Introduction: About the Author

ah but sometimes we wake up with the soul of an operetta
and we wish we had a carriage with white horses
white as the clouds we watch go by stretched out on green grass
while the sky like a perfect Moroccan binding
while nothing but one says while as one reaches for something
else
and we feel great urges to cry rabidly
and say bad words or be infinitely sweet . . .

(from Part V of *Never Ever*)

I

If he had been born just a little darker, and if his Mexican mother had not married a man from Galicia, Salvador Novo might never have become aware of nationalism's most superficial aspects. But as things turned out, Salvador looked the way he looked, and his mother married whom she married, and young Salvador wrote a poem called "History" about some time during his childhood:

¡Mueran los gachupines!
My father is a gachupín,
full of hate the teacher looks at me
and tells us of the War of Independence
and how the Spaniards were evil and cruel
with the Indians—he is Indian—
and all the children shout death to the gachupines.

But I object
and think that they are very stupid:
That's what history says
but how are we to know it?[1]

And if Salvador's family had not left the capital and moved to Torreón to escape the Revolution; and if they had not had a house near the entrance to the city; and if Salvador's uncle had not looked like someone else; and if Salvador had not seen him shot by the troops of Pancho Villa; and if Pancho Villa had not then spared Salvador's father's life—even though he was a Spaniard—on the condition that he leave the country; and if Villa had not later accepted a hacienda as a bribe

from the government to give up fighting; and if that bribe had not been so ironic, since after all, it had been somewhat of an agrarian revolution Villa had been fighting in, Salvador might never have realized that popular heroes are not always what they are cracked up to be, and the obituary he wrote in 1923 upon Villa's assassination might have turned out a little differently.[2]

And if more of the thinking and less of the fighting had taken place in "the barbarous North" where Novo grew up; and if the schools had not been forced to close because of the various military occupations—by the Villistas, by the Huertistas, by the Carrancistas—and Salvador had not been forced to stay inside, where he spent the time reading through his uncle's library, he might never have come across Enrique González Martínez, whose influence turned up later in Salvador's early poetry, and he might never have come across that poet's famous line (from "Tuércele el cuello al cisne," *Los senderos ocultos* in *Poesías Completas,* p. 135) which sounded the death knell for modernist aesthetics in Latin America, "Twist the neck of the swan with the deceitful plumage," and he might never have realized that literary traditions are not sacred, not inviolable, and he might never have broken a few on his own, and he might never have been called brother to Eliot and heir to Jules Laforgue, the Mexican Cocteau, the modern Molière, the only poet in Mexico besides Paz who ever understood André Breton, and many of the other things Novo was called during his lifetime, not all of them good.[3]

And if in 1910, after Francisco Madero had led the *anti-reeleccionistas* and Pancho Villa and Pascual Orozco had revolted in Chihuahua against the dictator Porfirio Díaz, forming a pact with Madero and storming Ciudad Juárez; and if after Porfirio Díaz had been forced into exile and Madero had been installed as president, Bernardo Reyes had not then revolted against Madero in the Northeast, and Zapata had not revolted in the South, articulating his Plan de Ayala; and if in February of the next year Madero's military commander in Chihuahua, Pascual Orozco, had not then rebelled for a second time—this time against Madero—and Madero had not sent Victoriano Huerta (later president) to put him down; and if Félix Díaz, Porfirio Díaz's nephew, had not revolted in Veracruz, and Huerta, supposedly defending the Madero government, had not conspired with Reyes and Díaz's nephew to kill Madero's brother Gustavo, at a meeting held inside the U.S. Embassy; and if Huerta had not then persuaded President Madero and Vice-President Pino Suárez to resign; and if four days later, after

Huerta became president, Huerta's forces had not killed both Madero and Pino Suárez; and if back in Chihuahua, Villa, along with others in Sonora and Carranza in the Northeast, had not then revolted against Victoriano Huerta, and Carranza had not announced his Plan de Guadalupe; and if in the North, Villa and Carranza had not formed a pact, and Zapata had not continued fighting in the South; and if in 1913 in Sonora, Alvaro Obregón, Plutarco E. Calles, and Adolfo de la Huerta had not teamed up to join the battle against Victoriano Huerta, and the United States had not invaded Veracruz, angering forces on all sides; and if in 1914, World War I had not broken out, and in May of the same year, Carranza had not been afraid of Villa getting to Mexico City before he did and had not cut him off from shipments of coal and other supplies coming by train and by sea; and if Carranza and Obregón had not made it to Mexico City and turned down Zapata's Plan de Ayala and then installed Carranza as president; and if factions in Sonora had not continued fighting, and Obregón had not gone north to solicit Villa's support in Sonora and then ended up betraying Carranza by forming an alliance with Villa; and if Zapata, still not satisfied with Carranza's lukewarm agrarianism, had not kept fighting—now not against Madero or against Huerta but against Carranza—and if, in response to a national convention convoked by Carranza, Villa had not called his own convention in 1914 in Aguascalientes and received the support of many national leaders; and if the convention had not been attended by a representative of the Zapatistas as well, and Villa had not convinced the convention to set up a government headed by General Eulalio Gutiérrez and had not named himself military commander; and if it had not soon become apparent that Villa would not even recognize the government he himself had set up; and if in 1915, Villa and Zapata had not entered Mexico City, and Carranza and Obregón had not retreated to Veracruz; and if Obregón had not eventually been able to regain military control of the capital; and if in 1916, a new convention had not been held and it had not produced the quasi-liberal, quasi-radical Constitution of 1917 and marked what many consider the end of the Mexican Revolution; and if that had been all, and Carranza had not run unopposed in 1917; and if after all that, Carranza had not then been accused of doing nothing to advance reforms and of maintaining the status quo, and Zapata had not been considered a threat to Carranza and been assassinated in 1919, and the president had not then managed to get the support of Zapata's followers by rewarding them with positions of power in the Morelos state government,

Salvador might once in a while have referred to the Revolution as something more than "the shootout that was the Revolution." But as things turned out, he never did.

And if Salvador had been born just ten years later, in 1914 like Octavio Paz was, and had been only three when the end of the Revolution was declared, Salvador might have taken a little more interest in its history, or written an "Ode to a Barefoot Soldier" or "to the División del Norte," and he might never have learned the first axiom of cynicism, "Idealism increases in direct proportion to one's distance from the problem," expressed so succinctly by John Galsworthy. But even Octavio Paz was forced to admit, in an interview with Claude Fell, that much of the fighting that took place seemed to have had no reason.[4]

But that is as far as the ifs go. There comes a time, no matter how much we are products of our environments or victims of circumstance, when the human will takes over, and we become responsible for our own lives, or so goes the story. For Novo, it can be said that this moment arrived late in 1917, when in order to attend high school at the Preparatoria Nacional, he moved to Mexico City where he lived with an uncle who worked for the railroads. Novo was thirteen years old when he came of age.

. . . The storm that howls

will throw up a stone to me . . . And when the Sun awakens
my brother and he continues along his path, death

will have perhaps covered me with its dust. And my brother
will pass over me . . . and seeking me in vain
he will go to die alone in a distant country . . .

("La parábola del hermano," *Poemas de adolescencia*)

II

High school is a fun time for Salvador Novo. His first year he tests out of English and Spanish literature and spends much of his time playing hooky, going to the movies, exploring the city, and visiting bookstores.[5] In high school Novo meets Xavier Villaurrutia, and in 1919 they publish their precocious poems for the first time in *El Universal Ilustrado* and more, soon afterward, in *El Heraldo de México.* Xavier becomes what is euphemistically called Novo's *amigo íntimo* and is later the subject of several poems. He is also part of the group that comes to be known as the Contemporáneos.

The Contemporáneos are a group of poets and playwrights, a group of friends, who come together for the first time in the late teens and early 1920s: Bernardo Ortiz de Montellano, Enrique González Rojo, José Gorostiza, Jaime Torres Bodet, Jorge Cuesta, and Gilberto Owen. Others sometimes associated with the group but who did not participate in any of the group's major endeavors are Carlos Pellicer, Octavio G. Barreda, Elías Nandino, and Rubén Salazar Mallén.

As a group, the Contemporáneos are the most exciting development in Mexican literature since modernism. Their work prompts José Joaquín Blanco, in his excellent *Crónica de la poesía mexicana,* to assert that though "Mexican poetry has not had its Siglo de Oro, it has had its decade: the thirties of this century. Pellicer, Villaurrutia, Gorostiza, Novo, Owen, Ortiz de Montellano . . ." Blanco notes their influence in many of the poets who come after: "The real influence of the Contemporáneos occurred in other poets who, although they didn't submit themselves docilely as disciples, did revise and reevaluate earlier poetry and assimilated from it whatever freely mattered to them: Octavio Paz,

Ali Chumacero, Rubén Bonifaz Nuño, and later, Gerardo Deniz, Tomás Segovia, Eduardo Lizalde, Gabriel Zaid, José Emilio Pacheco, and José Carlos Becerra. It can be said that the influence of the Contemporáneos is still of the first order in Mexican poetry, and even in essay and theater."[6]

Salvador Novo's contribution to the legacy of the Contemporáneos is substantial. Between 1915 and 1945, he writes three experimental plays, *Divorcio: Drama Ibseniano en cinco actos* (1924), *La señorita Remington: Diálogo fingido de cosas ciertas en que se demuestre que el tiempo no es dinero* (1924), and *Le troisième Faust: Tragédie brève* (1937); and translates three, *Ligados* (1928) and *Diferente* (1934), both by Eugene O'Neill, and *El dólar plata* (1935), by William P. Shea.

In poetry, his impact is felt even more: *Poemas de infancia* and *Poemas de adolescencia* (unpublished until 1955), *Adytias, poemas* (1924), *XX poemas* (1925), *Espejo: Poemas antiguos* (1933), *Nuevo amor* (1933), *Seamen Rhymes* (with drawings by Federico García Lorca, 1934), *Romance de Angelillo y Adela* (dedicated to García Lorca, 1934), *Décimas en el mar* (with illustrations by Julio Prieto, 1934), *Poemas proletarios* (1934), *Frida Kahlo* (1934), *Never Ever* (1934), *Canto a Teresa* (1934), *Dueño mío* (1944), *Decimos: "Nuestra tierra"* (1944), *Florido laude* (1945), and many satiric poems that are circulated in carbon-copy manuscript form but are not published until 1955 in *Sátira,* or are later included in the posthumous *Sátira, el libro ca. . .*

Novo's output is great and varied, so varied, in fact, that critic Eduardo Colín says, "He is like a box of surprises,"[7] and Emmanuel Carballo says:

> As a poet, Novo is a conqueror who for strange reasons doesn't colonize the territories he discovers: graciously—satanically—he leaves the poets of his age and younger to industrialize his discoveries. In his poems from his adolescence, he imitates Darío and González Martínez, and his "pastiches" possess such merit that an unsuspecting reader could easily confuse them with the poems on which they were originally based. His López-Velardian poems prove his enormous capacity for mimicry. Later, to make fun of the *estridentistas* (particularly Maples Arce), he writes the most lasting poems that that avant-garde trend ever produced, *Entre azul y buenas noches.* Immediately after, he shows up in surrealism, and it isn't an exaggeration to say that he and Octavio Paz are the only Mexican poets who have understood Breton and his disciples. Novo's surrealist texts stand out for the way their images are created: a writer of powerful

> imaginative capacity and of numerous, efficient mental mechanisms, he seasons his metaphors with irony and tenderness, with the "poetic" and the "prosaic," the classic and the modern, the purism in art and the populist elements, his own finds and the discoveries of others. His images and metaphors are like going from hot to cold water in the bathroom sink with no transition: using the element of surprise, they catch the unsuspecting reader off guard and move him, they produce in him the bittersweet sensation that Novo has proposed to communicate. . . . Together with Gorostiza, Pellicer, and Paz, Salvador Novo is one of the four most important poets of the Mexican twentieth century.[8]

In essay, Novo is known for his wittiness and his elegance: *Ensayos* (1925), *La educación literaria de los adolescentes* (1928), *Return Ticket: Viaje a Hawai* (1928), *Jalisco-Michoacán: 12 días* (1933), *Continente vacío: Viaje a Sudamérica* (1935), and *En defensa de lo usado y otros ensayos* (1938). Blanco calls him one of the best prosists in Mexico and describes *Ensayos* saying "[Novo's] innocence has been lost completely; in prose he is an erudite dandy, boasting of modernity and encyclopedism, full of humor and of twentieth-century wisdom to oppose to the wisdom of museums and archaeologists."[9] Antonio Castro Leal says, "His prose—so clear, so efficient, with a syntaxis of multiple, well-oiled hinges—almost makes one want to call it functional because it is made exactly for its purpose and because it has the sober and daring elegance of all the adornments it has spurned because they don't serve its end. One finds in it, naturally, a long education in the classics . . ."[10]

Novo also produces several anthologies which help establish him as an expert on world literature, particularly modern English-language literature, which had not been studied much in Mexico since Poe: *Antología de cuentos mexicanos e hispanoamericanos* (1923), *La poesía norteamericana moderna* (with poems translated by Novo, 1924), *La poesía francesa moderna* (1924), and *Lecturas hispanoamericanas* (1925), as well as several other anthologies for children. As early as 1922, when he is just 18, he translates *"Almaida de Entremont" y "Manzana de anís" y otros cuentos* by Francis Jammes (with a prologue by Xavier Villaurrutia), and in the late twenties is the first in Mexico to comment on lesser-known poets like Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen and Christopher Morley's "Translations from the Chinese," as well as on most other modern poets from the United States.

In 1928, bored and unimpressed by what the theaters of Mexico City have to offer, Novo and Villaurrutia take what little theatrical experi-

ence they have (some acting history and two musical revues they had written for the Teatro Lírico), a handful of friends (including Gilberto Owen and Celestino Gorostiza), and set up their own theater, Teatro Ulises, in the house of their friend Antonieta Rivas. Though the theater lasts only a few months, and though they had not intended it, Novo and his friends in Teatro Ulises set off a literary explosion whose shock waves are felt until well into the 1940s. Antonio Magaña Esquivel, in his *Medio siglo de teatro mexicano,* calls it "the arrival of the poets to theater," a line that would also later be used in the 1950s to describe Octavio Paz's Poesía en Voz Alta movement.[11]

The state of Mexican theater in the 1920s was deplorable. It had been dominated by cabarets and musical revues, comedy acts, zarzuelas, and other short pieces. According to Magaña Esquivel and others who have studied the subject, Mexican theater was overrun with Spanish influence. It was dominated by Spanish impresarios. Its repertoire was mostly Spanish, and the few Mexican playwrights who attempt anything serious at all imitate the Spaniards, Benavente, Linares Rivas, and Dicenta. Both actors and acting techniques are imported from Spain. So pervasive was the Spanish influence that even Mexican actors felt compelled to speak with a Castilian accent![12]

Teatro Ulises has two modest seasons, from January to August 1928 and then the first months of 1929. It stages six plays in translation: *La puerta reluciente* by Lord Dunsany, *Simili* by Claude Roger-Marx, *El peregrino* by Charles Vidrac, *Orfeo* by Jean Cocteau, *Ligados* by Eugene O'Neill, and *El tiempo es sueño* by Henri Lenormand. Nevertheless, Teatro Ulises is the only theater at the time to stage foreign or experimental works. Teatro Ulises also introduces new acting techniques and staging theory. When the theater closes in 1929, others quickly pick up where Teatro Ulises leaves off: Teatro de Orientación (led by Celestino Gorostiza and in which Villaurrutia participates), Proa Grupo, Teatro de Ahora, Escolares del Teatro, et al. continue to experiment on their own and to stage the experiments of young European playwrights.

In 1920, after the fall of Carranza, General Alvaro Obregón is elected president. Though he is remembered for many of his actions, especially for finally setting in motion the early stages of agrarian reform and stimulating the labor movement, Obregón's legacy to his country, at least with respect to cultural history, rests on his nomination of José Vasconcelos as the Minister of Public Education. José Joaquín Blanco here gives some idea of Vasconcelos' importance: "The struggle be-

tween the factions decided in favor of the Sonorans [Obregón and later Calles were both from Sonora], what they called the 'constructive revolution' began. With Vasconcelos in the University and later in the Ministry of Public Education, the dawn of our culture seemed to have begun and the enormous amount of energy in the arts and technology was explained by the Vasconcelan motto of substituting the troops of destruction with new contingents of construction, whose vanguard would be youth and the progressive intellectuals."[13] Vasconcelos, called the Maestro de la Juventud (Teacher of Youth) in Mexico, continued the tradition of Simón Bolívar by opposing a sort of Pan Americanism to the Monroe Doctrine. He was a member of the influential group Ateneo de México, which included other writers, like Alfonso Reyes. He built a reputation as a philosopher and intellectual with the publication of his books *Indología* and *La raza cósmica* and authored the phrase, ubiquitous in Mexico, "Por mi raza hablará el espíritu [The spirit will speak for my race]." He is also responsible for giving Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros the public walls they needed to launch their careers as muralists.

José Vasconcelos is the person most responsible for bringing the young Contemporáneos together as a group, by appointing them to fill the vacancies in the Ministry of Public Education left by the dismissal of Porfirio Díaz's *científicos*. Because he provides intellectual leadership as well as bureaucratic patronage, both Vasconcelos' presence and his absence have a profound impact on the group.

Under Vasconcelos the Contemporáneos participate in the first of the series of magazines that turns the assortment of young writers into a cohesive group and later gives the group its name: *México moderno* (1920–1923), *Vida mexicana* (1922), *La Falange* (1922–1923; the Fascists had not yet appropriated the word for themselves), *Ulises* (1927–1928; edited by Novo and Villaurrutia), *Contemporáneos: Revista mexicana de cultura* (1928–1931; the magazine that gives the group its name), and *Examen* (August to November 1932), to name the most important.[14] Novo does not play a major role in any of the magazines except *Ulises,* but through them his fate is nevertheless linked to the fate of the group. He also, with others from *Ulises,* is one of the editors of *El Espectador* in the early 1930s, in the areas of theater, art, and literature.

Shortly before the elections of 1924, when General Plutarco E. Calles is selected to be Obregón's successor, Vasconcelos resigns his position as Minister of Public Education. The loss of Vasconcelos' patronage, his subsequent exile, and political events in general in Mexico under

Calles have a disastrous effect on both the morale and the unity of the Contemporáneos.

For Novo, this is the second time in a year that he has suffered a loss. Though he was always associated with the group of Contemporáneos and with Vasconcelos, he has also been closely allied to a certain linguist and historian from the Dominican Republic working in the Escuela de Verano at the National University, Pedro Henríquez Ureña. It was Henríquez Ureña who gave Novo his first job in the government bureaucracy, teaching at the university, and it was Henríquez Ureña who served as Novo's mentor, guided his readings, encouraged him to compile his first anthologies, helped Novo to publish, and incorporated him into his small group of friends that published *Vida mexicana:* Antonio Caso, Vicente Lombardo Toldeano, Eduardo Villaseñor, the Nicaraguan Salomón de la Selva, and Daniel Cosío Villegas. However, in 1923, shortly before Henríquez Ureña's marriage to Lombardo Toldeano's sister, Henríquez Ureña and Novo have a falling out over Novo's gay activities. (Novo had gotten in the habit of picking up taxi drivers, and he even began making contributions to the taxi-driver-guild's newsletter in order to meet more.) Henríquez Ureña fires Novo from his position in the university and then, because Henríquez Ureña plans to leave the country, he leaves instructions that Novo should not be rehired. In his memoirs, Novo tells the story of how his own attendance at Henríquez Ureña's wedding ceremony later gave rise to a rumor (initiated by fellow writer Julio Torri) that Novo knelt down on the floor during the ceremony, opened his arms, and prayed aloud, "Lord, keep him for me. Lord, protect him. Lord, what's he going to do with a woman?"[15] This is probably the same Pedro who appears in Novo's poem *Never Ever.*

With Vasconcelos' resignation and Henríquez Ureña's departure, *La Falange, México moderno,* and *Vida mexicana* all suspend publication in 1923. Most of the Contemporáneos are forced to seek new positions in the Ministry of Health under Dr. Bernardo J. Gastelum, and must wait until they have established themselves there before they can resume publication of another magazine.[16] Novo, fortunately, is given a job as editorial director of the Ministry of Public Education by Vasconcelos' replacement, José M. Puig Casauranc.

Politics in the 1920s was beginning to take on the qualities that have characterized it ever since. Plutarco Calles, originally thought to be a radical, is elected in 1924. His most important appointment is Luis Morones, whom he puts in charge of the Ministry of Industry. Mo-

rones has risen to power as a labor boss, and under Calles, he, in the words of Robert Jones Schafer in *A History of Latin America,* "continued to accumulate an unsavory reputation for corruption, for subservience to employers rather than care for workers, and for the strong-arm methods of his Grupo Acción. Calles' reliance on labor became offensive to *agraristas,* and reinforced their support of Obregón."[17]

In 1926, nine years after the end of the Revolution, war breaks out again when Christian fundamentalists, the Cristeros, backed by conservative Catholics in Mexico and the United States, revolt in reaction to Calles' restrictions on the church. That same year, Calles names Obregón to be his successor as president. Because Obregón has already served as president, Calles moves to amend the constitution to allow a second term. (The Constitution of 1917 had been careful to include limits on the term of office for president, since the memory of Porfirio Díaz's multiple reelections was all too recent.)

Two generals are shot by Calles' forces for opposing Calles' nomination of Obregón. However, in 1928 Obregón himself is shot, and it is rumored that Calles' own forces are responsible, through Grupo Acción, the hit squad run by Morones. Some attribute the assassination to Calles' need to limit the power of Obregón and of the agrarian reformers.

Gastelum resigns from the Ministry of Health, again forcing many of the Contemporáneos to scramble for positions elsewhere, scattering them everywhere. Jaime Torres Bodet, José Gorostiza, and Gilberto Owen find positions with Genaro Estrada, head of Foreign Relations and an author (*Pero Galín*) as well, and leave the country. Ortiz de Montellano also obtains a post in Foreign Relations, but stays around to continue publication of the magazine *Contemporáneos.* Xavier Villaurrutia, Jorge Cuesta, and later Celestino Gorostiza end up with Novo back in the Ministry of Public Education.

With Obregón dead, and over the objections of the other generals from the Revolution, Calles imposes Emilio Portes Gil, who serves as interim president until another election can be held in 1929. At this moment, realizing that he needs institutional support and some political mechanism to unify the disparate elements that fought in the Revolution, Calles organizes the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PNR), the party which eventually becomes the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), ruling today.

At the end of the interim term, when Calles attempts to impose another president, Pascual Ortiz Rubio, through the party mechanism

of the PNR, the army revolts but is quickly put down. José Vasconcelos appears on the scene again and announces he will oppose Calles and Ortiz Rubio on the tried and true platform of *anti-reeleccionismo* (Madero's platform in 1910 against Porfirio Díaz). In its intellectual nature, Vasconcelos' campaign bears a certain resemblance to Adlai Stevenson's. He seeks an end to corruption, to military domination of the government, and to Mexican subservience to the United States. Vasconcelos "loses" what was likely a fixed election and in 1929 goes into exile, where he bitterly condemns the Calles/Ortiz Rubio government. Just two years later, in 1931, Ortiz Rubio is forced to resign because of his failure in dealing with the oncoming depression. Calles, now known as the Jefe Máximo de la Revolución (Maximum Boss of the Revolution), chooses another Sonoran, General Abelardo Rodríguez, to complete the term.

Novo makes it through this "consolidation of the Revolution"—messy as these leadership changes always were in the 1920s—fairly safely in the Ministry of Public Education, but after Vasconcelos' exile, he must leave to work in the Ministry of Industry, Commerce, and Employment, a job he never mentions in any of his writings. Novo has been left absolutely cynical by the recent turn of events, and allusions to Calles later appear in several of his writings, including *The War of the Fatties.* José Joaquín Blanco describes the effect of Vasconcelos' fall on the Contemporáneos:

> Vasconcelos is the knot that holds the generation of the Contemporáneos together; the first job this group had was *Lecturas clásicas para niños,* directed by Vasconcelos himself. And here the slight difference of ages among the Contemporáneos becomes a brutal division, as indicated by the drama of Vasconcelos. The oldest, Pellicer, Gorostiza, and Torres Bodet, were each in his own way left marked by the messianic, positive, and spiritual impulse during Vasconcelos' stay in power; the younger ones: Novo, Villaurrutia, Cuesta, and Owen, were left marked by the disaster and skepticism. . .[18]

To complicate matters, the Contemporáneos had not weathered the ten years of Callismo without picking up a few enemies along the way. Their interest in foreign literature made the Contemporáneos an easy target. Although, for example, *Ulises,* directed by Novo and Villaurrutia, included mostly contributions from the group, with some by Julio Torri and Mariano Azuela, it also included a good number of contributions from foreigners like Carl Sandburg, James Joyce, Max Jacob,

Benjamín Jarnés, Massimo Bontempelli, and Marcel Jouhandeau, and it was the inclusion of these foreigners that caused nationalists to object. *Contemporáneos* was similar. Villaurrutia cooperated with his expertise in French literature, and Novo with his in English-language literature. Almost from the start, the Contemporáneos ran into strong opposition from the most nationalistic elements of society, which accused them of being "antinationalist."[19] Emmanuel Carballo recalls some of the most typical criticism:

> Like any group with its own physiognomy, the Contemporáneos were open to the wrath and insults of other bands. Manuel Maples Arce believes they are united by a certain indeterminate "complicity." Ermilo Abreu Gómez says, referring to it, this group "has tried, without capacity of sufficient *culture*—and I don't say information—without being men enough, without an effective relationship with the land it lives in, to govern the effectiveness of the literature that ripens outside the small parcel it has rented for its debates." Time—to which the nationalistic voice of the author of *Canek* has appealed—has in part proven the Contemporáneos right. Although well sifted, their work still lives, while that of their antagonists has suffered alarming discredit. They, those who sought stimulus from abroad, grasped some of the notes that distinguish between being Mexican and the way of being Mexican in poems, essays, and works of fiction. Their "enemies" often wrote works that were more Mexicanist than Mexican.[20]

Novo was not oblivious to the literary situation of the country and answers nationalists' criticism himself, as one of the editors for *Ulises:* "We have not set out to procure whatever is national about our work, and with our words we do not wish to compromise our country."[21] Issue number six of *Ulises,* the last issue, carried yet another disclaimer: "[I]t is honorable to declare that *Ulises* does not represent 'national opinion' in any way . . . *Ulises* implies no more than two criteria, more or less in agreement the one with the other. Villaurrutia and me."[22] What Novo does not point out is that admiration of foreign literature does not imply foreign loyalties or in any way separate one from one's "people," the basic premise of the whole discussion. Worth mentioning, however, is the fact that in a country with only 20 percent literacy, like Mexico at the time the Contemporáneos began their careers, the very act of writing at all separates one to a certain extent from one's "people."

After the inauguration of Teatro Ulises, criticism of the Contempo-

ráneos was stepped up, because it did not go unnoticed that all the works presented were by foreign authors.[23] It did not seem to matter to critics that all the actor-directors in the group were Mexican, or that much of what was commercially produced was also foreign, that is, from Spain.

Partly in reaction to the charges of "un-Mexicanism," in 1928 the Contemporáneos, although not Novo, produced an anthology of modern Mexican poetry, which, though possibly well-intentioned, ended up causing a storm of criticism by the unfortunate, though intentional, omission of various poets, particularly the modernist poet Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera. Reviews of the anthology brought on some rather colorful and nasty anti-intellectual responses, e.g., "We do not know why, nor do we care to find out, but the compilation of this anthology, circumscribed around the finicky ephebic phalanx [a reference to *La Falange*] of this suspiciously fraternal Parnassus, smells to us like the work of the university."[24] (Vasconcelos, in exile at the time, had been very closely identified with the university.) As Novo later recalled, "Those who were upset brandished all sorts of vile insults: they called them homosexuals, isolationists, *précieux,* criminals, bad Mexicans."[25] Although most of the group had participated in producing the anthology, the cover carried the name of Jorge Cuesta, and he bore the brunt of the criticism.

In 1932, Jorge Cuesta is again the center of a scandal that draws attention to the Contemporáneos when *Examen,* the short-lived magazine Cuesta edits, publishes excerpts from *Cariátide,* by Rubén Salazar Mallén. The crude language in the piece scandalizes writers at *Excelsior* and others, and José Gorostiza, head of Fine Arts, Xavier Villaurrutia in the editorial department, Jorge Cuesta, Carlos Pellicer, and the department supervisor are all forced to resign from their positions in the Ministry of Public Education. What Novo calls a "picturesque 'trial'" begins centering around the scandal at *Examen.*[26]

Everybody seems to have gotten in on the act at one time or another. And as lasting proof of what can best be described as a campaign to discredit the Contemporáneos is the section of the murals Diego Rivera painted in the Ministry of Public Education after Vasconcelos' resignation, in which Rivera depicts the Contemporáneos as decadent lushes.

Carlos Monsiváis provides a description of the campaign against the Contemporáneos in his excellent biographical article "Salvador Novo: Los que tenemos unas manos que no nos pertenecen":

> The persecution defines them pitilessly. Orozco draws cartoons of them and baptizes them "los anales" [the anal ones]. Antonio Ruiz el Corzo paints Novo and Villaurrutia as feminoids leading the protest against the "pueblo." Rivera belittles them on the walls of the Ministry of Public Education. The persecution grows: in 1932 the Porfirian Committee of Public Health is reestablished in the Chamber of Deputies to purge the government of counterrevolutionaries. October 31, 1934, a group of intellectuals (José Rubén Romero, Mauricio Magdaleno, Rafael Muñoz, Mariano Silva y Aceves, Renato Leduc, Juan O'Gorman, Xavier Icaza, Francisco L. Urquizo, Ermilo Abreu Gómez, Humberto Tejera, Jesús Silva Herzog, Héctor Pérez Martínez, and Julio Jiménez Rueda) asks the Committee, since it is attempting to purify the public administration, to "extend their policies to the individuals of doubtful morality who hold official posts and who, through their effeminate acts, in addition to constituting a punishable example, create an atmosphere of corruption, to the extreme that it impedes the instilling of the virile virtues in youth . . . If it is a question of fighting the presence of fanatics, of reactionaries in public offices, the presence of hermaphrodites incapable of identifying themselves with the workers of social reform must also be fought." In the campaign against the Contemporáneos, the most mentioned name is that of Novo (who is ridiculed as "Nalgador Sobo"). [The spoonerized version of his name means, roughly, "bun fondler."—Tr.] Gossip, accusations of transvestism, rumors about his predilection for taxi drivers—Novo's atrocious reputation grows day by day, and, not so paradoxically, such demonization is the solid and serious source of his recognition.[27]

In 1934, General Lázaro Cárdenas is elected president. Cárdenas' first task is to consolidate his own power, but to do so he must get out from under the shadow of Calles, who has come to be known as the Maximum Boss of the Revolution, who has dominated politics for ten years, who has chosen three puppet presidents to represent him, and who, furthermore, has the support of his Partido Nacional Revolucionario. Cárdenas is smart enough not to break from Calles immediately. He begins by appointing a few of Calles' men to his cabinet, Tomás Garrido Canabal as minister of agriculture and Emilio Portes Gil as head of the PNR. However, he soon moves against them, replacing Garrido Canabal with General Saturnino Cedillo, a caudillo from San Luis Potosí, and firing Portes Gil. Cárdenas also seeks to consolidate his power by shutting down Calles-run gambling and prostitution, and gains populist sympathies by refusing to live in Chapul-

tepec Castle. He also strengthens policies favoring labor and peasants. Eventually he is able to portray Calles as a Fascist, and succeeds in exiling both him and Morones in 1936. Cárdenas further asserts his authority by reorganizing Calles' PNR, renaming it the Partido de la Revolución Mexicana. (Miguel Alemán Valdés makes it the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, the PRI, in 1952.) Much of what Cárdenas did as president is known in the United States: his nationalization of the oil industry, his granting of asylum to Leon Trotsky and refugees from the Spanish Civil War, and the lip service (for, despite everything, it was only that) he gave to socialist elements in Mexican politics.

Although Calles was hard on the Contemporáneos, their lot does not improve under Cárdenas. On the contrary, it gets worse. According to Octavio Paz, "Cárdenas' policies in cultural matters suffered from serious limitations. He was not at all attracted to the University or the higher aspects of culture, I mean to science and disinterested learning and to free art and free literature. His artistic tastes—or those of his close collaborators—tended toward pseudorevolutionary didactism and nationalism."[28]

Under Cárdenas, literature becomes more politicized than ever, and the nationalism which previously was used to condemn the Contemporáneos now takes on an added dimension of pseudoproletarianism. Thus the experimentalism of the Contemporáneos falls into direct conflict with the populist social realism of the muralist movement, just as in Europe the avant-garde movement could not be incorporated into the tenets of social realists. In this context, what Paz refers to as the "handful of the older [writers]" or the "new literature" can be applied to the generation of the Contemporáneos:

> When a society decays, it is language that is first to become gangrenous. As a result, social criticism begins with grammar and the reestablishing of meanings. This is what has happened in Mexico. Criticism of the present state of affairs was begun, not by the moralists, not by the radical revolutionaries, but by the writers (a handful of the older but a majority of the younger). Their criticism has not been directly political—though they have not shied away from treating political themes in their works—but instead verbal: the exercise of criticism as an exploration of language and the exercise of language as an exploration of reality.
>
> The new literature, poetry as well as the novel, began by being at once a reflection on language and an attempt at creating a new language: a system of transparencies, to provoke reality into making an

> appearance. But to realize this proposal it was indispensable to cleanse the language, to flush away the official rhetoric. Hence these writers had to deal with two tendencies inherited from the Revolution and now thoroughly corrupt: nationalism and an "art of the people." Both tendencies had been protected by the revolutionary regimes and their successors. The resemblances between the official aesthetics of Stalinism and the officious aesthetics of Mexican politicians and hierarchs are instructive. Mexican mural painting—originally a vigorous movement—was a prime example of this mutual accommodation between the regime and the "progressive" artists. The criticism directed at a showy nationalism and an art of patriotic or revolutionary slogans was more moral than aesthetic: it criticized imposture and servility. . . . Setting art free was the beginning of a wider freedom.[29]

Even today, it is tempting but misleading to compare the work of the Contemporáneos in literature with that of the popular muralists in art. As José Joaquín Blanco points out, what the muralists of the 1930s were trying to achieve with respect to the visual arts had already occurred in poetry during the Romantic movement of the nineteenth century, and had given as its product, for example, the national anthem, and later manifested itself as the *novela de la Revolución*. The latter, despite its proliferation, produced only one novel still remembered today, Mariano Azuela's *Los de abajo,* written more than fifteen years before Cárdenas, in 1916.[30] With respect to the *novela de la Revolución,* Novo, in a 1965 interview, says,

> [It] is very boring, and what's worse, it was born dead. As a body of literature, it isn't worth the trouble reading; individually, some works are excellent. For my taste, the focus this last generation [including *Pedro Páramo* by Juan Rulfo in 1955?—Tr.] has given the theme is more interesting. Most of the novelists of the Revolution did not have the integrity to say what really happened in the battlefields and in the private cabinets of the great bosses and ideologues. The most authentic novel is *Tropa vieja.* Its author, Francisco Urquizo, has always written—and his bibliography is extensive—the same novel. He and his congenitors have wished to make a specimen into a genus, which is a zoological aberration. These brutes—the revolutionaries like Zapata and Villa—the writers made into men: they conceded to them the faculty of reasoning, class consciousness, the possibility of indignation and of love faced with given social circumstances. In other words, they invented them.[31]

Elsewhere in the interview, Novo says, "We liked [Mariano] Azuela; today it was many years ago that he was 'discovered.' If I were to reread him, I don't know if I would still like him. *La luciérnaga* interested me more than *Los de abajo*." In *Poemas proletarios,* Novo dedicates one section of the opening poem to the *novela de la Revolución* and the so-called revolutionary literature:

> The literature of the revolution,
> revolutionary poetry
> about three or four anecdotes about Villa
> and the flourishing of *maussers,*
> the rubrics of the lasso, the woman soldier . . .[32]

Cardenismo had its representatives in literature, though they certainly did not include the Contemporáneos. No review of Mexican poetry would be complete without at least passing mention of what was the Contemporáneos' only real competition in the literary sphere, the fiasco of the *estridentistas,* an affected, self-conscious bohemianesque movement, today virtually forgotten. The *estridentista* movement is best described by José Joaquín Blanco:

> *Estridentismo* means "noise," the only thing they didn't make because, as [writer Carlos] Monsiváis explains, "a bourgeoisie that still hadn't taken shape didn't have the slightest interest in letting itself be ridiculed." The silences of the Contemporáneos, on the other hand, caused so much noise that they were persecuted as homosexuals and thrown out of their jobs, a trial was held over one of their magazines, and they were insulted with phrases like "the literary *asalta braguetas* [fly swatters? zipper burglars?] will never be able to understand the sweaty new beauty of our century." But that populist sweat, which invoked Marx and futurism, was nothing more than "infantile bravado," impotent in the face of the Edisonian reality of mechanized, industrialized urban life. Many other "poets," even more radicalized and populist, fought the Contemporáneos, though they left no seed, seeds they never had, nor noise, which they used up on themselves.[33]

To be fair, the harshness of Blanco's assessment of *estridentismo* is, though not quite unbiased, at least justifiable. As in the cultural polemics of Hitler's Germany, McCarthy's United States, Stalin's Russia, what was ostensibly a spirited, often vicious debate over aesthetics was more often than not confused and exacerbated by personality clashes, political expediency, and sexist prejudices. Carlos Monsiváis gives some

indication of the (low) level of the debate between the Contemporáneos and the *estridentistas* who, along with the Mexican muralists of the Treinta-treintista group, opposed them.

> The literary historians usually give a concrete limit to the *generational* work of the Contemporáneos: 1920–1932. Their collective influence and the hatred they incite are prolonged until the decade of the forties. In his *Poesía mexicana moderna* (1940), the anthologist [and *estridentista* poet] Manuel Maples Arces does not shy away from partisanship in his presentations: "Of the poets who in a symbolically Mexican revue locked themselves into the circle of the 'Contemporáneos,' drawn together by similar complexes and tendencies, Salvador Novo is one of those who has most tempted the demon of frivolity. 'Style has a sex,' Marivaux used to say, 'and one can recognize a woman through one sentence.' Here the identity is evident in an intention of triviality; no longer are desires hidden under any sexual euphemism, as in the other comrades of his tribe, but textually and without beating around the bush they proclaim the relationship that exists between individual privacy and imagery." With the subtlety that was given to him, Maples Arce continues: "Fruit of that impure vice spoken of by Valery Larbaud, Villaurrutia's poetry is offered marked by the fatalities of the sex . . . Making use of inversion [i.e., homosexuality] as a poetic device . . . Thus, in its frozen surfaces, this poetry depicts nothing more than scenes naturally inverted in the dead waters of reflection."
>
> In the twenties, the aggression is daily and multiple. The polemic in which Julio Jiménez Rueda denies and Francisco Monterde affirms (giving Mariano Azuela as an example) the existence of a "virile Mexican literature" has an explicit context: the Contemporáneos. In 1929 or 1930, the group of realist painters, Treinta-Treinta, demands the resignation of various officials, including a few homosexuals: "And we are against homosexualism, imitation of the current French bourgeoisie; and between them, now favored, and us, tireless fighters, there is the abyss of our honor, which cannot be bought for a post. The government should not maintain those of doubtful psychological condition in its ministries."
>
> Novo, model of the bad example. He is harassed, stigmatized. Without making him retreat: he is homosexual, he never denies or conceals it, he makes of it a symbolic badge for the daily annoyance of good manners. In the twenties, in full effervescence of machismo as the theory and praxis of the Latin American reality, Novo's attitude is a scandal. His heterodox choice is expressed as a challenge, defiant exhibition of fragility, dandyism, femininity of plucked eye-

brows. He responds to the attacks—as he is preserved in the portraits of him from the twenties and thirties—by heightening the provocation. There, congregating ridicule and ill will, he is a Wildean aesthete, a very refined snob in a golden vest, with an expression of sweet ennui on his face and the back of his hand on his hip. He is not the only one singled out, but he is the most ostentatious, who accepts any insult and returns it with interest. In newspapers, magazines, and conversations, he is viciously ridiculed: he is by far the most attacked of the Contemporáneos.

A typical attack: The Bolivian emigré Tristán Marof publishes *México de frente y de perfil* (Editorial Claridad, 1934) and, in his way, summarizes part of the climate of ferociousness against the Contemporáneos in his chapter "Effeminate Literati":

> Though against our better judgment, it is not possible in this chapter to leave out a strange group whose morbid tendencies from the first day I arrived in Mexico caused me certain pity . . . These lads write to please themselves. Their prose is acrobatic, movable, and insignificant. Each phrase of theirs seeks a certain "objective in rectitude" and they do not use Vaseline! They believe themselves to be disciples of Freud, of Cocteau, of Gide. They do pirouettes on country trapezes and, believing that they are cultivating a certain "Saxon humor," they are ridiculous. The traveler or the observer is surprised right from the start by the literary abuse of the word "joto" [faggot]. One might even guess it referred to some sacred name. The charm fades quickly, since the "joto" literary masters are sad and languid bureaucrats who fill inferior posts in the Mexican administration. They don't even constitute a picturesque band of *pillos* or *boleros* [blackguards or bootblacks]. Be it a Salvador Novo or a Villaurrutia, or a Genaro Estrada, or some other, the disappointment is the same . . . They have no imagination. Salvador Novo is the author of a dull, boastful book for certain lesbian women . . .
>
> Abroad those of the "jotista" literary group are intranscendent; nobody pays any attention to them or is interested in their literature, but in Mexico they write in the reactionary newspapers—the only ones that circulate; they are entrenched in the bureaucracy, they give classes in the school to boys, from whom they should be distanced for the sake of appearances, and, finally, they

> stroll through the streets and beaches making a gala ball
> out of an insolent reactionaryism and inciting people
> with their stares, which are not exactly literary . . .

The embargo, the psychological pressure, the social and moral lynchings are very intense. To them Novo opposes his literary and journalistic prolificacy, and the ironic civic values which later, in order to assimilate them, will be marked almost unanimously by cynicism. In everything he is too much: precociousness, talent, work capacity, genius, calumny, culture, affectation. . . . The effect of the persecution of the twenties and thirties will last in Novo the rest of his life and, once the long years of resistance are past, it will little by little be transformed into a desire to please and be praised, in the truce implicated by the gradual abandonment of harassment, in the languid photo in the kitchen or the daring toupée that stimulates, once again, provocation. But before the suspension of hostilities, the overwhelming disdain and sarcasm will magnify Novo's satiric disposition, they will justify or explain his verbal excesses, and will get for him an abundant audience at the slightest staging of his defiance. Novo's moral sideshow, to put it that way, will never go unnoticed; from there he will obtain the tone and initial impact of his legend and from there will come (from the desire to finally be accepted) his most serious and harmful concessions.[34]

Although the Contemporáneos are faced with overwhelming unpopularity in the 1930s, Novo has an initial stroke of good luck in 1933, just before he is purged from the bureaucracy and from his position as a teacher of history of the theater at the Conservatorio Nacional by President Cárdenas, ironically the year before Cárdenas promulgates a law protecting the jobs of civil servants. Back in the Ministry of Public Education in 1933, Novo is sent to represent Mexico at an international conference in South America, where he meets Federico García Lorca. The experience inspires Novo to write *Continente vacío,* about the voyage, the conference, and the writers he meets in South America; *Canto a Teresa* and *Décimas en el mar,* reviews of sea-related poetry; *Seamen Rhymes* (the second half of which is in English and is considered an outright act of provocation by nationalists), about the sea; and "Romance de Adela y Angelillo," a love ballad about a Mexican woman and an Andalusian man, a bullfighter, who meet in Buenos Aires and fall in love (as García Lorca, an Andalusian, and Novo, a Mexican, have met in Buenos Aires). Novo also writes a play, *El tercer Fausto,* a gay

love story, tragic, despite Novo's usual funny irrelevance, which, given the mood of the country, he doesn't dare publish in Mexico until twenty-two years later. (He does, nevertheless, translate it into French and publish it in Paris in 1937 in a very limited fifty-copy edition.) In 1933 Novo also publishes *Espejo: Poemas antiguos,* memories of his childhood, and *Nuevo amor,* his best-known book of poetry, which is highly acclaimed and immediately translated into both French and English. In 1934 he publishes *Poemas proletarios,* a sort of short *Spoon River Anthology* that attacks the prevailing pseudorevolutionary populism of the times by mocking the stock phrases of official history and the Cárdenas administration's hypocritical self-portrayal as a pro-proletarian government and by portraying the pathetic lucklessness of four soldiers; *Never Ever,* one of the first attempts in Mexico at a sort of free-association or stream-of-consciousness poetry; and *Frida Kahlo,* written in the same style, a portrait, not entirely flattering, of the surrealist painter. (Earlier, Novo had written *La Diegada (1926)* in response to Frida's husband's mural in the Ministry of Public Education; however, the virulent verses are only circulated in carbon-copy manuscript form until 1955, when they appear as part of *Sátira.*)

After this short burst of energy, Novo apparently becomes disgusted with the cultural scene in Mexico under Cárdenas and goes into a sort of poetic hibernation. He researches and writes "Las aves en la poesía castellana" in 1935, as an escape from the world, but doesn't make it public until 1952. He works in advertising, develops "spots" for the television and radio, and serves as a consultant in the movie industry, where he writes dialogue and script for a variety of movies, including *Perjura, Gil de Alcalá, Los dos mosqueteros, La venganza del zorro,* and *El signo de la muerte,* starring Cantinflas.

Merlin H. Forster, who has studied the Contemporáneos extensively, puts the end of the group as a group as early as 1932, after the *Examen* scandal. Some had left the country in 1928 after the assassination of Obregón, taking up the foreign service jobs Latin America often affords its dissidents, and especially its writers, as an alternative to exile. Those who had stayed around had later been purged from the bureaucracy during the *Examen* affair or shortly afterward by Cárdenas.

Novo contributes columns to several newspapers, *Excelsior, Novedades,* and *Ultimas Noticias,* often writing anonymously, and publishes occasionally (*En defensa de lo usado,* 1938, a collection of previously published columns; *Dueño mío,* 1944, in limited edition, a collection of

four of the funniest and most exquisite gay love sonnets ever written [included, with others, only in the two *Sátiras*]; *Decimos: "Nuestra tierra,"* 1949, which reflects a nostalgia for less complex times; and *Florido laude* in 1945, a rather uninteresting series of verses about flowers written for the Fiesta de la Flor). Nevertheless, Novo is beaten, and he does not really come back to the literary scene until after the last Cárdenas appointee leaves office, twenty years after the *Examen* scandal.

José Joaquín Blanco describes the options for writers of Novo's and our times:

> In general [the Mexican writer] finds himself situated between very narrow options. There are obsessive taboos: not to be outdated (how is the Mexican going to go on writing sonnets when the North Americans have already gotten to the moon?); not to be Europeanized (betrayal of one's country!); not to be personal (the privileged condition of forming part of the "very few" implies an awareness of that injustice and tries to resolve it speaking as representative of those who don't have a voice); not to be too cultured or present oneself as such (the successful writer is he who appears anti-intellectual, the intellectualized writer gives the impression of a gentleman who attends a gathering of beggars in coat and tails), etc.
>
> Poetry in this way appears as either a messianic apostolate or as a *déraciné* luxury. Apostolate if it seeks to morally and emotively consolidate the basic aspects of the national personality (which is equal to a moral defense of the Fatherland), to give a voice to those who lack one, to register the poor reality that surrounds it. Luxury, ivory tower, and *malinchismo* if it dares break the taboos mentioned.[35]

Novo by 1934 had broken all the taboos mentioned. With his expertise in foreign literature, he appears intellectual, "too cultured," and Europeanized. He is personal, even intimate, in many of his poems (Rivera, in fact, in his mural depicted Novo as a gentleman in tails); he refuses to be the Voice of the Oppressed Masses, at least in the way that is expected of him; and he is in a way outdated. Though he introduces many new innovations in poetry, in his longing for less industrialized, less standardized times (in cummings-esque poems like "El mar" and "Diluvio" in *XX poemas*), he at times appears outdated, if for no other reason than his insistence on the value of writing for writing's sake in an age of utilitarianism, when poetry too must be made "useful" to the new nation. In the 1930s under Cárdenas, Novo loses his resolve and at some point writes this burlesque sonnet (published in *Sátira* but prob-

ably written earlier) about the futility of writing, which for the sake of form, and to avoid the funding censors of the Jesse Helms committee, is perhaps best left in the original:

> Escribir porque sí, por ver si acaso
> se hace un soneto más que nada valga;
> para matar el tiempo, y porque salga
> una obligada consonante al paso.
>
> Porque yo fui escritor, y éste es el caso
> que era tan flaco como perra galga;
> crecióme la papada como nalga,
> vasto de carne y de talento escaso.
>
> ¡Qué le vamos a hacer! Ganar dinero
> y que la gente nunca se entrometa
> en ver si se lo cedes a tu cuero.
>
> Un escritor genial, un gran poeta . . .
> Desde los tiempos del señor Madero,
> es tanto como hacerse la puñeta.[36]

In 1936, García Lorca is killed by the Fascists in Spain. Jorge Cuesta commits suicide in 1942.

When we resurrect
—I'm planning to do so—
between us and this century
there will be an association of ideas
in spite of our format.

("Resúmenes," *XX poemas*)

III

In 1949, under the presidency of Miguel Alemán, toward the end of Salvador Novo's self-imposed silence, poetic hiatus, government blacklisting, exile in his own country, or whatever one chooses to call it, an archaeologist named Eulalia Guzmán announced that she had discovered the long-hidden remains of Cuauhtémoc, last Aztec emperor, symbol of the heroic resistance to the Spanish Conquest, and subject of two of the plays contained here.

According to accounts by Cortés in his fifth *Letter of Relation* to the king of Spain, after the Conquest, in 1525, Cuauhtémoc was hung for allegedly plotting a rebellion against Cortés' troops during a Spanish expedition to the Gulf of Honduras. In the four centuries that followed, poets from both Mexico and abroad variously used the figure of Cuauhtémoc as a symbol of bravery and passion; as the romantic reminder of the nobility of a bygone era (with emphasis on *bygone,* as illustrated by the words of Cuauhtémoc in these verses by the Romantic poet Ignacio Rodríguez Galván, 1816–1842, "My century has passed: my people all / will never lift their dark face, / now sunken in loathsome mud"); and as justification for a new empire, independent from Europe (under Iturbide), or for a new republic, led by a Native American (under Juárez).[37] Nothing, however, was known about the whereabouts of Cuauhtémoc's body during those four hundred years other than that it had been left hanging on a ceiba tree somewhere near a town once called Acallan.

Then, in 1949, *Excelsior,* one of Mexico's most respected newspapers, ran a report of a Native American man in a small town in Guerrero who claimed to have documents proving the whereabouts and burial

place of Cuauhtémoc's body. The documents had allegedly been signed by Toribio de Motolinía, a sixteenth-century Franciscan monk known as Protector of Indians, and told the story of how Aztec subjects still loyal to Cuauhtémoc had secretly recovered his body and transported it to a town, Ichcateopan, for burial. As the tradition of the town goes, Motolinía swore the locals to secrecy out of well-based fears that Spaniards would exhume the body.

The furor and excitement triggered by the claim was similar to what would happen if Amelia Earhart's body were suddenly discovered, or Adolf Hitler's, for lack of a better comparison, or Leif Eriksson's, or the holy grail.

The government immediately directed the National Institute of Anthropology and History to investigate, and it in turn commissioned Eulalia Guzmán, a respected archaeologist with a Ph.D. in anthropology. Guzmán had studied in both Mexico and Germany, was up-to-date on recent technological methods, and had assisted Alfonso Caso in his momentous discovery and excavation of tomb number seven at the Zapotec-Mixtec ruins in Monte Albán. Though some of her colleagues openly scoffed at her from the start, saying the idea of finding Cuauhtémoc's body was preposterous or impossible, Guzmán duly began her investigation.

The details of the case are rather complicated (they are more thoroughly described in Dolores Roldán's *Códice de Cuauhtémoc* [Mexico City: Orion, 1984]), but briefly, Guzmán, using the information found in the documents supposedly signed by Motolinía, and inspired by the oral tradition of the townspeople and by accounts from various Aztec codices that indicated that Ichcateopan had been Cuauhtémoc's birthplace and kingdom, eventually discovered what she believed to be the bones of Cuauhtémoc, under the main altar of a sixteenth-century church in Ichcateopan. They were covered by a few semiprecious beads, a spearhead, and a copper plaque with the words "1525 1529 Lord and King Coatemo" crudely etched in it. (The year 1525 was the date of Cuauhtémoc's hanging; 1529, the date of his burial by Motolinía, according to the documents of Ichcateopan. According to local sources, bodies that are hung dry out like a piece of fruit, rather than decaying, which explains how the four-year span between death and burial was possible.) A deformed foot bone, the third metatarsal, seemed to attest to the identity of the skeleton, since shortly after the fall of Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztec Empire, the Spaniards, convinced that Cuauhtémoc knew the hiding place of Moctezuma's treasure, had tortured him by burning his hands and feet.

The governor of Guerrero quickly rushed to the scene, followed by Alfonso Caso, director of the Instituto Nacional Indigenista, and other dignitaries. Reports describe the emotion of the townspeople at the tomb—some crying, some shouting "My King! My King!"—and the vigil set up by the community to guard the remains, which had been sealed in a box and wrapped in the Mexican flag.

Newspapers speculated about what should be done with the bones, whether they should be interred with other national leaders, whether a new monument should be built, whether they should remain in Ichcateopan. Guzmán was popularly acclaimed for her success in unraveling the clues of the documents to discover the bones of a national hero, lying in oblivion for four centuries.

Almost immediately, however, for whatever reason, be it professional rivalry, sexism, fear of the political consequences for the still largely non-Indian government (what if Cuauhtémoc's royal heirs could be traced, some speculated), or just healthy scientific skepticism, the charges of fraud began. There were claims that the documents by Motolinía were forgeries, that Ichcateopan had not been the town's name in the sixteenth century, that the bones had been taken from a nearby cemetery, that the plaque and other artifacts had been chemically aged. Although all these suspicions were eventually discredited, fellow archaeologists began to ridicule Guzmán as the victim of a hoax, or even its originator.

The Mexican government promptly appointed a commission of "experts"—"wise men," as the headlines sarcastically called them—to review Guzmán's evidence. Swamped in publicity, the commission began an investigation which some charged was more political than scientific. (The credentials and objectivity of some of the commissioners were doubtful.) Passions ran high. Popular sentiment against the commission increased with its every pronouncement about the inconclusiveness of the evidence.

In an effort to vindicate Guzmán's claims, the popular muralist Diego Rivera was summoned to attempt a portrait of the Aztec prince. His rendition, based on a reassembly of the bones, was then compared with descriptions of Cuauhtémoc in accounts by the conquistadors. José Vasconcelos, now back in the country, was called upon to attest to Guzmán's character, which he willingly did, declaring, "Eulalia Guzmán is no charlatan." Everybody who was anybody was forced to take one side or the other.

By all accounts, the investigation became somewhat of a monkey trial. Dolores Roldán, passionate in her attempt to vindicate Guzmán,

to the extent that she bordered on the melodramatic, compared the commission to the church tribunal that considered Galileo's theories on the universe, and to the "scientists" of Columbus' day considering his claim that the earth might not be flat. The commission, to the surprise of nobody, ended up declaring that all of the evidence had been fabricated.

Nevertheless, thousands of school children marched down Paseo de la Reforma in Mexico City to cover Cuauhtémoc's statue with flowers. High school students marched at night by torchlight in a homage to the fallen prince. Even the armed forces organized an act to honor Cuauhtémoc as Mexico's greatest military strategist, and the Senate proclaimed the need to raise a monument and inscribe Cuauhtémoc's name on the walls of the Senate building.

Under pressure, in 1950, the case was reopened and another commission was formed, pompously called La Gran Comisión Investigadora sobre la Autenticidad de los Restos de Cuauhtémoc (The Grand Investigative Commission on the Authenticity of the Remains of Cuauhtémoc). Though less contrary than the first commission, in the sense that it admitted that forgery of many of the artifacts was not likely based on chemical analyses and other tests, the commission still refused to authenticate Guzmán's discovery.

What Guzmán did then is unclear, although it is known that she was left to live in near poverty. Marginalized and ridiculed by the scientific community in Mexico, did she persevere, ceaselessly petitioning the government in attempts to have the remains authenticated and to clear her name, thus becoming a modern version of the pathetic Carlota la Loca, wife of Emperor Maximilian, who for years after her expulsion from Mexico attempted, rather ridiculously, to have Napoleon restore her to the throne? Or did Guzmán retreat in disgrace? Details are not available—not for Guzmán in any case. Carlota, subject of one of the plays here, eventually went insane and lived the last sixty years of her life in a demented state. She died in 1926, when Novo was twenty-two. (Refer to the glossary for more details.)

Regardless of what Guzmán herself did, however, the issue of the authenticity of the Ichcateopan discovery is still a hot one twenty-five years later. In 1973, under pressure, President Luis Echeverría declares the town a national monument, and in 1976, under President José López-Portillo, yet another commission is formed to review the methodology and conclusions of previous commissions.

The commission of 1976 is more objective but still falls short of au-

thenticating the claims. What is worse, when the bones are transported to Ichcateopan for display in a glass tomb at the site of their discovery, it is discovered that someone has removed the first cervical vertebra and the misshapen third metatarsal, which had proven a key factor in establishing the identity of the bones.

What Novo's opinion was on the authenticity of the Ichcateopan discovery is hard to judge. Nevertheless, it is likely that Guzmán gained his sympathy, never awarded lightly, at least with respect to the unfair treatment she received before the Gran Comisión. It is certain to have reminded Novo of the treatment Novo's friends, the editors of *Examen,* had received during an earlier monkey trial, one that was the culmination of a long smear campaign against the Contemporáneos, including Novo. In any case, Guzmán's story was enough to motivate Novo to include her as a character in *Cuauhtémoc and Eulalia,* in his set of *Diálogos,* published in 1956, five years after the results of the second commission were disclosed. And it is likely that the affair was also influential in his decision to write *Cuauhtémoc,* published in 1962.

Ironically, while Eulalia Guzmán's career is coming to a crashing halt, Novo's seems to have taken off again. The election of Miguel Alemán in 1946 marks the end of the long series of military presidents in Mexico. Alemán is the first leader since the 1910 Revolution who has not been chosen from among the many generals of the war, or from among the participants in any of the factional battles. Though many deplore this as the end to what they call the revolutionary period, for Novo the civilian government means an end to persecution, more tolerance for cultural innovation, and a chance to win back the public exposure and admiration so long denied him. In 1946, Novo wins the Premio Ciudad de México and $2,000 pesos with his monograph *Nueva grandeza mexicana,* based on Bernardo Balbuena's eighteenth-century *Grandeza mexicana* and Francisco Salazar's earlier works, *Crónica de la Nueva España* and *Diálogos latinos.* It also incorporates certain elements of Novo's 1923 serial novel *El joven* or *¡Qué México! Novela en que no pasa nada.*[38] Novo splits the prize money, donating half to the National University and half to the national literacy campaign.

What Novo's unfettered opinion of Alemán might have been is difficult to say. He satirizes the president's wealth and corruption in *The War of the Fatties* and in *In Ticitézcatl,* but owes to him the fact that he is once again allowed to work in the government bureaucracy. With

Alemán's approval, Carlos Chávez, composer of *Sinfonía india* and director of the newly reorganized National Institute of Fine Arts, names Novo head of the institute's theater department, a position Novo holds until the next change of presidents.

(It is no wonder that Novo later organized his chronicles of cultural life in Mexico around the different presidential periods; and if we are to believe what he says in a 1965 interview with Emmanuel Carballo, Novo would probably have considered arranging a literary anthology the same way. Carballo: "Based on what you've just told me, do you believe that in Mexico, more than literary *movements,* we have political *moments,* translated into the printed word?" Novo: "Yes. In Mexico everything happens according to the spasmodic ejaculations of its politics."[39] Indeed, Novo's own works can be grouped very comfortably into presidential periods.)

As theater director for the National Institute of Fine Arts from 1946 to 1952 (Alemán's term as president), Novo's impact on the Mexican stage is substantial. He organizes the Escuela Nacional de Teatro to train young actors, scenery artists, production workers, and directors. The new pool of trained professionals is largely responsible for the boom in the number of theaters inaugurated during the 1940s and 1950s. Antonio Magaña Esquivel, in his *Medio siglo de teatro mexicano,* lists twenty-five new theaters that open in Mexico City alone during that period.[40]

Xavier Villaurrutia and Celestino Gorostiza are also involved in the efforts to rejuvenate theater in Mexico, and in a real way, it is as though the group from Teatro Ulises had returned to dominate the stage, this time with near unanimous approval. (Novo may indeed have been gloating over this fact when he thought up the title for his play, *Ha vuelto Ulises* [*Ulysses Has Returned*], published some time later.)

During his first season at the National Institute of Fine Arts, Novo produces three plays written by Mexicans: *La huella,* by Agustín Lazo; *El pobre Barba Azul,* by Xavier Villaurrutia; and *El gesticulador,* by Rodolfo Usigli. However, no one objects when in 1948 Novo produces four foreign plays and one of his own, an adaptation for children. The year 1949 even sees August Strindberg's *Danza macabra* (*Dance of Death*), and the season of 1950 must have made nationalists turn over in their graves. Five works by Mexican authors were staged: *Rosalba y los llaveros,* by Emilio Carballido; *Antonio,* by Rafael Bernal; *Los de abajo,* by Mariano Azuela; *Xicaltépec,* by Roberto Blanco Moheno; and *Cuauhtémoc,* by Efrén Orozco; and *fourteen* foreign plays: Jean-Paul

Sartre's *Muertos sin sepulcro* (*Huis clos*), Eugene O'Neill's *El emperador Jones* (*The Emperor Jones*), Luigi Pirandello's *El hombre, la bestia y la virtud* (*L'uomo, la bestia e la virtu*), Ramón María Valle Inclán's *La marquesa Rosalinda,* Euripides' *Medea,* Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes* (performed in the original English!), Prosper Mérimée's *La carroza de la Perricholi* (*La carrosse du saint-sacement*), Alejandro Casona's *Fablilla del secreto bien guardado,* Edmond Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac,* Evelyn Williams' *Trespass* (performed in English), T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* (performed in English), Emmanuel Roblès' *Monserrat* (*Montserrat*), Conrado Nalé Roxlo's *Una viuda difícil,* and Noel Coward's *Un espíritu travieso* (*Blythe Spirit*). Needless to say, the scales tipped back the next year when only works by Mexican authors were staged, including the premier of *Corona de sombras,* by Rodolfo Usigli; *Los signos del zodiaco,* by Sergio Magaña; and *La culta dama,* which is Novo's first full-length success, a satire of the bourgeois lady in Mexico. The play causes a small scandal in the newspapers, proving that the organizer of Teatro Ulises has not lost his bite.

Novo's old enemies, on the other hand, seem to be losing theirs. In 1959, Novo lends his support to the Poesía en Voz Alta movement (a theater group started in 1956 whose proponents included Emmanuel Carballo, Juan José Arreola, Héctor Mendoza, Nancy Cárdenas, and later Octavio Paz) by allowing the group to use one of the theaters under his jurisdiction to produce Jean Genet's *The Maids* (*Les bonnes*). The few who object with cries of "Homosexuals!" and "Enemies of Mexico!"—the same charges once leveled at Teatro Ulises—are outnumbered.

In the late forties, Novo dedicates much of his time to the foundation of children's theater for the nation. In conjunction with the 400-year anniversary of Cervantes, Novo writes a stage adaption of *Don Quixote* for children. The farce and two *entremeses,* humorous one-act plays, (with music by Carlos Chávez, among others) are a major success and reach nearly 55,000 children. The next year he writes and directs *El coronel Astucia,* based on *Astucia,* by Luis G. Inclán.

Although Novo leaves the National Institute of Fine Arts when Adolfo Ruiz Cortines is elected president in 1952, he is named to the Academia Mexicana de la Lengua, and with the backing of investors, led by none other than President Ruiz Cortines, is able to inaugurate his own small theater, Teatro de la Capilla in Coyoacán, with only ninety-eight seats. There Novo produces several experimental plays, most of which he translates himself, and is the first in Mexico to stage

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot.* He also writes and stages all six of his "dialogues": *Joven II* (between his old self and his young self), *Adán y Eva* (between Adam and Eve), *Cuauhtémoc y Eulalia* (included here), *Diego y Betty* (between Diego Rivera and a reporter from the United States), *La Güera y la Estrella* (between actress María Félix and La Güera Rodríguez, a character created by Artemio de Valle Arizpe), *Malinche y Carlota* (included here), and *Tercer Fausto* (published in French in 1937, but appearing in Spanish for the first time, a dialogue between a young gay man and Mephistopheles, and later between the man as a woman and his lover). In the style of the Drama Quartet (Charles Laughton, Charles Boyer, Agnes Moorhead, and Cedric Hardwicke), the productions are limited to readings by Novo himself and actress Marilú Elízaga. (Dramatic readings were also one of the techniques explored by the Poesía en Voz Alta movement.)

Toward the end of President Ruiz Cortines' term, Novo is named director of the Escuela de Arte Dramática, which he had helped create. He also writes and produces another successful three-act play, about the political corruption of the news media, *A ocho columnas,* and his name is promptly banned from the newspaper alluded to. The editor threatens not even to publish Novo's obituary. (The "eight columns" of the title refer to the eight columns of text on the standard newspaper page.)

The presidential period of Adolfo López Mateos, beginning in 1958, is Novo's most important with respect to theater. In 1963, he wins the Premio Juan Ruiz de Alarcón, amidst some controversy, for *The War of the Fatties* (*En pipiltzintzin* [*Los niñitos*] *o La guerra de las gordas: Comedia en dos actos*). He translates and directs several works (Rattingham's *Mesas separadas* [*Separate Tables*], Robert E. Sherwood's *Camino a Roma* [*The Road to Rome*], Alan Jay Lerner's *Brigadoon,* William Shakespeare's *Otelo* [*Othello*], George Bernard Shaw's *Santa Juana* [*Saint Joan*], and *Un hombre contra el tiempo* [*A Man for All Seasons*] by Robert Bolt).

In addition to *The War of the Fatties,* Novo writes three other successful plays under President López Mateos: *Yocasta, o casi* (1961), *Ha vuelto Ulises* (1962), and *Cuauhtémoc* (1962). The first two pieces are based on classical legends. *Yocasta, o casi* is the story of Oedipus' mother projected into modern times. The title is a play on "I, chaste, or almost" and "Almost Jocasta." *Ha vuelto Ulises* centers around Penelope's mixed emotions upon Ulysses' return from Troy. Its prologue, with several long, optional passages about the structure of classical

Greek theater, is typical of Novo's interest in literature that talks about itself. The same year *Ha vuelto Ulises* is published, Novo publishes *Letras vencidas,* a series of essays on literary history and criticism, several specifically about history of the theater. Novo's interest in theater history and classical theater is significant, because its influence is seen and (typically) commented upon, both in *The War of the Fatties* and later in *In Ticitézcatl.*

Much more important than any classical influence that can be found in the plays contained here, and an important cultural event for Mexican society in general, is the publication, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, of a series of books that makes previously inaccessible Aztec culture available to the general public. In the context of Mexican literature, the importance of these works cannot be understated, for they make Novo part of the first generation of Mexican writers to be legitimately considered heirs to pre-Hispanic literature. (Novo, incidentally, is one of the first Mexican writers to have seriously studied Nahuatl, which served him not only in his capacity as a writer but also as Official Historian of the City of Mexico from 1965 to 1974.)

Despite claims to the contrary, earlier writers cannot, except in limited cases, claim any literary connection to their Aztec predecessors. José Joaquín Blanco explains why:

> To consider the poetry of pre-Hispanic Mexico and New Spain as the origins [of modern Mexican literature] implies giving them an intentionality they didn't have. In the importance that the liberals gave to pre-Hispanic texts, Menéndez y Pelayo saw a cultural falsification, given that, on the one hand, only enigmatic fragments existed in the 19th century, from which only very fantastically could any interpretation at all be derived, and on the other, as a cultural fact, the cultured Mexicans, like the Europeans, knew more about Mesopotamian cultures than they did about Teotihuacan or Chichén. . . . Recall too that it was only until well into the 20th century that pre-Hispanic poetry was translated, studied and conveniently distributed.[41]

With that in mind, the novelty and importance of the plays included in this book cannot be thoroughly understood without considering the publication of Alfonso Caso's famous book *Los Aztecas: El pueblo del Sol* (in the second half of the 1950s), which Novo ridicules in the "Presentation" of *The War of the Fatties;* Miguel León Portilla's *Veinte himnos sacros nahuas* (in 1958), parts of which are paraphrased in the deliv-

ery room scene in *The War of the Fatties;* a second book by León Portilla, *La visión de los vencidos: Relaciones indígenas de la conquista* (in 1961), which influences the perspective of *Cuauhtémoc;* Novo's own *Breve historia de Coyoacán* (in 1962), which serves as the basis for a longer, never-published book, *Historia de Coyoacán,* from which "Ahuítzotl and the Magic Water" is excerpted; and, in 1964, Angel María Garibay Kintana's *La literatura de los aztecas,* following up his earlier *Epica náhuatl.* The latter two pieces serve as the basis for *In Ticitézcatl* and other adaptations Novo prepares to be performed on-site in Teotihuacan as part of a spectacular light show, *Luz y sonido,* for the celebration of the 1968 Olympics. All published in the late 1950s and 1960s, these above-mentioned books, which Novo uses as sources for his stories from Aztec history, have, to use the reviewer's phrase, been both long awaited and much anticipated. Their publication is one of the most exciting events in the history of Mexican literature, and certainly one of Novo's intentions is to communicate the find.

But Novo is not Pablo Neruda encountering the heights of Machu Picchu. Though the two were born the same year, while Neruda was reading Walt Whitman, Novo was reading Dorothy Parker.[42] Needless to say, Novo's attitude, even when he considers the sacred history of the Aztecs, is not reverential. Since 1927 he has been the "curioso impertinente," a name he borrowed from Cervantes for his column in *Ulises.* Cynicism is his calling, his responsibility even, if we let Carlos Monsiváis tell it:

> In the 20th century in Mexico it falls to Salvador Novo to initiate a singular task of demolition: to chip away at the Sacred Institutions, to prove that myths are vulnerable, to find the flaws in our Great Names. *To demythify, to desacralize,* are verbs that, in Mexico, Novo has cultivated more than anybody: in a country where the people are regimented by respect, paralyzed by it, satire is a sin. If we don't know how to praise, we are told, much less can we exercise our faculties of discrimination, the critical powers that reveal the faults, the Achilles' heels of a country and its way of noticing or not noticing reality. Therein lies the reason the labors of Novo—who has invented new forms of attack, who has made aggression into an art and has given combative possibilities to a respectful literature—have become so indispensable.[43]

Novo's curious impertinence or satiric irrelevance is still evident in each of the plays contained here. In each, he unmasks or, to use the word he coined, "demythifies" a national myth. They abound in Mexico, at

least according to Octavio Paz: "Mexico's public art is state art, swollen like a circus athlete. Its only major rival is Soviet art. Our specialty is the glorification of official figures painted or sculpted with the well-known method of amplification. The mass production of cement giants. Our parks and squares smother under a vegetation of heavy civic monuments."[44]

In *The War of the Fatties,* Novo unmasks the myth of the sad-faced Indian, the myth of the Pueblo del Sol, the myth of the ethics of the Aztec rulers and of the PRI (ruling party in Mexico today), and, particularly, of Calles, Cárdenas, and Alemán. As Emilio Carballido says, "*The War of the Fatties* is medicine for our ancient pre-Hispanic world, so sick from solemnity and rhetoric, it injects it with a shot of life-giving humor, confers on it the vitality of laughter."[45] In *Malinche and Carlota,* Novo unmasks the myth of the complete indefensibility of those two women's positions, and the myth of complete independence under Juárez. In "A Few Aspects of Sex among the Nahuas," it is the myth of women's lack of sexual desire, and the myth of the modern origin of creative sexual practices (further developed in his "Las locas y la Inquisición," in *Las locas, el sexo, los burdeles*). In "Ahuítzotl and the Magic Water," if it can be considered in this context, it is the myth that the old empire had no problems whatsoever, and the myth that early historians understood the use of the period. In *In Ticitézcatl,* it is the myth that the legend of Quetzalcóatl's return is all there is to know about him, and the myth that classical Nahuatl culture is incompatible with classical Western form. In *Cuauhtémoc,* it is the romantic myth that contemporary Native Americans do not share the same virtues as their ancestors (achieved by casting Cuauhtémoc as "A Young Native American Man," i.e., any young Native American man), and the myth that everyone was satisfied with the imperial structure (an important reminder in a country that has occasionally looked toward monarchy as a form of government and has concentrated the powers of a monarch in the office of the president). And, finally, in *Cuauhtémoc and Eulalia,* it is the myth that we are ready to face the facts and give up our myths, replacing them with a handful of beads and a rusty spearhead, and the myth that we ought to.

The role of a cynic is rarely appreciated by one's contemporaries, but by the mid-1960s Novo has been able to cut a place for himself in the history of Mexican literature, and he enjoys a popularity he has never had but long deserved. He has been awarded the Premio Ciudad de

México for *Nueva grandeza mexicana* in 1946, been appointed to the Academia Mexicana de la Lengua in 1952, won the Premio Ruiz de Alarcón for *The War of the Fatties* in 1963. In 1964, Novo's 813-page collection of his best prose, *Toda la prosa,* which he publishes on the insistence of Nobel laureate Gabriela Mistral, is heralded by the press.

Novo's triumph over past adversities is worth gloating over, and in 1965, it is motive enough for his friend and colleague Emmanuel Carballo to write, somewhat vindictively:

> Novo is a cynic, a human being who calls things—as prohibited as they might be—by their first name. Since his youth he had known how to be what some of his contemporaries refused to accept: a distinct human being. Without euphemisms, in prose and in verse, he faced up to his destiny and lived all his hours as they came. Today after many long years of slights and hypocrisy, readers and critics recognize in him a writer, a great writer, an agonist who has sneered at his tragedy, a human being who has lived according to his desires, his insecurities, and also to the roles he played, both great and small.[46]

In 1966, in a volume that also includes *In Ticitézcatl* and *Cuauhtémoc,* Novo publishes two more short plays, *El sofá* and *El diálogo de ilustres en la Rotonda. El sofá* is a debate on the relative worth of tradition and money, as seen by three generations of tailors (the oldest is blind; the youngest wants to be an electrician) and a woman from the United States who wants to buy their sofa. *El diálogo de ilustres en la Rotonda* is a one-act comedy that includes just about anybody who is anybody in Mexican letters. Gathered in the rotunda mentioned in *Cuauhtémoc and Eulalia* are the ghosts of Alfonso Reyes, Enrique González Martínez, Amado Nervo, Juan José Tablada, Mariano Azuela, Luis G. Urbina, Virginia Fábregas, and Angela Peralta. Novo parodies them as they discuss their reception speeches for Ramón López Velarde, who is scheduled to be interred but who is preempted by a Dr. Mora who "brings with him credentials of Intellectual Father of the Reforma." As they wait, they discuss Novo's contemporaries Jaime Torres Bodet and Bernardo Ortiz de Montellano.

In 1968, a street is named after Novo in Coyoacan; he is one of the very few writers to have received this tribute during their lifetimes.

Thy bosom is endeared with all hearts
Which I by lacking have supposed dead . . .

(epigraph, *Nuevo amor*)

IV

Forty years of marginalization and personal attacks do not go by without taking a toll on even the most noble of leaders, and despite his ultimate success, their effect on Novo is obvious. When in 1968 the government of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz fiercely puts down the student movement by attacking a peaceful demonstration in Tlatelolco, the government calls upon Novo as Official Historian of the city to defend the action. His complaisance seems particularly cowardly in comparison with Octavio Paz's resignation of his ambassadorship to India in protest. However, unlike Paz, Novo had a show to put on, in Mexico, not New Delhi (his show *Luz y sonido* was scheduled to be performed in Teotihuacan during the Olympics), and, unlike Paz, Novo had already experienced enough government retaliation for noncooperation in his lifetime, on his own, without asking for it. Perhaps he reasoned that little would have been gained by his resignation. But his support!

As late as 1959, old-line critics had still not forgiven Novo, or the Contemporáneos as a whole, for their so-called lack of patriotism, for their definition of themselves as twentieth-century individuals rather than nineteenth-century nationalists, for their distaste for the ostentatious proletarianism of Rivera and Cárdenas, for the ubiquitous sloganism, for the concept of literature as an arm of propaganda. Nor had the Contemporáneos been forgiven for their interest in foreign as well as national literature.[47] More contemporary critics, however, who have dismissed these issues as absurd and have condemned the witch hunt of Contemporáneos under Cárdenas—which must seem to them as ridiculous as the HUAC, the Cold War, and the McCarthy era seem to critics in this country—still struggle to appreciate Novo because of his apparently ambiguous sympathies.

Carlos Monsiváis (born in 1938) explains Novo's seeming slide to the right thus:

> "Nothing," declared Jean Cocteau, "is as difficult to maintain as a bad reputation." That of Novo's cracks during the presidency of Miguel Alemán. At the luncheon in his honor, flanked by Vasconcelos and Torres Bodet, there is a homage by the democratic left for his work *La culta dama,* interpreted as a criticism of the bourgeoisie. Almost the ultimate: in 1947 Novo becomes a founding member (secretary of propaganda) of the then-leftist Partido Popular . . . [Later], at the beginning of the government of Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, Novo (48 years old) gives up counting on his provocations. . . . From defiance to complacency: very honored among the continual visits from the First Lady, doña María Izaguirre de Ruiz Cortines; very happy about the profusion of bankers, renowned professionals, politicians, intellectuals that fills the theater to capacity and admires the menu . . . To give in a little is to give up too much. Novo, clutching the pardon, makes fun of the subversives, finds in his friendship with the oligarchy his greatest vainglory, he even renounces defense of "the tribe." When a controversy arises in 1955 because of the prohibition of a play about lesbians, Novo intervenes to speak of "libertinism," of protecting the public from "sordid instincts," of the right of the authorities to protect morality and good manners. Such degradation reaches perfection: "If the Government did not have guardianship over such concepts [morality, good manners], its right to persecute thieves, to jail murderers, punish delinquents, would be invalidated—in a word, to repress antisocial manifestations, whatever kind they are, and thus they recur to the sanctuary of art to there take refuge like a thief that takes refuge in a church . . . May the day come when our robust health is freely repulsed by such exotic dishes."[48]

Like Novo's earlier defenders, José Joaquín Blanco (born 1951), perhaps the youngest and most objective critic, attempts to explain Novo's incongruous political shifts by blaming the torturous political climate:

> *The great disadvantage* of the Contemporáneos, as with the generation of the Ateneo de la Juventud, was their enemies. These stupid, opportunistic enemies little by little forced them into positions that were ever more asphyxiating, until they ended up in aberration. They didn't leave them alone until they had justified their literary activity in the same terms as the prevailing Powers. . . . In Novo it is clear: he became abject by entering into the game of the interlocutor. . . . Inevitably, literature is in contact with its enemies: what we

> wish we didn't know about the Contemporáneos . . . reveals the prevailing moral space, which they succumbed to perhaps out of fatigue . . . or from disenchantment, and from personal weakness. . . . The Contemporáneos, exiles in their own land, are also exiled in their poetry. . . . The poet, as expatriot, as a treasonous exception, as a bloody denunciation of the cultural failure of the country.[49]

Blanco is more successful with a second approach, explaining Novo's actions, his life in fact, as a sort of expedient but undenied hypocrisy, in which Novo makes it painfully clear to all that, under duress, he has compromised himself:

> The figure and poetry of Novo are invaluable despite his political corruption and mercenarism, for the sincerity with which he faces up to his disaster and takes it, in his satirical poems, to its cruelest consequences, a bitterness without tears, without complaint:
>
> I can write perfect verses,
> measure them and avoid assonances,
> poems that will move whoever reads them
> and that will make them exclaim:
> "What an intelligent boy!"
> . . . . . .
> I shall seek the best of histrionics
> to make them believe that what
> moves them also moves me.
>
> But in my bed, alone, sweetly,
> memoryless and voiceless
> I sense that the poem has not come from me.
>
> Novo doesn't try to fool himself nor does he try to fool us: within the *very narrow* mark of opinions in his time, he chose the one that was most to his advantage. For a frivolous, intelligent, educated homosexual, in the twenties and thirties the "caminos del bien" were not open to him. The governments of Calles and Cárdenas had treated him like a dog: he accepted the sweetest servitude in private initiative, and when the government opened the doors under Avila Camacho and Alemán, he entered, happy to charge a good price for his efficient services. To have chosen another path in his conditions would have demanded greater moral force than that which he was disposed to employ. As in the biblical scene, he traded his literary inheritance for a bowl of lentils, he knew exactly what he was losing, and that awareness destroyed him in the most consciously and voluntarily bitter life in the history of our literature. And even inside

that literary inferno that reflected his own internal disaster, there remained many, very many good qualities, perhaps more and better than those of the professional "caminantes del bien."

Certainly Novo pretended before the public his whole life: he wrote things on the Patria, good manners, family morality [Pancho Villa, we should add], etc., and charged well for his services, not only in money: his bosses as well as society had to accept him with his "maldita" appearance as an evident homosexual, plucked eyelashes, in make-up, with rings and wigs, saying things in his newspaper chronicles that others lacking his vocation of bitterness and emotional suicide would never have dared. When, on television, during the regime of Díaz Ordaz, Novo expounded on patriotic virtue, a clear clash of lies *insinuating a farce* was set up between him and the public: the sexagenarian, in make-up, dandified, and with his mannerisms and jewels, made a show of educating an easily scandalized society (the *Maestro de la Juventud* as a transvestite!), which in turn pretended—comedy of histrionics—to let itself be educated by him. But in his invaluable texts he doesn't pretend.[50]

With that in mind, that Novo never pretends in what he writes, and the suggestion that he meant his television appearance supporting Díaz Ordaz in Tlatelolco to be taken tongue in cheek, it is best to turn to Novo's poem "Adán desnudo," in which he apparently throws his support to the student movement. Abridged and in translation it follows:

Yes, we are still standing, but like the dust
that stands on statues: preserved
by the salt that covers us, petrifies us
. . . . . .
captive in the walls
that one by one were raised
to build a hereditary world
by the men who abdicated their potential:
who fearfully fled
the forest and the sea to close themselves off in cloisters:
to divorce their languages into countries,
to congregate their fear in the cities,
isolate themselves in houses and close doors on one another;
to protect their vanity of gods in the temples,
humble themselves in palaces;
to stockpile bravado and cowardice in closets
to love one another sadly in bedrooms,

to live on in bookshelves, in file cabinets,
in coffins, tombs, monuments.
. . . . . .
And suddenly,
the light of dawn offends and blinds our eyes.
New Adams with firm teeth bite into apples without sin,
plunge their strong arms into the crystal of the rivers,
tear down walls, doors, niches,
borders;
they appear on all the horizons
in search of themselves,
unsurprised, made in their own image;
they see themselves, they dance
. . . . . .
The world is theirs alone.
The one they take back:
the one we didn't know was ours
and which we traded for this one which they now tear down.

A world without borders, or races, or cities:
without flags, or temples, or palaces, or statues.
A world without prisons or chains,
a world without past or future.
The world unforeseen
by the men captive in the crypts of our world:
dreamed perhaps, scarcely imagined
by the naked Adam in Paradise.[51]

"Adán desnudo" was published in 1969, shortly after Novo had suffered a serious pulmonary infarction which forced him to greatly reduce his activities. It has, in this context, the strength of words spoken in articulo mortis, especially in light of the fact that that same year Novo also published "Mea culpa," in which he expresses his—by his own admission—maudlin regrets about not having had children. Although "Mea culpa" has nothing to do with the student movement, it attracts the attention of Elena Poniatowska, author of the definitive *La noche de Tlatelolco*. Significantly, she gives Novo a sympathetic interview.[52] (It is worth mentioning, too, that the gay movement, of which Salvador Novo was a very early predecessor, and whose underground newspaper was the only Mexican publisher to print Novo's scandalous memoirs, first went public on the ten-year memorial march of Tlatelolco.)

The year after "Adán desnudo" and "Mea culpa" are published, Novo is awarded the Trofeo Calendario Azteca by the Mexican Association of Radio and Television Journalists in 1970. In 1972, he publishes his last collection of essays, *Las locas, el sexo, los burdeles,* from which "A Few Aspects of Sex among the Nahuas" has been taken, and which includes a second dialogue with Sor Juana, *Sor Juana recibe,* between the poet-nun and Don Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora. The book also includes several essays on theater. Novo died in 1974, twenty-four years after Xavier Villaurrutia and one year after Pablo Neruda.

In assessing his work, and considering his life, particularly his political actions, it is most beneficial not to confuse the two. As Blanco notes, "Novo pretended before the public his whole life," but "in his invaluable texts he doesn't pretend." Sociological critics of Latin American literature have long noted that in Latin America (as elsewhere) literature has often been born from the need to express somewhere and somehow what cannot be expressed publicly, from the need to outwit the compilers of the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum,* to avoid the wrath of a humorless dictator or the retaliation of an insecure government. Carlos Fuentes, in his introduction to *Todos los gatos son pardos* (published eight years after Novo's *Cuauhtémoc,* but on the same theme), says:

> . . . in our country, to talk to oneself is to talk to the others: poetry has always been the central artery of Mexican literature: we only tell the truth in secret. And even when we talk out loud, we continue to speak in a low voice; remnant of the sweet Indian accent, some call it; voice of the slave, I say, voice of the subjugated man, who had to learn the language of his masters and who directs himself to them with elaborate respect, prayer and confession, circumlocutions, abundant diminutives and—when the señor turns his back—with the knife of the double entendre and the war cry of a nonchalant remark. . . . Because in Mexico public speech, from Cortés' *Letters of Relation* to the king all the way up to the last presidential address, has been held prisoner by the powers that be . . .[49]

Certainly, unlike Paz, Novo did not show himself to be a hero at Tlatelolco. But writers are not chosen by the valor they display in war. Generals and politicians only exceptionally make anything more than heroic couplets or crafty blank verse, just as writers only exceptionally make hyperbolic budget requests. Nevertheless, despite Tlatelolco, or including it, Novo has all his life fought to regain what Fuentes calls "captive public speech," and he has used the best weapons he, as a

writer, as a seemingly frivolous, intelligent, educated homosexual, has had available to him, "the knife of the double entendre and the battle cry of the nonchalant remark." It is to those weapons, appearing here as razor-sharp *macanas* and ironic parallels, that we owe some of the best literature of our time.