

## Freedom and Fantasy: A Structural Approach to the Fantastic in Carballido's *Las cartas de Mozart*

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In *Las cartas de Mozart* (1974),<sup>1</sup> Carballido returns to a dramatic formula frequently found in his earlier works—the mixture of reality and fantasy<sup>2</sup>—by creating a complex interplay between the reality of 19th-century Mexico and a fantasy world based on Mozart. When viewed in the light of Tzvetan Todorov's theory on the fantastic as a literary genre, the world of fantasy acquires a distinct function in this two-part comedy. Structurally, the fantastic sets off a catalytic process which culminates in the formation of a new reality based on Mozart. At the same time, the fantastic plays a key semantic role in the development and expression of the basic themes of freedom and creative transformation. The combination of the two worlds creates a delightful experience of what Todorov terms pure fantasy, wherein the reader or spectator is unable to determine just where one world ends and the other begins.

Todorov begins his study of the fantastic genre by establishing basic structural guidelines. He observes that the movement of this type of literature usually involves two interrelated forms of transition: from one social order to another and from a pragmatic view to an ideal one.<sup>3</sup> This basic movement between opposite poles is easily identified in the plot of *Las cartas de Mozart*. Set in 19th-century Mexico City, the play deals mainly with the attempts made by the young heroine, Margarita, to escape the repressive barriers placed upon her by society, her family, and her immediate and only reality—a dark, drab family store. Relief suddenly appears in the form of El Joven, a mysterious, ragged lad who talks her into buying three letters written by Mozart. Although these old manuscripts provide Margarita a temporary escape from reality into the remote world of Mozart, they are also a source of guilt and anguish; Margarita's mother, Malvina, suffers a fatal heart attack upon learning that her daughter spent her entire inheritance on some old papers. Subsequent to this unfortunate incident, Margarita is continually haunted by two characters who throughout the play represent the pole of reality: Tía Renata, who for selfish

reasons wishes to place Margarita in a convent, and Marcelo, a lecherous opportunist determined to marry the young girl. Margarita is forced, as the result of the undesirable and greedy plans of her elders, to seek a more secure and permanent form of escape. Her subsequent steps toward total liberation of mind and body climax in a final decision by which she embarks on a new life in the world of light, music, and fantasy with El Joven, who has gradually been transformed into the young Mozart.

It is important to note that what is treated here as fantasy—the world of Mozart—is in fact a historical reality. By contrast with the reality of 19th-century Mexico, and a temporal distance of one hundred years, the world of Mozart is easily made to seem fantastic to both the characters and the reader/spectator. The conceptual interplay established between reality and fantasy eventually leads to the realization of a phenomenon suggested in German by Margarita in the opening scene of the play: “Die Welt wird Traum, der Traum wird Welt”<sup>4</sup> (literally, “the world becomes a dream, the dream becomes the world”). As imparted to the deprived Margarita by the letters, the world of Mozart—a world of opulence, music, and romantic love affairs—becomes a dream. The same world that becomes a dream, however, ultimately becomes reality when Margarita dashes off to Vienna as Mozart’s young wife, Constanza. Thus, what the reader/spectator actually experiences is not only a movement from one form of society to another, or from reality to the ideal, but also a complex interplay of two distinct worlds where reality is capable of becoming fantasy and vice versa.

Having identified the basic structural movements common to literature of the fantastic, Todorov moves on to the roles which the fantastic plays in the actual development of a work. According to his theory, the fantastic involves two different yet related functions, one syntactical and the other semantic. The syntactical function refers to the way in which the fantastic enters into the structural development of the play as a whole, while the semantic function concerns the communication of the work’s basic themes.

In regard to the syntactical role of the fantastic, Todorov indicates a general movement between “two equilibriums which are similar but not identical.”<sup>5</sup> His concept is based on the existence of an ordered, yet different society at both ends of the work, with a period of disorder located between the two. This structural pattern is readily observed in *Las cartas de Mozart*. The ordered, prosaic reality that reigns at the beginning of the play promptly breaks into disorder shortly after the first appearance of El Joven with his letters by Mozart. A series of fantastic episodes involving the supernatural maintains this state of disequilibrium throughout the play. In Todorov’s scheme, the supernatural element causes this disorder by constituting a break in an acknowledged order composed of pre-established rules. The final state of equilibrium, not identical to the initial order, is achieved when Margarita decides to enter wholeheartedly into the world of fantasy.

Todorov contends that the duration of the fantastic, and thereby the disorder, rests on the duration of a hesitation experienced by both reader and character: “The fantastic lasts only as long as a certain hesitation: a hesitation common to reader and character, who must decide whether or not what they perceive derives from ‘reality’ as it exists in the common opinion.”<sup>6</sup> According to this theory, the

reader must ultimately make a decision, opting for one solution or the other, and consequently emerge from the fantastic. Todorov makes this question of reader hesitation even more complex by creating two sub-genres of the fantastic—the uncanny and the marvelous. He distinguishes them from the true fantastic and from each other on the basis of reader decision and experience:

If [the reader] decides that the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomenon described, we must say that the work belongs to another genre: the uncanny. If, on the contrary, he decides that new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena, we enter the genre of the marvellous.<sup>7</sup>

Another, simpler way of distinguishing between the sub-genres is to associate the uncanny with the past (previously experienced phenomena) and the marvelous with the future (non-experienced phenomena). According to this scheme, *Las cartas de Mozart* would belong to the category of the uncanny, as the fantastic process that occurs in the present can be explained by past experience—the historical rise of Mozart from rags to riches. The mixture in this play of the real and the supernatural, however, prevents the reader/spectator from ever making that decision. When the final curtain falls, the spectator is still unable to decide whether what he is witnessing is uncanny or marvelous. Even though El Joven's and Margarita's fantasy of becoming Mozart and Constanza can be explained as uncanny imagination, their final departure suggests the marvelous—a true transformation into the famous couple; they are off to Veracruz and to a boat bound for Europe, where the new Mozart has been invited to perform his first opera. The fact that the reader/spectator cannot decide whether this final transformation is marvelous or merely uncanny preserves the play in a state of pure fantasy. According to Todorov, this type of experience, wherein the reader cannot make a decision, is the fantastic in its purest form.

The characters, along with the reader/spectator, are also involved in this process of hesitation and decision. In this work, Margarita is the character who must make a choice. She must choose either to reject El Joven's transformation as uncanny imitation or to enter fully into the fantasy world with him. After a walk down the Alameda, which helps her overcome her fears of the outside world, Margarita decides to join the fantastic world offered to her by El Joven. Her final decision to depart for Europe with young Mozart signals the end of the conflict between reality and fantasy and thereby the beginning of a new order. As in many comedies, this new order is symbolized by a marriage. When Margarita, or Constanza, departs with Mozart she is dressed in a wedding gown, which ironically was to have been used for her marriage to Marcelo. A new order is also established within the real world. Through legal maneuvers and the poisoning of her lover, Renata finds herself wealthy and independent. Whereas in the fantasy world order is renewed through marriage, in the real world of the play it can only be restored through death.

A series of fantastic episodes occurs during the time that elapses between the initial order in which the play begins and the final return to order. These strange events serve to disrupt the initial order and to create a tension which will ultimately provoke the quest for that final return to order. The fantastic begins

to disturb the well-ordered world of reality shortly after El Joven's first appearance with the letters. After refusing to attend to him because of the late hour, Margarita dreams of snow:

MARGARITA: Imagínate, si nevara.

MALVINA: ¡¿Qué?!

MARGARITA: Si nevara . . . Los pobres que duermen en la calle . . . Y sin embargo, sería tan lindo, ver nevar . . .

MALVINA: (*enojada*) Sí, mi hijita, va a nevar en México. En seguida. Tu bisabuela Clemencia, que en paz descanse, vio nevar una vez. Anda, quítate de allí. (p. 44)

Malvina's attempt to shatter the girl's innocent wish illustrates Margarita's difficulty in escaping reality. Shortly thereafter, snowflakes begin to fall. The snowfall in itself is not fantastic, as it appears to have happened before. What is fantastic is the power of Margarita's imagination over the real world in which she must live. Margarita herself is not, however, aware of the power of her own mind. It is El Joven who will prove to her that a strong imagination is capable of determining any change, regardless of how fantastic it may seem. As Margarita discovers freedom and happiness in the world of fantasy, the ordered world of reality becomes progressively more disrupted.

According to Todorov, the tension created during the intervening period of disequilibrium is a result not only of these fantastic episodes but also of the hesitation that the hero experiences when faced with the two opposing worlds. From the very start, Margarita is seen as a rebellious yet fearful adolescent, caught between two totally different worlds. Her situation is immediately made evident to the reader or spectator by the stage setting: on the one hand exists the dark, dull atmosphere of the store, and on the other lies the mysterious yet alluring world of the Alameda, "una impresión de sombras y reflejos [. . .] líneas entrelazadas [. . .] gasas temblonas, traslúcidas" (p. 39). While Margarita does indeed react against the oppressive world of the store and her family, she expresses at the same time a strong fear of the outside world:

Yo no quería escoger, decidir, buscar. Todo es inmenso y espantoso, todo está lleno de caminos, todo está lleno de vejez, de hambre, de enfermedades o de guerra. Yo no puedo aceptarlo, yo no quiero avanzar, yo no quiero moverme, yo no quiero decir que sí ni que no, yo no quiero. (p. 58)

El Joven, however, helps her to solve this dilemma by encouraging her to make the decisions that eventually lead her to fantasy and freedom. She makes, in fact, three major decisions: to buy the letters of Mozart, to go for a walk down the Alameda, and, finally, to accompany El Joven to Europe. Each decision carries her one step closer to total liberation of mind and body.

Margarita's first decisive action, the purchase of the letters, produces a paradoxical effect. While the old papers do provide the girl an escape from her humdrum existence, they also compromise her even more in the world of reality by provoking the death of her mother. But once again El Joven comes to her aid and rescues her from guilt and depression with the following philosophy: "Nacer y morir no son decisión nuestra. Lo que está en medio sí . . . Hay que llorar cuando alguien muere. Y consolarnos. Y vivir" (p. 65).

This timely advice on deciding one's own course of life leads Margarita on to her second decision—to walk through the Alameda, a promenade which, by contrast to the store, becomes symbolic of the outside world. In this twilight world of shadows and misery, Margarita's deepest fears emerge. The dramatist describes the scene carefully for the reader or director:

La Alameda. Es una maraña absoluta que cubre todo, también a los personajes. Vemos, tan sólo, un enredijo vegetal en penumbra. Hay manchas tenues de luz en las que apenas vislumbramos figuras encobijadas, sin más ropa que la sucia cobija, mujeres desarrapadas, y miserables [. . .]. Hacen actividades confusas y no se ven casi, pero se intuyen obscenas; los mendigos tal vez se espulgan; alguien grita; hay una riña borrosa, quizás sólo sea un juego violento. . . . (p. 67)

A cold, slimy rock that Margarita accidentally touches becomes representative of the world in which she lives. El Joven, however, proves to her that when light and will are applied to it the stone becomes “una piedra capaz de transformaciones y misterios” (p. 68). When he orders “Hágase—la—luz,” the illumination of the streetlights converts a hitherto gloomy and miserable promenade into a fascinating world of music, butterflies, and brilliant objects. By the end of her visit to the Alameda, Margarita has ceased to tremble before the outside world. She concludes Part I by declaring “Ya no tengo miedo” (p. 69).

Part II of *Las cartas de Mozart* is primarily a preparation for Margarita's final decision to leave behind the dull and repressive, albeit safe, world of reality. The focus of this part, however, centers on the grotesque relationship which develops between Renata and Marcelo. During Part I it is gradually revealed that they were once adulterous lovers. Since the death of her husband, Renata has waited for Marcelo to propose to her. She is, therefore, stunned when she learns of his plans to marry young Margarita. During Part II of the play Renata progressively wins Marcelo over to her side through legal and psychological maneuvers. After forcing him into total submission, she poisons him in a calculated effort to free herself from a burning passion which could never be satisfied. This shift of focus from the world of fantasy to the real world represented by Renata and Marcelo could possibly be interpreted as a structural fault in the play. When considered, however, within the context of Margarita's decision-making process, the final emphasis on the adult world increases the impact of her resolution to follow El Joven. The evil, greed, and lasciviousness shown by the lovers all serve to emphasize the negative aspects of the world from which Margarita knowingly escapes.

The dual focus of the plot allows the fantastic world represented by El Joven and Margarita to develop parallel to, yet separate from the real world of Renata and Marcelo. Margarita, faced with the unpleasant choice between an intolerable marriage to Marcelo and the convent, is forced to flee to the world of fantasy. In Part II she gradually enters more and more into this other world through the letters of Mozart and through make-believe sessions with El Joven, in which they act out the roles of Mozart and his wife.

The most important fantastic event of Part II prior to the final metamorphosis of El Joven and Margarita is the apparition of the dead Malvina, who has come to visit her daughter and ask her forgiveness. In this scene, the setting and

dialogue are such that neither Margarita nor the reader/spectator knows for certain whether the visit is dream or "reality." At this moment, the lines previously drawn and maintained between the fantastic and the real world begin to disappear in a process that will culminate in the transformation of El Joven into the young Mozart. Up to the appearance of Malvina's ghost, the world of fantasy has consisted of events which could be classified as "uncanny," all products of youthful imagination. At this point, however, the reader/spectator becomes more a part of the fantastic process, as he is unable to determine whether Malvina's visit is merely uncanny (a part of Margarita's dream) or marvelous (a true apparition). According to Todorov's theory, the fantastic leads to greater involvement on the part of the reader: "the fantastic implies an integration of the reader into the world of the characters; that world is defined by the reader's own ambiguous perception of the events narrated."<sup>8</sup> Episodes such as Malvina's visit help to maintain the play in a state of the purely fantastic to the very end.

Besides determining the structural development of the play and the reader/spectator's experience, the fantastic also serves a semantic function by communicating basic themes that pertain to the world of the reader or audience. Todorov contends that "the real goal of the marvelous journey is the total exploration of universal reality."<sup>9</sup> Used as a tool in the exploration of reality, the fantastic can never be totally removed from the real world. As witnessed in this play, each world has the capacity to transform itself into the other. El Joven and Margarita express this idea in Part II of the play when they discuss the negative and positive aspects of the real world:

MARGARITA: Es horrible. Cosas turbias, confusas, viscosas, limo, musgo, humedad . . .

EL JOVEN: Y luz y sol y flores que salen de todo eso.

MARGARITA: Y podredumbre, y musgo, y limo viscoso con gusanos, que brotan de las flores y el sol . . .

EL JOVEN: Y flores y sol y mariposas, que brotan del musgo y la podredumbre y los gusanos . . .

[. . .]

MARGARITA: (*sonríe*) Necio. ¿Y Mozart que brota de trajes viejos, embodegados en un teatro?

EL JOVEN: Exactamente. ¿En quién espera Ud. convertirse?

MARGARITA: ¿Es necesario que me convierta en alguien?

EL JOVEN: Es una ley biológica, la de la generación espontánea. (p. 80)

Their playful argument reinforces the idea of a world in constant transformation. Todorov observes that the theme of transformation is, in fact, the theme most common to literature of the fantastic. In Carballido's play the theme of metamorphosis or change finds its expression mainly through the repetition of several motifs—light, music, the letters of Mozart, and the butterfly—, all associated with El Joven and thereby with the fantastic world that he embodies.

Each time the young wizard appears he is accompanied by light and music, two creative forces that come to form an integral part of his total being. Light itself, as indicated in the Alameda scene, has the power to transform the world completely. El Joven explains that music is nothing more than another form of light: "Hay música brillante y oscura, la música es una forma de luz y se

gradúa como la luz. La música es luz" (p. 69). As a result of their interchangeability and constant association with El Joven, light and music eventually become symbolic of creative transformation and total liberation from darkness and repression.

Music is present throughout the play, both audibly and conceptually. Most of the major scenes—El Joven's first appearance, Malvina's death, and the final transformation scene—are accompanied by the strains of various operas written by Mozart. The finale of *La flauta mágica*, for example, plays during El Joven's dramatic metamorphosis into a radiant young Mozart:

Se abre la puerta de golpe y entra El Joven: viste otra vez a la moda del siglo XVIII pero en seda blanca, elegantísimo. Rachas de viento, ráfagas de luz brillante; revolotean cortinas y trapos y helechos, palpitan relámpagos blancos entre las junturas de los muebles.

Música: El final de *La flauta mágica*, desde "heil sieuch Geweihten!" (sic) (p. 90)

The title and the music of this well-known piece underscore the magical quality of the ongoing dramatic action. More of Mozart's operatic scores are either heard or serve as the topic of conversation throughout the play. When the curtain first opens, Margarita and her family have just returned from a performance of *Las bodas de Fígaro*, an opera which serves to introduce into Carballido's comedy the themes of marriage and adultery. Later in the play, the theme of Don Juan—the damnation of the lover—is introduced by the opera *Don Giovanni*. This is the opera being featured in Mexico City when Renata plots the death of Marcelo, the lover who has used and cruelly abandoned her. When a neighbor describes to her the performance, Renata responds:

RENATA: Así que Don Juan, al infierno, y sus amantes . . .

VIOLA: ¡Tan contentas! (p. 76)

The Don Juan theme appears once again in music from *El convidado de piedra*. A few strains, heard shortly before Malvina's apparition, reinforce the supernatural nature of her visit. She has returned briefly from purgatory in order to ask forgiveness for her sins, with the hope that she will someday ascend to heaven. The effective use of music, therefore, serves to reinforce not only the themes of Mozart and Don Juan but also the fantastic nature of the play.

While light and music serve a primarily thematic purpose, the three Mozart letters perform both a structural and a thematic function. Structurally, they represent the first real intrusion of the fantastic into the world of reality, and thereby set off a catalytic process that continues throughout the play. The letters are a part of the force that destroys the ordered world in existence at the beginning of the play. Immediately after seeing El Joven wave his letters at her through the window, Margarita begins her rebellion by refusing to sew a button back onto Marcelo's coat. She continues her rebellion against her family and an undesirable marriage by spending a small fortune on the letters. The money, her inheritance from a recently deceased aunt, was to have been invested for her by Marcelo. The letters continue to wreak havoc by provoking Malvina's sudden death. The papers themselves seem to have a fantastic power over Margarita which she in turn uses to rebel against reality.

Thematically, the letters of Mozart contribute to the theme of transformation. Their intercalation into the actual text of the play facilitates the transition from reality to fantasy by bringing in the world of Mozart and thereby preparing both the characters and the reader/spectator for the gradual metamorphosis of El Joven and Margarita into their final respective identities. In several scenes Margarita is heard reading the letters aloud as she translates them from German into Spanish. The ludicrous and often obscene content of these letters contrasts sharply with the proper world in which she lives. Yet it is precisely this absolute contrast which attracts Margarita so strongly to the world of Mozart and fantasy. Eric Rabkin, in his study of fantastic literature, defines the fantastic as a “diametrical reversal of the ground rules of the extra-textual real world.”<sup>10</sup> The world contained within the letters represents the exact opposite of the world in which Margarita has been forced to live. Therefore, the content of the letters, which is strictly historical, becomes a fantasy to the young Margarita.

The motif that contributes most to the theme of transformation is the “mariposa.” As a symbol of light and illusion, the image of the butterfly is applied strictly to El Joven, who continually hovers about the scene, appearing and disappearing with the mystery and charm of a butterfly. Margarita and her young friend Martín, and unknowingly Malvina, all refer to El Joven as a butterfly at one moment or another. Through repetition, the image acquires a symbolic value which is best defined in an earlier play by Carballido, *Yo también hablo de la rosa*. Here the Intermediaria reads from a bestiary: “Las mariposas dicen cosas profundas. Dicen: ‘fugacidad, misterio’. Dicen: ‘amamos los cambios sorprendentes’. Dicen: ‘todo es posible’.”<sup>11</sup> This passage from *Yo también hablo de la rosa* presages the profound relationship that exists in *Las cartas de Mozart* among the butterfly, El Joven, and the theme of transformation. In his role as philosopher, El Joven frequently says “cosas profundas,” but as “butterfly” he also proves that “todo es posible.” In one discussion with Margarita he comments, “Y flores y sol y mariposas, que brotan del musgo y la podredumbre y los gusanos” (p. 80). Sheathed in white satin, the Mozart that emerges from beggar’s rags is a clear reflection of the homely caterpillar’s metamorphosis into a radiant butterfly. The physical transformation of El Joven is accompanied by a gradual verbal transformation: the quivering lad who barely speaks at the beginning of the play ultimately spins out beautiful verses as young Mozart. The repeated image of the butterfly helps, therefore, to convey the symbolic significance of El Joven’s metamorphosis and to prove that the world is indeed one of mysterious transformations.

Todorov’s theories on the structure of the fantastic demonstrate that the world of fantasy plays a key syntactical role in the development of *Las cartas de Mozart* by provoking and facilitating Margarita’s final decision, and thereby the movement from one ordered society to another. In its semantic function, the fantastic expresses the basic themes of freedom and transformation, and ultimately conveys the dramatic message proposed by Carballido—the world is one of mysterious transformations, and that man himself, provided with a free and imaginative will, is capable of determining these changes. What appears to be simple comedy becomes more complex due to the dual focus on reality and fantasy and to the reader/spectator’s experience of the play. Trapped between



the two opposing worlds, the reader or spectator enjoys an experience of pure fantasy, unable to decide just where to draw the line between those worlds. Todorov helps to explain this ambivalence between the fantastic and the real world when he states that the primary function of the fantastic is, in fact, to oblige us "to see how close these apparently marvellous elements are to us, to what degree they are present in our life."<sup>12</sup>

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## Notes

1. The play, begun in Pittsburgh in January, 1971, was not finished until February, 1974, in Mexico City. It was first staged in Mexico City in October, 1975, by the Compañía General de Teatro under the direction of Raúl Zermeño.

2. The dissertation of Margaret Sayers Peden, "Emilio Carballido, Dramatic Author: His Work from 1948-1966," University of Missouri, 1966, discusses in detail his use of this dramatic structure.

3. Northrop Frye, in his *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), establishes this movement as a basic characteristic of the comedic structure.

4. Emilio Carballido, *Las cartas de Mozart*, in *La Palabra y el Hombre*, Nueva época, número extraordinario (sept. 1974), 42. All subsequent quotes will be from the same edition.

5. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975), trans. Richard Howard, p. 163.

6. Todorov, p. 41.

7. Todorov, p. 41.

8. Todorov, p. 31.

9. Todorov, p. 57.

10. Eric Rabkin, *The Fantastic in Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 42.

11. Emilio Carballido, *Yo también hablo de la rosa* (Mexico: Editorial Novaro, 1972), p. 108.

12. Todorov, p. 172.