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Quince Duncan's *Los cuatro espejos*: Time, History, and a New Novel

by Alan Persico

The novel *Los cuatro espejos* (1973)¹ written by Costa Rican Quince Duncan can, with all reason, be viewed as a typical example of a work in the Afro-Hispanic tradition, not only because it examines the situation of the black man and woman in this Central American Republic, but also because the novel itself is written by a black man who, in addition has also co-authored another very important and significant work, *El negro en Costa Rica*,² which highlights precisely some of the issues raised in the novel which we are about to examine.

At this point, it is perhaps necessary to note that the matter of viewing the works of black writers primarily as works of the black experience, is both unfair and unjustifiable. A very distinguished poet such as the Peruvian Nicomedes Santa Cruz, for example, has had reason to express his concern at being labelled a 'black' poet, since the inclusion of the term 'black', he feels, tends to convey the impression that one is dealing with an unusual phenomenon. For him, one is either a poet, or not a poet. That one is black should not be attributed the level of significance that some commentators tend to insist on.³ But, apart from this, there is also the danger of concluding that such works are important and impressive only, or even mainly, because they focus on the experiences of blacks at the mercy of a culture which, some say, is not their own, nor of their own making. Therefore, with a view to countering this tendency, the present paper seeks to examine aspects of *Los cuatro espejos* in an attempt to show that, like some other works in the Afro-Hispanic tradition, this novel too can be considered a 'new novel', as this expression is sometimes used to refer to works of other writers such as Juan Rulfo, García Márquez, Ernesto Sábato, Vargas Llosa, Alejo Carpentier, Roa Bastos, Angel Asturias, to name just a few. This will be done through evidence drawn from the novel, as well as through references

to observations made and conclusions drawn by critics regarding what are the major characteristics of the new Spanish-American novel. Perhaps one of the first to allude to the contemporary stylistic and structural features of *Los cuatro espejos* is Ian Smart, although, at the time, he was focusing primarily on the work's religious elements. Reflecting on an episode in which the wife of the protagonist Charles McForbes has been attacked by a *dopi*, Smart observes:

It is suggested that this nefarious duppy was commissioned by Christian, but there is no certainty of this in the enigmatically-structured novel with its inverted and fragmented chronology, its symbolism, and its general vagueness—features frequently encountered in the modern novel.⁴

Doubtless, another Spanish-American novel that immediately comes to mind is Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (1955). However, John Brushwood's observation on Rulfo's work that ". . . on subsequent readings we are more and more amazed by its unique clarity,"⁵ is also applicable to Quince Duncan's work, the argument of which follows.

The protagonist Charles McForbes, a second generation black, is at present the husband of Ester McForbes, of white ancestry. Ester is a member of the Centeno family, traditionally rich, powerful, and influential. Apparently, Ester was very anti-black in her youth, a fact that is not surprising when one remembers that her father was at heart a racist. Lorena Sam, Charles' first wife, died following a spell of witchcraft that some believe to have been cast on her by Cristian Bowan, an old family-friend who always wanted her (Lorena) but who lost her to Charles. Cristian and Charles become mortal enemies when Cristian tricks Lorena into going to his home, where he rapes her.

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Now, one Sunday evening, Charles and Ester attend a lecture at the Teatro Nacional on the topic "Racial Minorities in Costa Rica." The observations made in the lecture clearly affect Charles to such an extent that when he returns home, goes to bed, and awakes the following morning he finds that on looking into the mirror, he has no face. This horrible discovery serves as the stimulus for the protagonist to examine himself, his past, his values, his morals, and the decisions he has so far made, particularly his decision to marry Ester Centeno, a white woman. This process of self exploration takes the form of a journey, both physical and psychological during which reference is made to the social situation vis a vis Blacks in Costa Rica, racial discrimination, injustice, as well as aspects of the history of Costa Rica, family history, including that of his own family and that of his wife Ester. The novel ends at the point where Charles, having completed his journey of self exploration returns home to his wife quite satisfied that he made the right decisions. The novel's stylistic and structural devices include omniscient narrator, protagonist-narrator, flashbacks, time shifts, dialogues interspersed with flashbacks, and the juxtaposition of reality and fantasy.

Los cuatro espejos is divided into two parts. The first, which has six chapters is told mainly by an omniscient narrator. Only chapters I and IV are told by the protagonist. On the other hand, the whole of part II, which consists of five chapters, is told in the first person by the protagonist himself. This part constitutes about one-third of the work, but it is, not surprisingly, the section where the protagonist seeks and finds his own psychological and cultural liberation.

Now, with respect to the major characteristics and features of the new Spanish-American novel, critics and students of this body of literature have identified elements such as the treatment of Time, Space, Love, Narrative Structure, and Death; as well as the presence of an atmosphere of magical realism, and a very high level of linguistic sensitivity.⁶

On the matter of Narrative Structure, many novels are developed around the concept of a quest. Usually a journey is undertaken which, in former times tended to be more literal, more physical, whereas in recent times it tends to be more symbolic. It is a journey inward toward a revelation of the real self, towards the search for authenticity. According to Thomas E. Lyon, for

example:

Santos Luzardo (*Doña Bárbara*) and Arturo Cova (*La vorágine*) effect Odyssean treks in space, wrestling upon the surface of the land in a realistic social context. *Pedro Páramo* and *Los pasos perdidos* portray an internal odyssey, characters struggling with psychological rather than real monsters. A change from external to internal structure is obvious; the mass social problems of the twenties have evolved into more individual, mental concerns of the fifties.⁷

As can be noted in our brief summary of *Los cuatro espejos*, Charles McForbes also undertakes a journey of self-exploration. However, there is a synthesis or a combination of the real and the symbolic. Charles, who now lives in San José, the capital, travels back to the region of Limón where he grew up, and as he does so, he examines his past experiences. True, the protagonist in Carpentier's work *Los pasos perdidos* is also apparently journeying through geographically identifiable locations but this is not made clear in the body of the novel. Rather it is explained to the reader in a note at the end.

Why then has Quince Duncan placed such emphasis on the literal journey? Apart from the obvious advantage of being able to present, based on historical fact, the differences in lifestyle and values that exist between the people of the capital San José and those of the predominately Black Limón, the author perhaps does not wish to lose track of his concern for the position of Blacks as a group. The journey should not be interpreted as an individual struggle alone. It is a statement concerning the plight of Blacks in Costa Rica on the one hand, as well as of the cultural contributions that Blacks have made, and their attributes, on the other. So that although ostensibly it is presented as an individual journey, it is understood to be also, perhaps more so, a journey that should concern the group. When, for example, Charles is reflecting on the importance of the individual not giving up the struggle, he as narrator, makes the following observation:

Y pucha, lo comprendo ahora: durante miles de años una raza ha vivido de la esperanza, y eso la ha mantenido viva, y por lo tanto, cuando un negro pierde la esperanza muere irremediamente. (p. 123).

At the same time though, he recognizes that in the final analysis everyone is alone. "Porque en última instancia, todo hombre está solo frente a la Fuente de su Existencia" (p. 49). The quest motif then is both individual and collective, literal and symbolic.

Usually in the traditional novel, Time is measured in days, months, or years, even if there are temporal leaps and time shifts. In the new novel, more noticeably, there is often an attempt made to create an air of atemporality, to negate Time, or to create an atmosphere of timelessness, whether it is by presenting time as being circular, or repetitive, by presenting as co-temporary, events that clearly could not have been so, or, by structuring the work in such a way that events do not follow the sequence in which they actually occurred. This phenomenon is not surprising if we bear in mind the point made earlier about the internal journey, the notion of stream of consciousness, and the way memory functions. In many of these works memory plays a particularly important part, especially in the individual's attempt to find the true meaning of his life, or to examine his present circumstances in terms of his past behavior, and his future aspirations.

If we examine the events in *Los cuatro espejos* we note that Time is dealt with on two levels. In real terms Charles' journey lasts three days. However, the events that influence his psychological journey span centuries. This technique allows the author to inform us on a wide range of events that have affected the development and the consequent world view not only of Charles McForbes but also, that of many of the other characters in the work: Charles' father-in-law, his wife, Cristian Bowman, Ruth, and several of the former sweethearts of Charles. This dual time frame in which events pertaining to the psychological realm are inserted into the protagonist's actual three-day journey has led to the necessity of including cues for the reader (that are much more obvious than in *Pedro Páramo*). We encounter expressions such as "He mirado el espejo esta mañana, y no he visto mi rostro" (p. 24); "Desde la noche anterior al salir de la conferencia, había notado algo extraño en él" (p. 97); "¡Todo en un día! Su marido enfermo mental; su prima con un ataque cardíaco; su padre totalmente agotado y acusándola de matar a Engracia" (p. 105); "Vos lo has esperado todo el día" (p. 111); "Hace tres días que no veo a Ester" (p. 163). Together with such "reminders" there are also occasional references to the lecture at the Teatro Nacional. This is one of

the ways in which the novel creates an impression of Time moving yet not moving. In a different sense, the movement from crisis to liberation in three days may perhaps be alluding to the question of death and resurrection in three days. In fact, it is interesting to note that Charles was at one time a pastor.⁸

It is perhaps in its treatment of Space that *Los cuatro espejos* most resembles that traditional novel, especially if we interpret space in the context of Time on the chronological, real level. In three days Charles goes on a three day journey to Limón where he meets many of his former sweethearts, and his son, and where he catches up, so to speak, on the events that have occurred since he was last in Limón. This physical visit was crucial for him to literally see and appreciate again, and be able to draw comparisons and contrasts with what he once left behind, and what he now had, which includes a high class life style, fancy car, access to exclusive clubs, gardner, etc. As he returns to Limón he observes:

Ahora volvía a la tierra negra que perfora y penetra los poros. Tierra negra que se adhiere de pronto a las encías, y limpia el barniz. Tierra sin tiempo, sin forma, que se nos mete en la lengua. (p. 128).

Part of his motivation to return must have been the feeling of guilt he was experiencing following the words of the speaker in the talk at the Teatro Nacional. He was motivated to find out whether his decision to abandon Limón and seek a new life in San José was anything to feel guilty about. Prior to his return visit to Limón he was of the impression and belief that somehow he was not Black, although, indeed, he was fair skinned. Consequently he had acquired new values. He asks himself:

¿En qué momento preciso perdí mi propia identidad? ¿Qué cúmulo sueños me pusieron en conflicto con la cultura mamada en los negruscos pechos de mi madre, y sorbida gota a gota desde la pálida rodilla de Pete McForbes? (p. 128).

This physical space covered with its allusions to aspects of Costa Rica's historical and social development, was extremely important although the psychological journey was of greater significance still. Through the protagonist's

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reflections and digressions we are eventually led on a journey that spans his own childhood, adolescence, and adulthood up to the present. Two very significant events in his life have been his relationship with Lorena, including the circumstances surrounding her death, and, the one with Ester Centeno, his present wife, and the lecture they attended at the Teatro Nacional on racial minorities in Costa Rica.

Although Charles has had relationships with several women, one of whom bore him his only child, a son, it was Lorena who was particularly influential on the first phase of his life, which he spent in the Black world of Limón; whereas Ester, who is White, is the motivation, in part, for him to explore all the events of his past with a view to determining whether he has let down himself and his race by marrying a White person. Quince Duncan makes the following observation in a later work which relates directly to the situation portrayed in the novel:

En el sexo, la idea era que "los negros somos una raza fuerte, y mezclarse es debilitar nuestra raza". Casarse con una persona blanca era casi una traición para los negros limoneses.⁹

Like the *cuento* "La virgen no tiene cara," by Ramón Díaz Sánchez, *Los cuatro espejos* therefore may be seen as an existentialist novel in which the protagonist, as he covers psychological and physical space asks himself questions such as "Who am I? What am I here for? Where am I going? Have I made, and am I still making the right choices?" In this sense, it is again also like the modern novel that focuses on man's aloneness (soledad), his sense of guilt, and the threat of inevitable failure to become, (until the moment of death when all options cease). But it is different from some existentialist novels in that the protagonist Charles, comes to terms with his situation, and in fact finds liberation, having passed through the stages of confrontation, dualism, and identity. Charles had confronted a crisis situation in which he realizes he is caught between two worlds apparently totally different. He has identified himself with a fusion of these, and as a result feels calm, liberated, and free. He notes: "Pero lo que sí he comprobado es que uno no puede huir de sí mismo. Eso sí" (p. 146).

Quince Duncan has also taken advantage of the technique of the search for identity to allude to, and

to comment on events of historical significance for Blacks, mainly, their suffering during the days of slavery, and also, as a result of contemporary racial discrimination. For example, the following observation is made:

"A cuantas abuelas antes de ella, durante estos ignominiosos cuatrocientos años de crímenes (el indio asesinado, y sus propios descendientes mestizos, cantan la gloria del conquistador) le arrebataron a sus hijos para venderlos en la plaza: Vendo negra y a sus dos hijas."

"Las vendo." "Las vendo juntas o separadamente a gusto del cliente." "La mayor tiene dos años" (p. 88).

And later:

Y sin embargo en Limón hacemos carnaval cada mes de octubre, para celebrar el día de la Raza que introdujo estacas en el año /sic/ del indio en el nombre de los Reyes Católicos. Y nos sentimos orgullosos del inglés, idioma de criminales. Sí, de traidores. (p. 89).

But in addition, he also criticizes certain aspects of contemporary Costa Rican society, for example, the housing situation, the failure of nationalization, police corruption and brutality, inefficient and unhealthy hospitals, the scramble for upward social mobility at any cost, the stress on the acquisition of wealth, and of material things generally in an attempt to "impress" others. Note the following, for example:

La gente no compra cosas para su uso, sino para su impresionar (pp. 11-12).

De cada cinco, cuatro han hecho su casa base de astucia. O por lo menos, gracias a la ayuda de algún amigo bancario. Total, de nada nos sirvió que nacionalizaron la banca porque las cosas siguen al servicio del que tenía un buen amigo en el banco (p. 17).

En realidad — pensé — nadie tiene interés en el conocimiento. Por lo menos eso era cierto en Costa Rica.

Todos estudian por ganarse un puesto.

Eso es, para conseguir un puesto y mejorar de posición económica (p. 26).

Now, on the question of housing in Costa Rica, John Patrick Bell states:

One of the most acute inadequacies suffered by the nation was in housing. All the groups in Costa Rica preoccupied with social problems were concerned with this shortage and studied both its causes and its remedies.⁹

However, as we noted earlier, there is another, perhaps more important, type of history that abounds in the work, namely, family history. The belief that it is necessary to examine, or to analyze, one's roots if one is going to understand one's self is clearly acceptable to Quince Duncan. This may appear to be a contradiction (though it really is not so), when one considers the existentialist nature of the work, and the existentialist notion of the importance of the here and now. This apparent inconsistency may perhaps be partly the reason why the author makes use of narrative technique involving not only the protagonist himself, but also an omniscient narrator who recounts many of the events mentioned by the protagonist, but from the points of view of the other characters. As always, it turns out that the sentiments Charles expresses in relationship to those events are corroborated by the other characters through the omniscient narrator. A more reliable cause and effect relationship is thus established between the past behavior and experiences of the characters and their present world view. This applies not only to Charles McForbes, the protagonist, but also to Cristian Bowman, Ester, Lucas Centeno, and Saltiman McForbes, Charles' grandfather, among others. As a result, quite often the childhood, and adolescent experiences of the characters are alluded to. However, as we have already observed, Charles does not see himself only as an individual who is totally responsible for his actions, and his destiny. Rather, he sees himself, typically, as a representative of his race, of his culture, and implicitly, of any group that is discriminated against, or that is condemned to an inferior position. While reflecting on his twenty-three years' experiences as compared with the eighty years of his father Pete McForbes, he notes:

Los ochenta de Pete eran mejores, porque

el viejo murió sin ver la llegada gradual de los blancos adinerados y de las compañías bananeras que succionaron la tierra restante. Ni vio los acaparadores, que llegaron calladamente y sin que el lodo los manchara, que llegaron invulnerables a la naturaleza cómplice, que además les dio la astucia suficiente para redactar en español documentos legales que solo ellos comprenden, pero capaces de impresionar al campesino (p. 33).

Later, reference is also made to Hitler, and to the problems caused by apartheid. So that, although in the first instance the evil that men do is perhaps applicable only to himself and to his people, it is later extended to include groups and peoples that suffer oppression anywhere.

The emphasis on the element of history and its meaning for the individual has led to the frequent use of expressions involving the verbs *recordar*, *acordarse*, *no olvidar*, and *pensar*: "podía recordar", "evocara", "pensara también", "recordara ahora", "se quedara dormida para sonar de nuevo . . .", "llegara a la memoria . . .". The point being made is that the objective historical facts and events are not just referred to for their own sake, but rather, they are made to assume importance within the world view of the characters. Also, there is much greater attention paid to family history, and individual life history, for the purpose of creating a better understanding of the world view of the characters. Further, this perhaps emphasizes the symbolism behind the key characters "taking a walk", "caminando". Apart from its being a physical journey forward, it is also a psychological journey backward into their past. Charles at one point during his journey backward reflects on the words of his grandfather, through the omniscient narrator:

. . . ustedes no son negros, pero tampoco son blancos. Son gente de color, nunca se olviden de eso. . . Si no quieren que los negros se apoderen de nosotros, y conviertan esta isla en una especie de Congo salvaje, hay que meter la cabeza al aprendizaje. No quiero a ninguno de ustedes casado con una negra. Búsquense una mulata o una inglesa. Hay que subir de color para escapar de esta cochina en que estamos. El negro, desde Noe fue condenado por Dios a sufrir. . . Hay que ir blanqueando, esa es la solución (p. 130).

It is implied that such advice, handed down, influenced the protagonist to marry a white woman, and to hold some of the values he now possesses.

Some of the other characteristics said to be typical of the new novel, such as the attitude to Death and Love, and the use of magical realism can not be examined in detail here. Suffice it to say however that in a vision Charles does hear and see his deceased father and his father's deceased friend having a conversation. Charles' father even speaks to him and tells him what he could do to help his sick wife. Later, Charles' wife tells him exactly the same thing, noting that she was speaking with the old man. This points to the fact that not only is it a case of reality and fantasy juxtaposed, but also we see that the view of Death is one where communication is still possible between the dead and the living, and that such communication is portrayed as being quite normal.

On the question of love, it may be argued that Lorena, in the case of Charles McForbes, can be compared to Regina and Susana for Artemio Cruz and Pedro Páramo respectively. In all three cases the women played a very important role in the protagonist's search for identity and authenticity. Of course it is quite true that in historical detail, *Los cuatro espejos* is not as elaborate nor as complete as *Pedro Páramo* and *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, both of which treat aspects of Mexican history; nor as Sábato's *Sobre héroes y tumbas* that focuses on Argentine history, but the work is conscious of the effects that historical circumstances can have on a given society.

In conclusion, although *Los cuatro espejos* is essentially a novel depicting the Black experience, it reflects many features of the "creators" as described, by Mario Vargas Llosa. It is not just a novel of social protest. Two aspects in which it is definitely to be considered a 'new novel' relate to its treatment of Time, and the way it serves itself from reality, combining objective historical events of a political, ideological and social nature with family history and individual personality. Thus the novel attempts not only to describe the process of individual liberation, but also, to point the way toward the liberation of culturally oppressed groups in general.

NOTES

¹Quince Duncan, *Los cuatro espejos*, (San José: Editorial Costa Rica, 1973). All references are to this edition.

²Quince Duncan and Carlos Melendez, *El negro de Costa Rica*, (San José: Editorial Costa Rica, 1972). Duncan is also the author of six volumes of short stories and four novels.

³Interview with Marvin A. Lewis, Lima, 1979.

⁴Ian Smart, "Religious Elements in the Narrative of Quince Duncan", *Afro-Hispanic Review*, I no. 2 (May, 1982), 28.

⁵John Brushwood, *Mexico in Its Novel*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966), p. 31.

⁶See for example, Thomas E. Lyon, "Orderly Observation to Symbolic Imagination: The Latin-American Novel from 1920 to 1960", *Hispania*, 54 no. 3 (Sept., 1971), 445-51; Kessel Schwartz, "Themes, Trends, and Textures: The 1960's and the Spanish-American Novel", *Hispania*, 55 no. 4 (Dec., 1972), 817-31; Mario Vargas Llosa, "Primitives and Creators", *London Times Educational Supplement*, Vol. 67, no. 3, 481 (Nov. 14, 1968); John L. Walker, "Timelessness Through Memory in the Novels of Augustín Yáñez", *Hispania*, 57 no. 3 (Sept., 1974) 445-451; Donald K. Gordan, *Lo jamaicano y lo universal en la obra del costarricense Quince Duncan*, (San José: Editorial Costa Rica, 1989) and "The Sociopolitical Thought and Literary Style of Quince Duncan", *Afro-Hispanic Review*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2, and 3 (1988) 27-31.

⁷Thomas E. Lyon, "Orderly Observation", 446.

⁸The fact can be seen as being part of the concept of 'double identity' that is noted in the novel. See Dellita L. Martin-Ogunsola, "Invisibility, Double Consciousness and the Crisis of Identity in *Los cuatro espejos*", *Afro-Hispanic Review*, vol. 6, no. 2 (May 1987) 9-15. See also Ian Smart, "Religious Elements".

⁹Quince Duncan and Carlos Melendez, *El negro*, p. 138.

¹⁰John Patrick Bell, *Crisis in Costa Rica: The Revolution of 1948*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), p. 21.