulent Latin American history of failed revolutions. Both stories about a quasi-feudal social order that gave rise to ghost towns could be an engaging intertextual exercise. Both Pedro Paramo, a despot, and Colonel Aureliano Buendia a revolutionary are strong dominant, rural leaders. Both fail to sustain their towns. The inhabitants of Comala and Macondo share a common custom of the living appearing to converse with the dead.

6) Leading us to a discussion on the Mexican cultural preoccupation with death and eschatology. In a typical Mexican cultural discourse Juan is all the time in communication with his dead mother who guides him to Comala, where “life whirs by as quiet as a murmur [...] the pure murmuring of life...” (58) Ironically, this life-giving murmuring of the mother is transmuted into moaning and murmurings of dead souls in torment that takes the life of Preciado. Preciado confesses “Yes, Dorotea. The murmuring killed me.” (58)

7) With this, the novel becomes a dissertation on Roman Catholic understanding of purgatory. Preciado is indeed a man in purgatory. He describes his experience after death in the house of Donis, from the grave: “I remember I got there by feeling my way along the walls as if I were walking with my hands. And the walls seemed to distill the voices, they seemed to be filtering through the cracks and crumbling mortar.... I began to sense that whispering

drawing nearer, circling around me, a constant buzzing... until finally I could hear the almost soundless words 'Pray for us.'" (58-59)

8) Comala is a town of sinners. The ultimate sin being incest. Donis and his unnamed sister-wife, or Susana's tale of her old father, bring us close to a Freudian understanding. Beardsell interprets: one son, Abundio kills his father, while another son Juan has intimate relations with the mother, the sister-wife of Donis.

9) The name Donis, in its allusion to Adonis anticipates myths of fertility and regeneration. Critics such as Nicolas Emilio Alvarez (1983) have drawn attention to the underlying mythical content of the novel. Beardsell suggests:

If we connect Juan's journey to Comala with his encounter with death, we recognize that his experiences constitute a kind of metaphysical quest, such as those known throughout the world in myths.... In making a journey from his mother's bedside to his father's town—i. e. from his home back to his place of origin—Juan makes an archetypal journey. In particular it is consistent with the universal myth of Eternal Return in a place (usually a temple or a sacred city) at which heaven, earth and hell meet: a cosmic centre or *Axis Mundi*. In Mesoamerican mythology this *Axis Mundi* is fundamental.

10) The place of eternal return in this case is Comala. The story traces the formation of a cacique and his impact on a region during the turbulent times of the revolutions. Rulfo repeatedly informed interviewers that his earliest objective was to present a cacique. The author gives us historical and political reasons for the rise of the Cacique. Simultaneously, the author humanizes the ruthless tyrant as a loving son and grandson who must seek to avenge his father's murder, and presents the psycho-social reasons for his transformation. His family is seen to be forced to pay

irrational tithes to the Church. Pedro's revenge comes through an exploitation of the religious hypocrisies of people.

11) Ultimately, *Pedro Paramo* is a demonstration of the Mexican socio-political concept of Caciquismo disturbed by the incursions of the Europeans, the syncretism caused by the racial and cultural mix. The 'cacique' was a tribal chieftain of the Taino people. The term was translated as 'king' or 'prince' for the Spaniards. In a cultural reading of the novel Patrick Dove notes:

The term "cacique" is derived from *kasiquan*, a Carib term which means 'to keep house.' *Caciquismo* renews or pretends to restore a tradition of filiation, personalism and familiarity which can easily appear to counter the threat posed by the process of modernization, and bureaucratization.... Akin to the sovereign in medieval Europe, the *cacique* could be said to possess two bodies... of capital and tradition. (98)

However, none of these readings can stand in isolation. Each story must be read against the other. Susanna, Dolores and other women wouldn't have been victims, had there been no caciques; the Cacique is but a byproduct of Capitalism brought in by the Europeans; and without his violation of land, women and property, would not have been the Civil war or the Cristeros revolution; no son, then would have gone out in search of a dead father; and so on and so forth, bringing us in circles back again to the same point where the search begins. "It was as if time had turned backwards." (55)

The text itself questions its structure and illustrates the arduous task of making meaning/s, of coming to conclusions. This is demonstrated symbolically through Susana, the only reason for Pedro's existence. Susana dies. The church bells toll and toll so that, what had at first appeared to be a requiem "little by little, the event turned into a fiesta. Comala was bursting with people, boisterous and noisy.... They were having a fair." (116) It is only authoritative figures like Pedro Paramo who would refuse to nourish this carnival

of polyphonic voices “I will cross my arms and Comala will die of hunger.” (117) It is Pedro, the patriarch, who must disintegrate for the richness of meanings to emerge.

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