

**ROMANCE STUDIES:
Readings in Excess and Betrayal, from Modernism to the Present**

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The Old Gringo: Carlos Fuentes, Repetition, and History

History, Karl Marx tells us, tends to repeat: “the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce” (*The Eighteenth Brumaire*). It is appropriate then that Carlos Fuentes’s novel of the Mexican Revolution, *The Old Gringo* (*Gringo viejo*, 1985), is about history and centrally concerned with repetition, about how tragedy slips into farce, and vice versa. It is also about memory, writing (too often a fetish object), legitimacy, justice, freedom, and the ways in which revolutions so frequently seem to degenerate into vicious reiterations of what they once promised to overthrow. But this need not be reason to stop trying to change the world. After all, the old gringo of the novel’s title, even at his advanced age, and after a lifetime of writing and cynicism, still heads south into the tumult, facing almost certain death with little more than a couple of books in his bags.

1. Repetition as Content and Form

Repetition in *The Old Gringo* is a theme from the outset. Consider the book’s opening lines, portraying one of its central characters, a former schoolteacher named Harriet Winslow: “Now she sits alone and remembers. / She sees, over and over, the specters of Tomás Arroyo and the moon-faced woman and the old gringo cross her window” (3). The fact that everything that follows is presented in terms of memory is already a nod to one form of repetition, for recollection involves reliving or reviewing the past, experiencing it a second time. Moreover, this remembrance is itself multiple: “over and over,” we are told, these images return to Winslow, whether she wishes them to or not, as though they were an instance of what Sigmund Freud termed a “compulsion to repeat” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 14) by which repressed trauma returns to haunt the present. And what she sees “cross[ing] her window” are described as “specters,” shadows or revenants of what was once fully alive, though the next sentence clarifies that they are “not ghosts” because they “have simply mobilized their old pasts, hoping that she would do the same and join them” (3). Further modes of repetition are therefore invoked: both mobilization, as a rejuvenation or injection of renewed energy, and imitation, as Winslow is enjoined to follow the example offered by these spirits from long ago.

Repetition is not merely theme. It is also formal strategy. The book’s very last line is the same as the first, with the slight change that the text is italicized: “*Now she sits alone and remembers*” (199). Moreover, in the intervening two hundred or so pages, this line is a

refrain, cropping up a dozen times or more (24, 44, 71, 74, 95, 105, 106, 107, 119, 127, 147, 163, 188) in one form or another: “She still sits and remembers” (74); “‘You have your booty,’ she replied, proud (she remembers), haughty (now she sits alone)” (105); “Now she is alone and remembers” (119). So my question to you is: What is the effect of this repetition? Why this insistent return to the same phrase? Does it function in different ways at different times? Why does the last line repeat the first? Pause the video, and write down your thoughts. While you do that, I’ll have a tequila, but I’ll be right back.

Tequila is a liquor made by distilling fermented juice taken from the agave plant, mostly in the state of Jalisco, west of Mexico City. It has become a symbol of *mexicanidad* or Mexicanness, especially after the Revolution, as the country sought a new national iconography. Advertising and popular culture associated the drink particularly with Pancho Villa, an image that was picked up and turned around by the US media, who depicted the revolutionary general as a drunken bandit. (In fact, Villa barely touched alcohol, and outlawed it in his home state of Chihuahua.) In *The Old Gringo*, however, the only characters who are shown drinking tequila are the foreigners, Winslow and the old gringo himself, who bond in their shared Americanness over this most Mexican of libations: Winslow is described as “a North American woman [facing] the prospect of a comforting glass at dusk with a fellow American” (64-65). It is as they consume Mexican difference that the two of them can best see what they both have in common.

In some ways, such repetition is more akin to poetry than to prose. Poetry, after all, is often characterized by repetition either in terms of form (rhyme, rhythm, structure) or theme, circling back to its topic rather than developing a linear narrative. Here too, then, the reiteration of the same line over and over gives Fuentes’s text a lyrical tone. It adds to the sensation that there is something dreamlike about this story, which hovers between the real and imagination, between the concrete history of the Revolution, including real-life figures, and the flights of fiction with which Fuentes fills in the gaps in the historical record. Moreover, the repetition of this particular phrase distances us further from the tale being told, as it reminds us of the frame within which the narrative is set: for all the shifts in perspective, and however much it sometimes seems as though we are almost witness to the incidents being described, in fact the action is all firmly in the past, and the

story as a whole is filtered through the reminiscences of the one character who holds in the balance history as tragedy and history as farce.

Winslow is depicted, at least at first, as an unwilling participant in the history in which she is accidentally caught up. Shortly before the events that she retells unfold, she has just arrived at a hacienda somewhere in Mexico's vast northern desert, where she has been hired to tutor the children of its wealthy owners, the Mirandas. But the landlords have fled before the approach of revolutionary forces led by one Tomás Arroyo, who had grown up as a peon on this vast estate and is now out for revenge on his former oppressors. Arroyo and his men have set the hacienda alight, and we find Winslow "in the midst of the vertiginous terror of the unexpected" (33). But more surprises are in store as, among the revolutionaries, she meets the "old gringo" of the novel's title, a man who has been drawn to the violence in Mexico because, he tells us, he has "come to die" (24); "To be a gringo in Mexico . . . ah, that is euthanasia" (145). In due course, the old man's wish is fulfilled, but not before he takes a quasi-paternal, quasi-amorous interest in Winslow's well-being, and a somewhat overwrought love triangle ensues between him, Arroyo, and Harriet. The Mexican ends up killing the gringo, but when word gets out of the foreigner's death, the overall commander of the revolutionary Division of the North, the legendary Pancho Villa, orders that the corpse be dug up to be killed a second time (perhaps a third, in that the old man is envisaged as being already a dead man walking as soon as he has crossed the border). Winslow then claims the body and has it repatriated and buried in the United States, under the pretext that the deceased is her father, a Captain in the US Army who had gone missing in Cuba years before.

Throughout this convoluted plot, characters are depicted as reacting to and re-enacting aspects of their past lives that they cannot quite leave behind even amid a revolutionary process that is supposed to make everything new. Much of this re-enactment has to do with family histories: it turns out that Arroyo is the illegitimate son of the hacienda's former owner; the gringo blames himself for his own son's suicide; and Winslow is coming to terms with her father's betrayal of his family, as the truth is that he vanished because he set up with a Cuban lover.

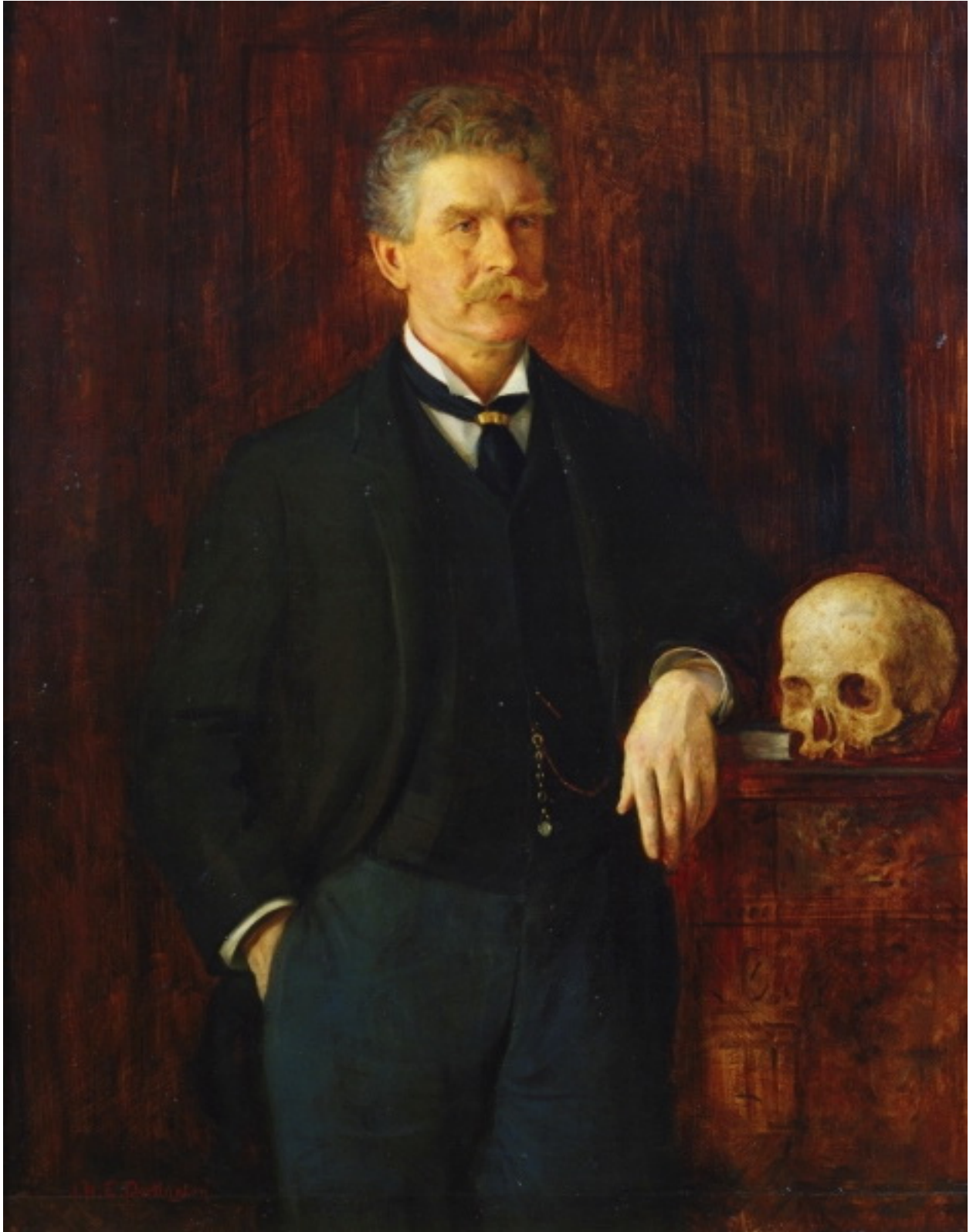
The otherwise farcical execution of a disinterred corpse with which the drama culminates is then portrayed as offering resolution to these secret personal tragedies: Arroyo, who "also die[s] twice" (181), shot by his own commander to keep the story quiet, at least does

so ultimately as a loyal revolutionary, with “Viva Villa!” on his lips (185); the gringo satisfies his “final vanity” by being “killed by Pancho Villa himself” (146); and Winslow gets to give her father a dignified burial (albeit that the body in the coffin is not his), with the American press praising “the martial courage his admirable daughter had recognized and rescued from the bloody battles of the Mexican revolutionaries” (185). It is only later, as she “sits alone and remembers,” that Winslow recalls the more complex dynamics that underlie and undercut the official stories of heroism and redemption, which seem, against the grain of Marx’s dictum, to have transmuted melodramatic farce into solemn national tragedy.

2. *Paper Power*

The old gringo is not just anybody. It is revealed near the end of the book (though for the reader this is an open secret, as his identity is apparent from early on) that he is Ambrose Bierce, a journalist, poet, and writer of short stories known for his caustic wit, famous above all for the satirical *Devil’s Dictionary*. Sample definitions: “History, *n.* An account mostly false, of events mostly unimportant” (110); “Love, *n.* A temporary insanity curable by marriage” (155); “War, *n.* A by-product of the arts of peace” (235). Bierce’s provocation was to separate words from their accepted definitions, with the sly wink of collusion that suggests that we all already know that the commonplaces of everyday language have to be inverted to reveal their true meanings. Then the historical Bierce did indeed disappear in mysterious circumstances: he was last heard of in late 1913, aged 71, accompanying Villa’s forces in revolutionary Mexico.

In Fuentes’s novel, Bierce crosses over into Mexico with little more in his luggage than a couple of his own books and a copy of Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*: “All my life I’ve wanted to read the *Quixote*,” he imagines telling the customs officials, “I’d like to do it before I die. I’ve given up writing forever” (11). No longer a writer, having lost faith in the possibilities that writing offers, he proposes to read a book whose titular knight is deluded by his reading into thinking that madcap misunderstandings constitute a heroic adventure. It is as though, not content with writing the *Devil’s Dictionary*, the old gringo were armed with a further warning not to trust what is set down in print.



Ambrose Bierce

Often, those who are most convinced of the value of writing are those who cannot read at all. *They show that the power of writing has little to do with whatever meaning it may convey, subject to interpretation, but rather with the book as fetish object, the materiality of paper.* This is the case for Arroyo, who travels with a strongbox containing a set of “papers as brittle as old silk” (28). Illiterate, Arroyo cannot read what is written on them, but he displays them to the old gringo with the certainty that they vindicate his rebellion: “You see what’s written here? You see the writing? You see the precious red seal? These lands have always been ours, *ours* [. . .]. The King of Spain himself said so. Even he acknowledged it was ours. It says so right here. Written in his own hand. This is his signature. I am the keeper of these papers. The papers prove that no one else has a right to these lands” (29). Questioned by the gringo as to how much he can understand of these ancient parchments, Arroyo snaps: “You are a fool, gringo. I may not be able to read, but I can remember. [. . .] I know what my papers mean better than any who can read” (30). For Arroyo, deciphering the text is hindrance more than help: for him, its power lies in its encipherment, in the spell that it weaves that would be broken if it were disentangled.

But if Arroyo is the keeper of the papers, he is also possessed by them. He thinks that they give him power, but it is they that have power over him. The band of revolutionaries that he leads is supposed to be a “floating battalion” (52), with instructions to proceed to Zacatecas and then Mexico City once they have mopped up any remaining resistance in the countryside. But as much as the papers tie the land to Arroyo, they tie *him* to the land, to territory and to sovereignty, and he is reluctant to move on from the burned-out hacienda whose absent owners still haunt him. Burdened by these ethereal manuscripts, he and his men are stuck in a quagmire, conceding authority to a long-dead colonial King.

No wonder the old gringo burns Arroyo’s precious treasure, the fetish that binds him to the past: he “knew the value of papers, the papers that legitimized General Arroyo’s quest: bounty and vengeance and lust and pride and mere acceptance by his peers” (162). Their destruction triggers the novel’s dénouement: this is why Arroyo flies into a rage and kills the gringo. But it is only by getting rid of them that the revolution can come into its own, and that Arroyo may have the chance to be freed from the fate of repeating his progenitors’ false moves, of confusing writing with legitimacy, and legitimacy with justice. He fails to take up that opportunity. In the aftermath of the shooting, “as the rain dissolved the ashes of the papers,” Winslow denounces him: “Your name isn’t Arroyo,

like your mother's; your name is Miranda, after your father. Yes, [. . .] you're the resentful heir, disguised as a rebel. / 'You poor bastard. You are Tomás Miranda'" (175). Resentment may fuel revolutions, but it ensures that they end up reiterating the old order in new guise.

The question posed by *The Old Gringo* is whether repetition can become difference: whether returning to a theme (such as the Revolution itself, already addressed by so many Mexican novels) or a phrase ("she sits alone and remembers") can enable something new, can mobilize and rejuvenate, can open up the future rather than simply tying us to the past. Sometimes once is not enough in the search for liberation. To paraphrase the Marquis de Sade after the French Revolution (in *La philosophie dans le boudoir* of 1795): yet another effort if you would become revolutionaries!

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Image: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ambrose_Bierce-1.jpg

Song: "Los Dorados de Villa" (Duetto Chihuahua)