

EDMUNDO DESNOES AND CUBA'S LOST GENERATION

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Scholars working in the area of contemporary Cuban literature are frequently asked about the current state of literary affairs on the island. The novel in particular, with the exception of a handful of resounding yet politically controversial successes, is rarely mentioned. Only one novelist of merit, Edmundo Desnoes, has fully embraced the revolution and achieved some measure of success in serving it without greatly compromising his aesthetic standards. How he has achieved this and why he is unique are questions that deserve exploration.

Cuban literature, especially Cuban prose fiction, has received considerable attention during the last fifteen years. The main reason for this interest has nothing to do with politics, although primarily political events have at times brought world attention to bear on the Cuban artistic situation, and certain literary events have had political ramifications. The eyes of the literary world have so often turned to Cuba simply because of the prominence of an unusually large number of Cuban authors in the so-called "boom" of Spanish American fiction.

None of these authors, however, has played a significant role in the birth or in the development of Cuban socialism. Two of the best known, Alejo Carpentier and José Lezama Lima,¹ were established authors long before the revolution, and while each has had an active cultural role in revolutionary Cuba, neither has been a prominent political voice and neither reflects in his literature the problems of Cuban political and cultural revolutionary change. Other fiction writers to achieve international prestige have left Cuba to live in exile.² Still on the island, however, is a group of writers who have dedicated themselves to prose fiction. Some of the best, such as Reynaldo Arenas, are apolitical, at least on the surface.³ Others have encountered governmental resistance to their work.

Among those who have chosen to be politically involved and who have stayed within the good graces of the revolutionary government, there are no great artists; indeed there are very few good ones. This unfortunate fact may be due to the very nature of realistic prose fiction, especially the novel, which tends to rely heavily on the conflict between the real and the ideal and between the individual and his society. The early years of the revolution saw a flood of works that portrayed the injustices of the Batista regime, and the reader was logically

to assume that these injustices would be eliminated. Once the old order had been destroyed, authors could be expected to turn their attention to the building of the new and could serve as guardians of justice by pointing out flaws in the developing system.

This literary change has not taken place, however. The favorite theme is still the bad old days, and there are but two novels of reasonable merit that scrutinize the problems of the revolution. They are Manuel Cofiño López's *La última mujer y el próximo combate* and Miguel Cossío Woodward's *Sacchario*.⁴ The reasons for the scarcity of true novels of the revolution, meaning novels that deal not with the war itself but with the new society as it evolved, are no doubt numerous, but the primary factor is clearly that criticism is not graciously received by the new power structure, at least in the arts. The Uruguayan Mario Benedetti, who has been an extremely important intellectual leader in Cuba, has stated his position bluntly: critical literature is a great virtue in capitalist societies; in socialist societies it is counterrevolutionary: "Quienes escriben literatura subversiva dentro del mundo capitalista, en su mayoría dan por sentado que, una vez subvertido ese orden y reemplazado por el revolucionario, su misión de subversión estará cumplida. Continuar tratando de subvertir un orden que entonces sería socialista, significaría sencillamente pasar a militar en la contrarrevolución. Es una regla de mínima coherencia: sólo los negadores profesionales pueden no entenderlo."⁵ Herein lies the essential problem: a novelist is in large part a "professional negator," and hence has a limited place in a new structure. While the manner of negation has tended to change and diversify greatly in recent years, the novel continues to rely on conflict for its basic dynamism. Until recently all novels had plots, and despite critics' reluctance to speak in banalities, it is often wise to state the obvious as even Scholes and Kellogg felt obliged to do: "All plots depend on tension and resolution."⁶ The tension, or conflict that gives life to a recent novel may be linguistic, or simply spring from reader expectation versus fulfillment. Nonetheless, the conflict must be present.

All of the Cuban novels of this period, despite occasional forays into various forms of lyric or linguistic tension, rely in some way on the basic traditional conflicts between man and society or man and himself. The idea that the individual must totally sacrifice himself to the standards of society in whatever form—economic, moral, or behavioral—rests as uneasily within the novel form as does the concept of individual autonomy and supremacy within the classical epic.⁷ While this is certainly not the place for a treatise on the novel as a separate genre, I must insist on the obvious: the novel is far more than an expanded prose fiction.

Benedetti casts the traditional novelist at his very best into the role of counterrevolutionary. Since the Uruguayan's position seems to be the official stance, it is hardly surprising that novels and stories that deal with contemporary problems are rare indeed. Norberto Fuentes and Eduardo Heras León have both met with serious difficulties because they sought to break this pattern.⁸ Furthermore, it is hardly surprising that Cuban fiction tends to fall into two types: the usual declamatory statements on the evils of pre-Castro Cuba, or literature that evades the question of contemporary Cuba. Of course it is possible to deal

with an individual's problems in society, but the individual must be found deficient, not the revolutionary society itself.

The role of the fiction writer, then, has been rather severely limited. Even so, some authors have done well in their creative endeavors without abandoning the almost necessary conflict of man versus society. Edmundo Desnoes, though certainly not a great novelist, has been successful in dealing with the problems of the individual caught between two very different social orders. He has not made the artistic mistake, as many have done, of painting Batista's Cuba all black and Castro's all white. Rather he has concerned himself with the almost incapacitating choice facing the intellectual petite bourgeoisie in the 1960s.

Because he has avoided the all-good versus the all-evil stance of other Cuban authors, and because of his sympathetic treatment of men literally caught between two worlds, Desnoes is far more readable than many of his colleagues, and his novels undoubtedly have brought comfort to countless Cubans trapped in the transition. In addition he has surely been of great service to the revolution because such readers must have felt that like Desnoes's characters, they too could survive emotionally and successfully convert to the new order.

Desnoes's novels characteristically lack the melodramatic shifts found in other works of the period. His characters do not recognize, much less state, that the old order was entirely corrupt, entirely evil, or that from 1960 on all men are equal, all are brothers. Nor does he focus entirely on the downtrodden who are suddenly emancipated, or on the exploiters who finally receive their deserved punishment. Instead he explores the grey zones. His characters are normally relatively young, but not idealistic, and if they are idealistic they are hesitant. They do not come from terribly poor or rich family backgrounds. They are petite bourgeoisie who stand to lose a good deal if they remain in Cuba, yet stand to lose equally if they flee to the United States. Their problems, and the manner in which Desnoes treats them, are worthy of examination.

The paralyzing agony of having to choose between two worlds is evident in central characters in each of Desnoes's novels, *No hay problema* (1961), *El cataclismo* (1965), and *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (1965).⁹ Only Sebastián Soler y Powers, of *No hay problema*, appears capable of committing himself to a cause, and at the end of the novel even he is uncertain as to what he can do to serve the revolution. Others either withdraw and do nothing at all, such as Cristina in *El cataclismo* and Malabre in *Memorias*,¹⁰ or half-heartedly join the counterrevolution in the hope that the Americans will win their fight for them (Ricardo in *Cataclismo*). The majority of characters who fully embrace the new order—Evelio and Quique in *Cataclismo*, for example—are from the proletariat.

The lower classes are well represented throughout Desnoes's works, but only as a small part of a broad spectrum of points of view. The foreground of the novels is normally occupied by members of the petite bourgeoisie. Because of the international success of the film as well as the novel, Malabre, of *Memorias*, is easily the most familiar. He is a thirty-nine-year-old former businessman and landlord who remained in Cuba after his wife and parents fled to the United States. He lives well on his government reimbursement checks, writes a little,

and suffers from acute boredom. He does nothing whatsoever either for or against the revolution, and is, by his own admission, a “comemierda” who lives off the efforts of others.

Because of his passivity, Malabre can hardly be considered a tragic figure, yet his point of view is so fully portrayed through the first person narration that it would be difficult for one who is relatively neutral in attitude toward Castro to condemn him. Malabre recognizes that his entire life has been meaningless, and that even the cabarets, movies, and excursions to the beach before the revolution were but futile attempts to fill a void: “Lo importante era no aburrirse. Ya veo, recordando ahora, que perdí mi tiempo miserablemente” (p. 16). Even his mediocre success as a businessman was due to his father’s intervention rather than to his own efforts: “Regresé a La Habana y mi padre me había comprado ya la mueblería. Ni siquiera me opuse violentamente. ¡Soy un mierda!” (p. 39).

Now, after all of his friends and family have left him alone in Havana, he is even hesitant to have an affair because he might have difficulty extricating himself: “Sería volverme a complicar la vida con una mujer. Me empezaría en seguida a pedir cosas y vendría a vivir conmigo y me haría la vida insoportable. No quiero buscarle problemas. Estoy mejor así. Poseerla sería más fácil que deshacerme de Noemí” (p. 21). His fears are realized when he has an affair with Elena. Her family charges him with a variety of sexual crimes in an attempt to force him into marriage. While he is cleared of all charges, he is held in jail for a brief period during the investigation.

Logically, Malabre needs either to join his family in the United States or become involved in the revolution. Emotionally, however, he is incapable of doing either. He knows that life is hard for those who flee—his wife, Laura, is a cashier in a cafeteria (p. 43)—and while there is no evidence that he has ever supported any cause, he uses fear of betrayal as an excuse for his inaction: “¿Fidel sería así? No me parece, pero . . . No quiero volverme a engañar. Cuando más, puedo ser un testigo. Un espectador” (p. 27). He is fully aware of his parasitic existence in Cuba: “Existo por la generosidad del gobierno: recibo todos los meses cuatrocientos treinta y ocho pesos de la reforma cubana” (p. 34), but feels guilt only when he has to go to the bank to receive payment: “Me sentía un parásito social; no exactamente: un cuchillo afilado que nunca se usaría. No había nadie de mi edad cobrando. Todas eran viejos consumidos” (p. 41).

Malabre’s estrangement from Cuban reality is made all the more acute by his reading of Desnoes’s first novel, *No hay problema*. Desnoes himself appears as an acquaintance of his protagonist, and uses Malabre’s point of view to criticize both himself and his work. Sebastián, the central figure in the first novel, has an advantage over Malabre in that his story takes place during the final years of Batista. He too commits himself as little as possible to action, although he does agree to hide arms for the revolutionary forces. His capacity as a journalist with a New York magazine gives him ample opportunity to criticize the dictatorship and he makes the most of it. He is persecuted by the militia for his news stories abroad, not for his revolutionary action, however. He lacks the courage for that:

“Había que actuar como Fidel Castro. Pero vivir así era arriesgarse a morir y Sebastián prefería seguir medio vivo, o medio muerto” (*Problema*, p. 88).

After his second arrest and a torture session, Sebastián flees to Florida where he lives much like Malabre lives in Havana, in security but in a stupor of boredom and uselessness. Unlike Malabre he blames himself for his situation: “Me he castrado voluntariamente pensando que nada podía cambiar, defendiendo mi libertad individual por encima de todo. Libertad que no es otra cosa que aislamiento y soledad” (p. 218). He returns to Cuba to serve in whatever capacity he can to help the revolution. Sebastián, then, stands as an example of what Desnoes would like his middle-class readers to be, while Malabre provides a negative example. The latter rejects *No hay problema* outright: “Es de un simplismo que me ha dejado boquiabierto. Escribir eso . . . es realmente patético” (*Memorias*, p. 29), and concludes that “Eddy” wrote it “por oportunismo.” His reaction to Sebastián’s return to Havana is that “Nadie se integra: el hombre es, será siempre un desarraigado” (p. 29).

Malabre and Sebastián provide the two most developed examples of the crisis facing the middle class during the early stages of the revolution. Sebastián, however, was alienated from the Batista regime and was pro-revolutionary even before Castro’s success provided him the security he needed to become a revolutionary. Malabre, a parasite even in the Batista days, nonetheless had more to lose in the change of power. Each, in his own way, conveys what is clearly Desnoes’s point of view—that even the hesitant and the cowardly can become useful to the revolution if they make the effort. The alternatives are to become unhappy aliens in the United States or parasites in Cuba.

The same possibilities are offered in *El cataclismo*, which is inferior to the other two novels because of its diffuseness and poor organization. The lower classes, represented primarily by Evelio, Migdalia, and Quique, embrace the revolution with enthusiasm despite the hard work it entails. Migdalia is hesitant at first only because of her loyalty to the middle-class family she has served throughout her adult life. The family is composed of an elderly couple, Margarita and Cristóbal, their daughter Cristina, and her doctor husband, Ricardo.

The attitude of the elderly, established couple is evident in a conversation Cristina has with her mother: “—¿Quién es Fidel?—pregunta Ana Luisa—. No lo conozco. ¿Fidel qué? Debe ser algún parvenú.—Vámonos, mamá, Ricardo está hablando de esa chusma que se ha metido ahora en Palacio” (p. 20). Ricardo, the young doctor, is enthusiastic about Castro because he believes his own status will improve with the new government: “Ahora somos nosotros, los profesionales, la gente preparada, los que hacemos las cosas, la gente con el no jau, como dicen los americanos” (p. 21). His attitude quickly changes, however, when the property he hoped to inherit from his in-laws is confiscated: “Si caemos en las garras del comunismo no hay quién nos salve” (p. 62). Ricardo goes to the United States with his in-laws, while Cristina chooses to stay in Havana where she lives much like Malabre in *Memorias*. She becomes the mistress of Simón Razón, who is active in the revolution, but she does nothing herself despite her lover’s urgings. The revolution has exacted its toll from her, nonetheless, for not

only did she lose her property and her family, but her uncle was executed for counterrevolutionary terrorism. Ricardo later returns with the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion.

These are but a few of the points of view offered in *El cataclismo*. The novel abounds with characters, none of whom is well developed, and each of whom offers a different perspective on the events of the early 1960s. The very profuseness of attitudes and actions makes it difficult for the reader to formulate his own position. Desnoes recognized this weakness in his book *Punto de vista*,¹¹ which not only clarifies his intentions but provides a number of valuable insights to the novels.

In *Punto de vista*, Desnoes again passes judgment on himself and on his work. He states that both *No hay problema* and *Memorias del subdesarrollo* belong to periods when he had a clear vision of events in Cuba and of his mission as an artist. *El cataclismo* is from a period in which he wandered off course: "La novela que más he trabajado y la menos lograda—porque traté de ser objetivo y la objetividad, como la verdad absoluta, no existe, existe sólo nuestro punto de vista" (p. 9). Desnoes also describes his personal life, and we can quickly see that his situation paralleled that of the characters we have examined: "Hace apenas dos años y con treinta y cuatro años en las costillas empecé a darme cuenta cabal de lo despistado que andaba" (p. 7). His background, too, was much like theirs: "Me avergonzaba vivir en el seno de una clase media que sólo pensaba en su comodidad y sus entretenimientos" (p. 13).

Desnoes's novels deliberately dramatize the ideas expressed in his essays. His goal has been to persuade other Cubans, from backgrounds such as his, to take action in support of the revolution. Such commitment is necessary not only for Cuba's survival, but for the survival of the individual: "No creo que la vida pueda vivirse sin una causa más grande que nosotros y que nos trascienda" (p. 8). Desnoes makes his choice consciously, fully aware that committed art is impure, but he goes on to say that culture, like man himself, is impure (p. 94). He therefore rejects the "art for art's sake" position of Malabre in quest of his impure goal: "El verdadero artista (tú lo sabes, Eddy), siempre será un enemigo del Estado" (*Memorias*, p. 30). Yet he has done so without falling into the declamatory prose so common among his fellow writers because he holds dearly to the aesthetic principles stated in his review of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*: "Toda literatura que no profundice o enriquezca la vida del hombre se convierte en una estafa. El arte como instrumento de propaganda o como profecía tiende a desvirtuar su naturaleza: es un arte enajenado. La literatura sólo puede estar al servicio de la visión del artista, de la búsqueda de la verdad."¹² His novels teach us a great deal about the crisis of the petite bourgeoisie, just as surely they have had a great impact on those Cubans who chose to stay in their homeland.

NOTES

1. Carpentier's major works were published before the revolution: *Los pasos perdidos* in 1953 and *Guerra del tiempo* in 1956. While *El siglo de las luces* appeared in 1962, it was

- essentially finished in 1959 according to the author (see Alejo Carpentier, "Autobiografía de urgencia," *Insula* 20, no. 218 [Jan. 1965]: 13). His latest novel, *Recurso del método* (México: Siglo XXI Editores, S.A., 1974) does very little to enhance his reputation. Lezama Lima (b. 1912) was an internationally known poet when he wrote his only novel, *Paradiso* (México: Biblioteca Era, 1968). Neither author has a novel that deals directly with revolutionary Cuba.
2. The most prominent ones are Guillermo Cabrera Infante (defection 1965), Severo Sarduy (defection 1960), and Juan Arcocha (defection 1964).
 3. Arenas's novel, *El mundo alucinante* (México: Editorial Diógenes, S.A., 1969), directs several veiled barbs at the Castro government, and has never been published in Cuba, presumably because of its sexual explicitness.
 4. Manuel Cofiño López, *La última mujer y el próximo combate* (La Habana: Casa de las Américas, 1971); Miguel Cossío Woodward, *Sacchario* (La Habana: Casa de las Américas, 1970). The first touches on the abuses of power by those in charge of agrarian and reforestation camps, while the second portrays the rigors of cane cutting and the inefficiency of reluctant volunteers.
 5. Mario Benedetti, *El escritor latinoamericano y la revolución posible* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Alfa Argentina, 1974), pp. 74–75.
 6. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 212.
 7. This change from stress on the subservience to the independence of the individual as a keystone in the evolution from epic to novel has been emphasized by nearly all major literary historians and critics including Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953); Scholes and Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*; Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967); and Northrup Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (New York: Atheneum, 1967).
 8. Both men are primarily short story writers. Eduardo Heras León was expelled from the editorial board of *Caimán Barbudo*, a major revolutionary literary magazine, because his collection *Los pasos en la hierba* (La Habana: Casa de las Américas, 1970), which won the Casa de las Américas prize, depicted, according to the other editors, revolutionaries as inferior human beings rather than noble idealists. The official statement of his expulsion was published in *Caimán Barbudo*, no. 46 (May 1971), p. 2. José Norberto Fuentes lost his job for similar reasons. His critics felt that *Condenados del condado*, which won the same prize in 1968, suffered the same fault. Fuentes was also accused by Heberto Padilla of being counterrevolutionary. His spirited self-defense won him the support of Fidel Castro, who according to unsubstantiated rumor, promptly reinstated him.
 9. The editions used for this study are: *No hay problema*, 2nd. ed. (La Habana: Ediciones Revolución, 1964); *El cataclismo* (La Habana: Ediciones Revolución, 1965); *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (La Habana: Ediciones Unión, 1965).
 10. The protagonist of *Memorias* is named only at one point, and then by his surname (p. 35). His anonymity increases the sense of his nonexistence. In the film he was given the name Sergio.
 11. Edmundo Desnoes, *Punto de vista* (La Habana: Instituto del Libro, 1967).
 12. Edmundo Desnoes, rev. of *Un Día en la vida de Iván Denisovich*, *Casa de las Américas*, no. 24 (Jan.-April 1964), p. 100.