

Plenary Address given by Rosa Beltrán at the ACLA 2007 conference in Puebla, Mexico.

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In 1995 she received the prestigious Premio Internacional de Novela Planeta/Joaquín Mortiz for her first novel *La corte de los ilusos*; her second novel, *El paraíso que fuimos*, was published in 2002, and her third *Alta infidelidad*, in 2006. She is the author of three books of short stories, *La espera* (1986), *Amores que matan* (1996), and *Cambios cosméticos* (2006). Her short fiction has been translated into English, French, Dutch, and Italian. Her book of essays on comparative American topics, *América sin americanismos* (Mexico City, UNAM, 1997), was awarded the Florence Fishbaum Award., and in 1994, she was recognized by the American Association of University Women for her literary critical work on twentieth century women writers.

Rosa is currently working on a historical novel based on the trials and tribulations of the nuns who secretly inhabited the Convento de Santa Mónica in the city of Puebla.

Bleeding Borders: Criticism and Fiction

Rosa Beltrán

Part I

For as long as I can remember, one thing that was very clear to me was that the world was divided in two. The one of the “doers” and the one of the makers, “fable makers” that is. The doers were the men. The Kingdom of Heaven belonged to them. To be a doer was to go to work all day, it was “your dad is very responsible and because he is very responsible he is not here.” “Doing” was another term for abandoning. My mother, on the other hand, was the fable maker. Through her I discovered smell and touch, my first stories about the world, and a little later, the sound of things. My mother was a voice. An explosive stream made of many voices, hers and others, because she was an excellent imitator. Her magic was defined by the fact that the imitated person never resembled the original, though she evoked him. In some mysterious way she would conjure them up

with a minimal gesture, a barely noticeable feature, and later transform herself into that person and even someone else. Someone that seemed even more interesting and alive thanks to her imitation. My siblings and I were surprised to see that the imitated person was not the plain and conventional individual that we knew, but a fascinating one who we would have to discover through her voice. My mother turned local characters into terrifying beings: the security guard, the baker, or one of the two employees of the only bank around, which was called “Banco Internacional” and occupied an indistinct gray building in Tlalpan. Through my mother we learned of the horrible destiny of the security guard who, with no luck, always passed by on his bicycle blowing his whistle to try to scare away the thieves; of the ill-tempered *gallego* who counted out the bread and later, with great effort, wrote the price on a piece of cardboard; or of the spinster who stamped the bank statements with vengeance on her mind.

Because of my mother, life made sense and everyone that surrounded us acquired a purpose, even though it was almost always a disastrous one. My mother talked and talked. Nothing could stop her. She argued over everything, invariably winning all battles: over the sour milk she received or because she was promised a lower price before she went to pay.

On the street there were so many men and nobody to defend her when one of them showed disrespect. But that was not the truth. One time I saw a man on a bicycle, stop, say something to her, and grab her breast. At that moment, an automobile with two men in it suddenly came to a halt. The one in the passenger seat asked if that fellow had done anything to her and she concurred. The car pulled away and caught up with him. We both saw how one grabbed him by his hair while the other pounded him with his fists. When they finished, they called us over. My mother approached and the perpetrator offered her his apologies. She, of course, did not accept them.

My aunts talked with her non-stop, shaking their heads from *one side to the other* as if to say, “*What a world this is!*” My cousins and I listened to them gossip. We remained silent while they talked—always agreeing—as if they were only one voice and not five sisters. And in spite of feeling safe, deep down we knew something was wrong. Because what was useful was doing. Fabulating was a way of passing the time, or of wasting it. Something that was done on the sly, with a sense of guilt and secrecy.

To hear my mother was the only thing I had and that was not much. What would I do when she was gone? The only thing I could hope for was that the world would mirror her stories. That words were an imitation of things.

One day after breakfast, my dad sat all of us down in the living room and told us, “I am going to read, and pay attention—there will be questions.” We sat, very properly, and watched him take out a volume of the *Barsa Encyclopedia*, Chapter: The Digestive Process. When he opened the book and showed us some illustrations the four of us were aghast. What came afterwards was much worse, an incomprehensible reading, and the same thing, he told us, was happening to us at that very moment inside our bodies. We had never heard such words. We did not understand, nor did we have the slightest hope of understanding. And because of this, thanks to this, verbal images soon became lively realities and sound was finally an independent presence. The protagonists of the digestive process were inhabitants of the land where I lived, protected from the world and safe from its *banality*. I felt happy and in my element, at least while that revelation lasted. First I imagined a house without a master where a neurotic gatekeeper called Pylorus spent his time opening and closing the door. The main character of the story, named Alimentary Bolus, maneuvered himself through extremely narrow hallways until he bumped into Licina, who upon seeing him, decided to follow him forever and ever without the need to explain the reasons for her extravagant love. I was happy doing something that I had never done before with words. I was learning to read. And even though I didn’t know it yet, the method and the voice were the echo of still another voice, and in the act of interpretation there was a shadow. It was my mother.

Looking back on this today, one could say that I entered the house of literature through the back door. I started to read by being a bad reader. I understood what I wanted to understand, not what the book or the author meant to say. One could object to this point of view: to what extent is this reading? But also, and more honestly, we should ask ourselves if it is possible to read the world in any other way. Is there any way to avoid mediation, one’s own story, the unique interpretation through which each one of us grasps the spirit of a work? Today I realize that this form of reading represented for me the power to evoke images *in absentia*. It was the possibility of giving form to a personal myth through the mere sound of words.

In the blindness of our first readings there is a kind of implicit enlightenment. The limits that we so rigidly impose upon the meaning of a work can cause us to lose the fabricated yet irreplaceable wonder of the first experience, of that primordial moment in which the word is a talisman and the world a vessel for all of our fantasies.

The land of childhood is full of poetic confusions. Its *verbal sign* is alchemy and its implicit object is to transform straw into gold. One day I heard an aunt say that we had lost all, or at least a good part, of the family fortune because of my grandfather's "bookkeeper." I did not know what the "mishandlings" my aunt talked about could be, let alone that a "bookkeeper" was, in reality, an administrator, the man responsible for the hacienda's accounts. To me, a "bookkeeper" was the one who possessed the most valuable objects in the world. From my point of view there was not a richer nor more fortunate soul than the one who had all the books and could read as many as he liked. So it did not amaze me that because he was not a doer but a reader—and perhaps even a fable maker—the bookkeeper had been the cause of our family's misfortune.

Understanding the dictionary's definitions was my way of growing up. And even though reading is also a gradual process of learning to "call a spade a spade" sometimes I see reaching this summit as a kind of Paradise Lost. Trusting the dictionary is a way of robbing words of the lightness and holiness that Plato finds in orality. Using it is only one way of remembering that my childhood is gone forever, even though sometimes I fantasize that it will return the very day I begin to lose my memory.

One crooked but useful path to occasionally recover this magic (my mother's voice) is reading a book by opening it to a random page. It is a game that I play frequently and one that gives any work its essence separating it from the pagan and the banal. The book, while preventing me from following the plot, as occurs in Holy Scripture, resists revealing its meaning and instead inspires me to travel through other worlds. I have never felt that I was betraying the author by reading in this way. Beyond us, the book possesses its own spirit, and Borges reminds us that even the Bible says that the spirit wafts where it wishes.

Listening to others' stories and later recreating them was how I knew that my mind had finally found its home. Since my life could never be as rich or complex as that of others, I was condemned to live through them, to borrow their words and return them, sheltered and nourished, and, consequently, lead a vicarious existence. Which of the two

was deceiving me, which was the true one and which the false? Who would be more myself, the one that lived or the one that wished? The writer is the one who plays the role of the other, the one who places his true fears and longings in others. He is the transvestite who uses a noun like a reversible suit and simply says “writer” when in reality he wants to say “woman writer.”

Reading and writing from this body always implies an act of cross-dressing. Never, when reading *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka, did I ask myself how I could identify with the protagonist, if Gregor Samsa was a man and I a woman. The same happened with Jean Valjean, with Raskolnikov, or Stephen Dedalus. Nevertheless, I have never heard of a male reader identifying with a female character created by a female writer.

Accepting that my world would be a bookish one and that my adventures would be limited to conquering printed pages with the renewed emotion of someone approaching her *Terra Incognita* with each one of them was not an easy task. I often heard my parents say, “Child, go do something now, stop reading.” And also, paradoxically, “Be yourself.” How could I be myself and read at the same time? And also: how could I imagine without falling into the temptation of being someone else? Thanks to the books that I had and could read I became Joan of Arc, saving myself and dying again and again, filled with a pious feeling and an enormous compassion for myself. I was alternately a princess, a vampiress, a Christian martyr, and a Moorish slave girl. When I got tired of all this, I became the Queen of Hearts and ordered many heads cut off. But I didn’t always choose my ghosts so well. For some reason I prefer to ignore, my Dr. Jekyll was always inevitably murdered by Mr. Hyde and each reading of *Madame Bovary* reinforced my helplessness to not fall under the spell of its poetic truth. Maybe it is because of this that I am condemned to suffer the betrayal of all my lovers. Living vicariously, wishing and, at the same time, fearing to be others, that is my identity. I am the words I have heard and read. Each time I begin a book or write a page, which is to say, each time I come into contact with someone else, mother I hear your voice. A voice that, by encompassing all voices, reassures me that when reading I am not alone.

Part II

Without language, there are no facts. This was, perhaps, the only thing I was certain

of in the early eighties when I entered the School of Philosophy and Letters at the UNAM (The National University of Mexico) to study literature. Never, for as long as I can remember, did I consider training for a profession or learning a trade. Choosing to major in literature to earn a living would have been crazy. To study literature was at once something ambiguous yet close to the idea of being a “bookkeeper”; a way to safeguard stories, to have them all for myself.

Back then, the UNAM was infamous for being filled with “freaks” who wandered around enveloped in clouds of marijuana and moved as erratically as the zombies of Sayula. To talk about the UNAM was to evoke a place inhabited by professors who only arrived to teach class once in a blue moon and despicable administrators who lost official documents, unless you could convince them not to with money, bottles of liquor, or pairs of nylons. A world, in short, that if difficult to enter, was much harder to leave, because no one could remember the last time a student had graduated. Nothing I heard discouraged me for the simple reason that studying literature was something grander and more sweeping than red tape and academic infighting. I enrolled in the program the same way an alchemist enters his lab: to absorb the substance of books in order to discover the interior mechanism that “animates” language. To attend a literary gathering open to all places and times. To discover what the world was like. And, truthfully, to discover who I was, too. I had reasons for believing that books, in some unknown way, would reveal these things to me. That they had been written by others didn’t matter. I knew that it would be a trivial and fortuitous circumstance that someone else might have written my own experience and that it was me that I was reading about.

Thanks to the Academy I discovered the origin and the sound of my language, and along with that, something more astonishing: that although all books written in Spanish shared the same 28 letters of the alphabet, no two of them were alike. That impression grew when, at the end of my studies, I read the work of Latin American authors. They were part of a well-known group called the *Boom* and had been raising commotion outside the classroom for a while. Why were these authors studied so little and so incidentally in my department? According to some, the problem lay in a mystery called “requirements”; according to others, it was because the majority of the literature professors in Mexico were exiles from the Spanish Civil War.

Chance. Subjectivity. Criteria. I was finally getting immersed in Academia.

This was my first apprenticeship in literary studies. A form of “reading” in which some voices are privileged over others. Thus was born, without my knowing it, my concept of “method” and also an outrageous hope: that this exile of Latin American literature was the vestige of an evil cult, a momentary detour in the route that could take me back again to that first voice, the one I now called “the total book” as a substitute for my mother.

I learned other things as well in the Academy. For example, that there is such a thing as “erroneous reading”. There I learned that what the nineteenth century novel did with words, transforming reading into a living act, was in reality a consequence of misreading.

I learned that if in Paris serial novels published in newspapers provoked debates in the Houses of Parliament and opened the door to penal reforms; that if they dictated fashion and thought and saw to it that reading rooms rented the newspapers where *The Mysteries of Paris* by Eugène Sue was published for 10 *sous* per half hour; that if the fevered excitement over the newspaper serials was such that, as Umberto Eco recalls, it ensured that the “erudite gatekeepers” read the next part of the story to the illiterate and that there were sick people who waited to die until the end of the story; that if desperate pleas were sent to the author begging him not to kill Fleur-de-Marie and the author himself received donations to help the fictional Morel family; that if the novel was capable of doing all this and more, it was only because, the Academy says, there is a problem in comprehension called misreading. Happily enough, thanks to the Academy we know that if there are readers of *The Iliad* who believe, in effect, that the Trojan War occurred, it is their problem. Because as Doctorow informs us, evidence indicates that the Homeric epic was transcribed after generations of oral transmission. Homer (or the collection of authors that we call Homer) was a bard at the end of the Bronze Age, and in the Bronze Age stories were the privileged instruments of storage and transmission of information: they were a collective memory. And there was not an observation of the natural world that was not itself a religious belief, nor a history that was not legend, nor practical information that was not communicated through poetic speech. “The world was enchanted,” says Doctorow; fortunately, the Academy claims, we have lost the charm. Fortunately? And have we really lost it?

Something troubles me inside each time I receive these kinds of lessons. Because I knew then and know now that I would certainly pay the price of renting the books that I have read if I had to; because I know that this is done in Cuba, right now; because just as García Márquez had to call his friends at 4 a.m. to tell them, with tears in his eyes, that Colonel José Aureliano Buendía had just died, my life is turned upside down by a literary character very often, and almost all the decisions I have made in my life are indirectly born of and driven by literature. I don't think the Greeks were mistaken. Not any more than we are. If science lives to refute its previous postulates, this means that the world is not made of atoms but of stories.

I had my stories. Many were born from books. One day I went to the Sierra de Hidalgo to teach reading and writing. The idea that inspired me to travel to an almost uninhabited place, where a handful of farmers racked their brains trying to understand, and where at night some of the same men, drunk and momentarily cured of their fever for literacy, tried to enter the little room where “the teachers” had entrenched ourselves, was an idea that had emerged from literature. For by then I had read the nineteenth-century Mexican writers and I felt, as did they, that literature and liberty should build on each other simultaneously. Prieto, Payno, Ramírez, Altamirano, Riva Palacio, the liberals who, as Carlos Monsiváis has explained, “built ‘the Republic out of almost nothing’, and wrote when they could and at the same the time, took up arms, drafted laws, directed state offices... stood up to the second empire... and were close to president Benito Juárez, at once supporting him and criticizing him.” All of the literature that has been written after that moment in Mexico is nourished by that liberal tradition. From the novel of the Revolution to more contemporary authors, there is something of that force that still survives. I do not mean to imply by this that the relation between intellectuals and the State has always been an auspicious one or that there have not been catastrophic contradictions. What I am saying is that typically in our country, literature and political action have gone hand in hand. Most of our most brilliant writers of both genders have participated in the political life of the country, have written for newspapers, and acted as conscientious critics of our society. This is not the norm in North American academia and the critics who regularly write for newspapers are an exception. Edward Said, Noam Chomsky, and Susan Sontag, among the most recent, have all been pillars in the debate

about the link between intellectual thought and political participation. Their writings about the problems of our times and Bush's erratic—to say the least—behavior in the Middle East is fundamental within and outside the US. Through them our idea of critical thought acquires another dimension. Together with Norman Mailer, they are perhaps the last exemplars in a world where the rules of the game have changed.

In Mexico, during the first half of the twentieth century, many writers were key in building programs dedicated to the study of literature. Rosario Castellanos, Juan José Arreola, Salvador Elizondo, Sergio Pitol, and Margo Glantz are some of the ones considered to be great writers but also great teachers. Today, there are fewer and fewer authors appointed as university professors because the criteria for inclusion have changed. The concept of “mastery” in the Academy has changed, and one type of knowledge automatically displaces another. This is not the case in the US, or at least not always. Many of the writers who see their works of fiction as a handicap to their CVs in Mexico are, ironically, invited to teach at some US universities in their capacity as authors. Although of course, there is the case of Roman Jakobson voting against hiring Nabokov for considering him to be inept with regard to the formalist and structuralist fashion. Thanks to him, and to Cornell, we have Nabokov's superb *Lectures on Literature*.

By the time I arrived at UCLA, I had written a book, regularly published in the daily papers, worked as an editor and written a series of critical introductions to works of Mexican authors; I had written book reviews, and had a daughter, a life partner, and a degree. All of this baggage fit into my idea of the “total book,” one that contained all stories and all genres and, being a book, was not reduced to a conventional form or a single reading. For me, the Academy's greatest legacy was a sentence by Juan José Arreola. “Literature,” he said, “is not in books. It is the ability to see the stained-glass windows of Chartres in a slice of tomato and the mysteries at the bottom of the sea in a bowl of fish soup.” Armed with this legacy and a Fulbright scholarship, I arrived at UCLA in 1988 to study comparative literature.

Part III

Where are you from? This question, repeated constantly in every situation, can be

upsetting. Not if you are from Europe, Northern Europe, that is. But if you arrive in the US from a “Third World country,” it becomes what Paul de Man calls the “rhetorical question” to which only one type of reaction is possible. Every time I responded to this question a variety of prejudices would emerge about what it means to be Mexican and I would begin my never-ending self defense. It is inevitable. When the question comes up, I answer and smile while you respond, “You don’t *look* like a Mexican,” and continue to smile when you add, “Oh, but you *sound* like a Mexican.” I try to tear down the wall and not play this game. I talk to you about what I think I am. I combine your folkloric notions with my Western education. You frown and are disappointed if I confirm your idea of Mexican-ness because I am validating it, but you are equally disappointed if I try to situate myself differently because, in your mind, I start to fade away, thus I am not. I talk to you about my identity as if it were a mutating virus, I tell you that my identity is a performative tactic. I am not a lady, nor a good woman, nor an angelic homemaker. If being a woman means being sweet and virtuous, I choose to be a mean and wicked one because, thanks to the books I read when I was a little girl, I realized that only bad women can be happy. The good women found in books are those who are left behind, those who suffer, and those who are relegated, like the Virgin, to stand forever on top of a half moon. And the men? What are men? Doesn’t it seem strange to you that when we say “a public man” we are thinking of something very different than when we say “a public woman?”

When I arrived in the US among my biggest surprises was *hearing* what I was or what I should be because I was Mexican, because I was a woman, because I was whatever one becomes after one crosses a border and begins to be seen by others. Above all, it was obvious that I was not myself; instead, I was and always would be an “other.” The second thing that intrigued me was going to bookstores in the US and finding that authors like Gabriel García Márquez and Jorge Luis Borges, who for me had written “the total book”, appeared on the shelves under “ethnic literature.” Maybe both issues were in reality part of the same one. Where are you from? That question contains the origin of the crime.

I wrote my first novel, *La corte de los ilusos*, (The Court of the Deluded) starting from the idea that being Mexican is always having to justify yourself. The novel is an

ironic take on our supposed independence from Spain in 1822, when it occurred to us that to be free, the best idea was to create an empire in the image and likeness of the European one from which we had just separated ourselves. We had an emperor who wore a Napoleonic suit and we had a social class, the Mexican nobility, which dedicated itself to buying titles dispatched by the shiny new empire. In my novel, I undermined the perspective and changed the point of view by placing the “public man” within the confines of domestic life and bringing the women, always the extras in the great film of History, to the foreground. The public woman was now public in a distinct way and the public man, subjected to matriarchal laws, had to view himself differently in relation to History. Our country’s definition of history was that of the history of pretentious claims to a certain class. The Mexican middle class is always inventing a different origin for themselves, because nobody wants to say, as Octavio Paz pointed out, that we are the product of a conquistador’s rape and the unconditional surrender of an Indian woman called La Malinche.

Since then, everything I write is written in light of the power exercised by the one who does not wield it... apparently. I write about the tactics of the weak, about that instantaneous change of identity that appears when one form of power moves out of its place. All my books are a counter-declaration against the world, something I was taught to see by studying comparative literature and having lived in the US. Formalism, Structuralism, Post colonialism, Queer Studies. They were all new and fascinating ways of “reading” the total book. This technique only imposed one condition upon me. That I should see theory as another form of making literature, at risk of exchanging art for another language, one destined to perish in short while at the hands of a new theory offered as a “better product.”

History is always being written. History is that which is about to come. Thanks to this discovery I could recount family histories while questioning the values between reason and madness, and I wrote a novel in which a contemporary Don Juan stands to lose everything in our post-feminist times.

But History is also what is occurring here and now. In Mexico, a country of women authors as great as Nellie Campobello, Rosario Castellanos, Elena Garro, Josefina Vicens, Inés Arredondo, Amparo Dávila and Elena Poniatowska, you can only survive if

you *believe in miracles*. In Mexico, where a high percentage of the population lives in extreme poverty and dozens of women inexplicably die every day in Ciudad Juárez, you can only cope if you are *waiting for a miracle*. And the miracle happens. The miracle is here. Open up your eyes. Listen.

Just a few blocks from where we are, on the corner of Cinco de Mayo and 18 Oriente, there is a convent of nuns that keeps the dried tongue of their bishop as a relic. If you visit, you will see that until quite recently the convent of Santa Mónica kept cloistered nuns. The extraordinary thing about it, however, is that it was hidden by the families in the surrounding houses who furnished nuns for the convent for almost 70 years. As convents had been outlawed since 1861 and, by official decree, there were to be no nuns in Mexico, the community kept this convent of novices a secret until 1934, when Valente Quintana, the only detective that we have had in Mexico, discovered it by chance. The story goes that he came across the convent by accident. While visiting one of the houses surrounding it a jar fell down and rang a bell hidden behind a cupboard that summoned the Mother Superior. Detective novel? Historical chronicle? Fiction about the trials and tribulations of the 24 nuns hidden within a few meager square meters for almost 70 years? The novel I am writing will be all of those things at once, and through all these themes and genres, comparative literature will show its face in a roundabout way.

It is not by accident that we have met here, in this place where the elements of the story I am now writing take place. Nor is it by chance that the themes I am currently teaching have now just arisen. Religious and physical borders, ambiguous identities, class differences, the body, and feminine seclusion. Comparative literature has given me all this and more. It has given me the possibility of seeing in a particular space the combination of themes, images, and genres that unify not only the academic voice, but the literary voice, the voice of history and of time. It has taught me to hear what is disjointed or what is formal, that which does not fit into a system, the erudite and the pedestrian, abruptly and in the same fashion. The world of my childhood—that is to say, my mother’s voice—so distant now, returns every time I hear the din of all voices. All except one. That which attempts to rule over all the others in the name of an institution, a theory, or a question: Where are you from? That whose endeavor is to draw the line.

When I hear it I go back to the time of my childhood confusions, the time of poetry, that is. Because literature, comparative literature, is to me above all, the only way I know to silence the tyrant that we all carry inside.