

Pedro Páramo: A Metaphor for the End of the World

Julio Ortega
Brown University

In *Pedro Páramo* (1955) the ideological code has a powerful representational function—to manifest popular Catholicism. Juan Rulfo uses the hybrid information of the Catholic religion in its popular Mexican and Latin American version to construct the world he presents to us in the novel.¹ One could say that the world of *Pedro Páramo* is perceived as real only within the ideological framework of its characters and, therefore, exists only in the systematic codification produced by popular culture. The coherence of the representation depends on this codification, although it is also a paradoxical and ironic demonstration of how that world may be seen so completely from this point of view that it comes to seem absurd. Because every ideological construction taken to its extreme ends up revealing its own absurdity, a literal postulation of reality from an ideological point of view can only produce alienation. The ideologically represented world is an alienated one because its limits are within the subject, not reality.² Therefore, the representation to which the subject has paid tribute and of which he is victim is nothing but a phantom of reality.

Or rather it is a phantom of discourse. Ideology is a compulsive form of discourse, a horrendous and enclosed discourse in which the subject represents a world to which he, in turn, is subjected. In this respect, Rulfo's novel is not only a critique but also a paradoxical one since its reality effect is a reduction (or amplification) to the point of absurdity. It represents reality through its negation and eventual destruction; *Pedro Páramo* is thus a metaphor for the end of the world (of the world turned upside down), produced by a dominant patriarchal and authoritarian ideology. The novel is a political and even subversive one in which myth demythifies.

The ideological code also implies an examination of the production of its critique in the novel.³ At what point does the novel question, subvert, and finally destroy its own ideological assumptions and

the institutions (the family, property, patriarchy, the church, the structures of power) that sustain those assumptions? The institutions that structure society are systematically undermined by the novel's controlled rebellion. And language is also hollowed out, becoming a kind of anti-rhetoric: Rulfo's style is so spare that it rejects eloquence. It is a language that retracts into the elemental substantive.

The ideological production of the novel sustains an economic, social, and political world that in turn reproduces that very ideology. Power and violence are also structuring devices which allow the representation of a unique system, one that does not need legitimation and one in which social relations have become corrupted. In sum, the novel tells us that society is impossible. It is impossible because the ideological institutions that sustain and name it are antihuman. The novel thus proposes a parable of reading—that of going to the extreme of negation which is death and judging everything from the standpoint of death. The novel literally works out the Flaubertian lesson of writing from the extreme paradox of impersonality (writing as if the narrator were dead). Finally, the ideological code is realized in the novel through institutions that appear to distort something that is held to be natural and latent. This latter, ironically, does not appear in the world of the novel but in that of the reader. It defines human relations in opposition to those established through violence. This “natural” world is absent, a vacuum, indicating that not only society but also human relations in Rulfo's novel are precarious.

The meaning of the novel is also produced on the level of narrative. Here, the search of the father belongs to one of the most traditional plot structures—that of the hero in search of himself.⁴ The protagonist, of course, seeks his father and the patriarchal paradise in order to find his own identity in the course of the journey. And he discovers his face through a series of masks, that is, through mediations. It is true that his identity is never acquired in definitive fashion but is always the object of search. But in this novel, the attainment of identity is thwarted, and the search is frustrated from the very start. Few protagonists have so little sense of identity as Juan Preciado. He finds nothing he seeks and finds himself only in death—that is from the privileged standpoint from which everything can be known. The Oedipal plot of the son who sides with the mother and kills the father represents a “journey back to the seed” (or a journey of the seed) in order to acquire total memory at a moment when change has become impossible. The truth of death is the only “natural” order. The father

is a body that the novel converts, not to dust, but to stone because it belongs to the desert, to the end of structure. Symbolically and from this negative point, the novel ends with the possibility of a liberation of the subject, thus making the assassination of the father the true meaning of the novel. Killing the father means destroying the institutions that represent his arbitrary power; it is thus a rebellion in which life is sacrificed for the sake of a higher level of consciousness.

It is in popular culture that we find this belief in death as complete knowledge. Like a tacit collective narrator, popular culture produces both alienation and collective knowledge. But on the symbolic plane, the standpoint of death implies a taboo that is transgressed by the novel. Because we are in a "world turned upside down" communication is not possible in the world of the living; ironically it takes place in the world of the dead.

How does one speak from the world of the dead, from a community that no longer exists? For if the world is phantasmagoric, what can the novel reveal? Interestingly, all we can grasp is the referent evoked by words; if Comala has already disappeared, the "reality" of the novel is an effect of language which, in turn, implies that this language has a powerful ability to locate the reader. It is a language that pauses, fixes, shows, reveals. This intense representational quality is based in a nominative and substantive language. At the same time this is a dialogical discourse. There are not only sequences of direct dialogues but also inner dialogues, monologues, and fragments of remembered conversations. Several voices intertwine in this polyphonic writing so that conversations amplify other conversations or revise them, and dialogues in the present of the text become evocations or echoes of a greater dialogue or narration. This texture of oral narration evokes a collective narrator who is never referred to as "we," but who, nevertheless, occupies a collective narrative space where voices are discontinuous in time—hence the self-referential character of the dialogue ("as I was saying to you"). This is a language that constantly quotes itself in order to indicate the space of consensus. Popular culture is, thus, a space of consensus made up of proverbs and sayings that imply mutual recognition, assumptions, and common-places as the site of the ideological—for the language of the commonplace can also be fossilized.

Yet, how can a highly codified representation such as this be sustained? How can the inflexibility of the ideological network that knits together an arbitrary world be understood? Let us recall that

Pedro Páramo's words, "we are the ones who make the law," indicate that it is disorder, not order, that prevails as the social form of power. Disorder is "caciquismo" but also something more: the distortion of social existence and the loss of individual identity, because power subjugates, empties of meaning, does violence to any possible collective order. Because of their restrictive and reductive distortion, the codes that produce reality in this novel are sustained through their own negation of collective order, of a system capable of building consensus. The social production generated by the novel is a destruction of collectivity. It is from this that the critical energy of the novel evolves—one of the briefest, the best, and the most inexhaustible novels written in Spanish.

In the *Tractatus de Hispanorum Nobilitate* (1597) of Sarmiento de Valladares, we find a systematic formulation of two of the codes that determine the social representation of the novel: private property and legitimacy—two foundations of the aristocratic ideology that determined the control of land and inheritance. The idea of the "big house," the law of primogeniture, the rights of the legitimate son ("hidalgo" from "hijo de algo") are recorded in this legal, historical treaty which is a codification of legitimacy. It is upon this remote foundation—which has nevertheless persisted over time—that the novel constitutes its inner contention: it is landownership that sustains power and dictates legitimacy. The deeply arbitrary nature of this disorder is represented as violence that inverts the supposedly "naturally" legal into an antinatural illegality. All the sons of Pedro Páramo are illegitimate (natural) since they are "unknown" to an "illegitimate" father. Juan Preciado, "a legitimate child," does not bear his father's name although Miguel Páramo, the natural or bastard child, does. Thus the novel actualizes the vicarious source of traditional power that has become internalized in culture. However, it displays this source in an even greater illegitimacy, in its human and social irrationality. Property and legitimacy appear, in this critical light, as two usurping and distorting codes and, given the impossibility of a legal discourse or corpus, as arbitrary violence.

Each reading of *Pedro Páramo* is the attempt to solve an enigma. It might seem to be an enigma that is no mystery because everything is said in the novel. By suggesting a reading of the codes of the novel, we are also suggesting its eminent readability. But this is a text whose readability displays its mysteries—mysteries, however, that cannot be resolved. It would be ingenuous to believe that because *Pedro*

Páramo is constructed according to these codes, we have solved the enigma. This does not happen, for the enigma is mythopoetic in nature and thus does not constitute a probable solution, much less some hidden extra-literary data to be discovered. There are, it is true, some texts that appear enigmatic because of some indecipherable aspect that turns out simply to be the author's withholding of information. If the author does not give the information, we cannot identify the killer in a murder mystery. This would be a limited kind of enigma, one which suggests that we are all guilty; but if we are all guilty, then there is no enigma. In *Pedro Páramo* the elements that constitute the enigma or the indecipherable are finally identifiable in the codes, as we have seen; yet the enigma is never unravelled. There is neither sufficient reason nor a total regime of meaning that would allow the reader to resolve the dilemmas. Once it has lost its foundation, the world has no way of beginning over again, and it ends itself, closing off any possibility of continuity. This "world upside down" is, certainly, a historical reflection, and its radical hyperbole transforms it into an allegory of those codes that we believe articulate social existence. On this level, the enigma of the novel is like a medieval mystery play in which the beginning and the end occur at one and the same time. And it is therefore a mystery whose purpose is to present an enigma as the absence of any explanation of the orphaned protagonist, of the subject without a pronoun, of the voice of the uprooted.

It is the mother who provides the motive for the search for the father. Sent by his mother, Juan has arrived in Comala. But the development of this mystery is an inversion of the terms because it is based on the discovery of death and the "world upside down." The death of Juan Preciado constitutes the contract, for in order to know the enigma, Juan must die. This pessimism implies that truth is improbable and is only revealed beyond this life: to know the truth he has to die. When Juan Preciado dies, he is incorporated into the enigma as its witness; and at the end of the quest, he comes to know that this enigma is the death of his father. The mother dies and the novel begins; the father dies and the novel ends. These two events (inverted by narrative time), the quest and the contract, permit Juan Preciado to live the whole enigma. The enigma is thus the scene of the subject. The subject is this axis, this son without a face, the one who has no pronoun. He is "valued" (*preciado*), but he has no value other than that of a sign with no real identity, a pure interrogation constructed from negation and a critical point of view.

If the enigma is self-identity, then the book must be the question, “who am I?” In order to know who I am, I come to know why my mother died and how my father died. In these two acts of understanding, the question of identity is also the question of origins, and from the privileged standpoint of death, the subject recognizes himself as a questioning sign. That is, he witnesses his true birth from the discourse of negation.

NOTES

1. Translated by Lysander Kemp (New York: Grove Press, 1959), *Pedro Páramo* was originally published in 1955 (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica).
2. “Alienation,” in its connotation of estrangement, as used by Marx is helpful here to emphasize the “false conscience” of the characters. It is probable that Rulfo was aware of this concept through the Marxist literature of the time; however, I use ideology here in the sense used by Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy* (London, New Left Books, 1971).
3. Code is used here in the Roland Barthes’ sense of supratextual organization of discursive orders. See particularly his “Analyse textuelle d’un conte d’Edgar Poe,” in Claude Chabrol, ed., *Sémiotique narrative et textuelle* (Paris: Larousse, Coll. L, 1973): 29–54.
4. For further discussion of this topic see my book *Poetics of Change, The New Spanish American Narrative* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984).