

Carlos Fuentes
LA CAMPAÑA
México: FCE, 1990. Pp. 261
Reviewed by Alfonso González

Carlos Fuentes's latest novel, *La campaña* (The Campaign; 1990), explores the possibility that the tripartite slogans of the French Revolution—Liberty, Equality, Fraternity—which became the philosophical creed for many young revolutionaries throughout Spanish America, might have been more a dream in which to believe than an attainable goal. Through the mixing of nineteenth-century revolutionary ideas and literary conventions with contemporary social mores and experimental techniques, Fuentes creates the figure of the revolutionary intellectual: ill fitted for combat, but armed with a reformist zeal rooted in the ideas of Rousseau and Montesquieu. The reader follows the quest of a young Argentinian, Baltasar Bustos, to help South America gain independence from Spain, and to rid himself of his sexual passion and guilt feelings toward Ofelia Salamanca, Marquise of Cabra. Baltasar and his two best friends, Xavier Dorrego, a publisher, and Manuel Varela, the narrator, make their first revolutionary statement through an act of justice. They plan to kidnap the newly born son of Ofelia Salamanca, the wife of the President of the "Audiencia" (Supreme Court), and replace him with the son of a syphilitic black woman who had been lashed for giving birth to a child. The switching of the babies, according to the three young revolutionaries, would be an act of justice since the pampered life that awaited the young nobleman would now be bestowed on a black baby.

Notwithstanding his physical handicaps, myopia, and overweight condition, and like a true nineteenth-century romantic, Baltasar Bustos falls desperately in love with the mother of the baby he kidnaps. For years, Baltasar tries to find Ofelia Salamanca in order to inform her that her real son is alive, and to confess that he is passionately in love with her. Though his search takes him all over Spanish America—Buenos Aires, Santiago, Lima, Maracaibo, Veracruz—he never gives up in his quest to find Ofelia, to tell her the truth, and to become her lover. In his trips he tries to live up to his revolutionary ideals, but succeeds only in one: fraternity. In Maracaibo he helps sick prostitutes and disfigured soldiers at the local hospital. When he expresses his ideals of liberty and equality to others on the battlefield, they only laugh at his naiveté. In light of the hero's quest, the campaign referred to in the novel's title acquires philosophical and religious connotations. Rather than a military enterprise, it is a spiritual, apostolic journey. The protagonist's personal sacrifice in helping the sick and dying makes him a hero; his failure to convince others of the importance of liberty and equality portends the shaky existence of an independent Spanish America.

Though the novel is at times verbose, especially when the characters try to rationalize human frailties or ideals, Fuentes manages to attract and maintain the reader's interest. Through a series of unexpected chance encounters, graphic expressions of human sexuality, and irony, the author constantly sur-

prises his reader. Irony is ever present. Out of the three revolutionary friends, it is Baltasar Bustos, overweight, out-of-shape, and myopic, who turns the group's ideas into action. The potentially disastrous effects of the child substitution scheme—a backlash repression against blacks—are muffled by a fire which kills the black baby, making the Spanish parents believe that their son had died. Thanks to the ill-conceived idea of justice of the trio, the novel's single most influential figure in the independence of Spanish America comes into being: Ofelia Salamanca. At the end of the novel we are led to believe that the kidnapped child was returned to the Marquise by the black woman to whom he had been entrusted. Because she recuperated her baby through the good will of a black woman, Ofelia Salamanca decides to help the insurgents by pretending to help the Spaniards. She becomes the most active and valuable agent in Spanish America's struggle for independence. The reader's interest is also maintained through the descriptions and protrayals of the character's sexuality. Sabina, Baltasar's spinster sister, expresses her sexual frustrations by wearing knives between her breasts and legs, and taking pleasure in killing defenseless dogs with a knife made out of a bull's penis. The lengthy description of Ofelia Salamanca in the nude centers on her genitalia. The Marquise pretends to help the Spaniards through the use of her body and seductive powers, but in reality she helps the insurgents throughout Spanish America. In his quest to be true to Ofelia Salamanca, Baltasar remains celibate until he is adopted by the tenants of a bordello in Maracaibo.

La campaña mixes old and new literary conventions. Among those identified as nineteenth-century literary usages one notices that (1) the novel follows a linear time frame, beginning on the evening of May 24 and ending ten years later; (2) the driving force behind the protagonist's actions is unfulfilled love; (3) throughout the narrative, the protagonist remains loyal to his ideal love and to his friends; (4) there are many chance encounters, a few hidden identities, and a last-minute revelation which explains and ties the loose ends of the plot. Among contemporary novelistic conventions one finds that there are several narrators to the tale. The reader is repeatedly told that the narrator is Manuel Varela, but at times the story is told by Baltasar Bustos through his letters; at other times, it is clearly neither Manuel nor Baltasar, but an omniscient narrator. Other modern strategies include the explicit depiction of human sexuality.

La campaña is not one of Fuentes's best novels, and for some readers Bustos might be Fuentes's most intellectual and least convincing of his revolutionary characters, but it tells an entertaining, thought-provoking, and at times humoristic story. It's worth reading.