THE DEATH OF THE STORYTELLER AND 
THE POETICS OF (UN)CONTAINMENT: 
JUAN RULFO’S EL LLANO EN LLAMAS

Inspired perhaps by Ángel Rama’s highly influential Transculturación narrativa en América Latina, critics have often sought to locate Rulfo’s work in a return to traditional, rural, indigenous, and oral narrative forms, in the context of what Rama calls ‘el repliegue dentro del venero cultural tradicionalista’. Rulfo’s narrative fiction, according to Rama, stands as a prime example of the way in which Latin American narrators wrote by turning their backs on European literary modernity: ‘al relato compartimentado, mediante yuxtaposición de pedazos sueltos de una narración (en John Dos Passos, en Huxley) se le opuso el discorrir dispersivo de las “comadres pueblerinas” que entremezclan sus voces susurrantes’. In this sense, Rulfo’s work is considered to ‘procede[r] de una recuperación de las estructuras de la narración oral y popular’; its fragmentary structure stems not from the influence of modern cultural forms, but from the ‘reconocimiento de un universo dispersivo, de asociacionismo libre, de incesante invención que correlaciona ideas y cosas, de particular ambigüedad y oscilación’. As Adam Sharman points out, this means that Rama effectively opposes the anti- or irrationalist aspect of residual oral forms with the Western modernist tendency to ‘contest the dominant Western rationalist tradition’. Formal fragmentation, in this view, is connected not with literary modernization and innovation, but rather with the retreat into a collective oral tradition.

In the same critical vein, Walter Mignolo argues that Rulfo’s work is characterized not just by the fictionalization of orality, but more specifically by ‘la ficcionalización de una oralidad que identifica la yuxtaposición de tradiciones culturales nativas y colonizadas’. He thus attributes the fragmentary form of Rulfo’s work to the recuperation of oral Amerindian languages, to ‘la lógica no-causal y aleatoria de culturas primariamente orales’ (TO, p. 430). Again, the fragmentation of logical causality and temporal linearity is connected to orality, in stark opposition to what he calls ‘alphabetic writing’, which in turn is connected to temporal, linear, and chronological organization (TO, p. 431).

While Mignolo focuses on residual form, Evodio Escalante focuses on

1 Ángel Rama, Transculturación narrativa en América Latina (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 2004), p. 44.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., pp. 44, 53.
residual content in his insistence that the time of Rulfo’s fiction is ‘el tiempo contrario al universo de la lectura’:

The archaic, or rather residual, traditions, beliefs, and orders that permeate Rulfo’s world, according to this reading, make it unapproachable, alien to any modern reader. In the light of this proposition, he questions the extent to which the modern reader might be prepared to accept its archaism.

I wish to situate the following reading of El llano en llamas not in opposition to these arguments, but rather in a dialectical relation with them. My contention is that his cuento constitutes not just the folding back into archaic or residual forms, but also a rupture from, and in, traditional narrative. In other words, the aim is not to contradict these modes of thinking, which are all to a certain extent justified by Rulfo’s work, but to propose another, supplementary dimension, namely Rulfo’s engagement with emergent forms, and his consequent contribution to the modernization of storytelling through the modern literary genre of the short story. In doing so, I shall seek to provide some affirmative responses to Sharman’s pertinent question, posed in relation to Rama’s argument: ‘If the transculturators were involved in a retreat back or re-immersion [...] into traditional culture, is this not because they have been out of traditional culture and have returned to it on the back of the experience of modernity?’ As we shall see, his literary output is an eminently transcultural one, which melds themes, experiences, and forms from different intersecting cultures. As Rowe observes in his brilliant critical guide to El llano en llamas, though there are of course marks of orality in the stories, these are only ever partial:

Their compositional techniques are those of modern, post-Joycean fiction, assembling a world by freely juxtaposing fragments of consciousness rather than aiming to produce naturalistic pictures of life. They combine modern literary techniques with an input from oral culture.

Whereas as far as Escalante is concerned, Rulfo’s territory is that of the archaic, the residual at best, my argument is that his work is punctured by emergent cultural forms. The terms ‘archaic’, ‘residual’, and ‘emergent’ are

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7 Sharman, Tradition and Modernity, p. 152.
used here in the sense offered by Raymond Williams: whereas archaic forms are relegated to museum displays, belonging as they do merely to the past, residual ones are fragments of past forms that are still actively present within cultural processes, and emergent ones constitute new modes and formations that have yet to be fully developed and established.\(^9\) Notably, both the residual and the emergent are fragmentary cultural forms: the former because they are partial remainders of a former system that has collapsed or disintegrated, the latter because they have yet to take on full form or acquire meaning within dominant social structures. It is hardly surprising, then, that the transcultural properties of Rulfo’s work are connected to its fragmentary quality, to the fact that, as Rowe affirms, ‘Rulfo was one of the first writers in Latin America to thoroughly break up traditional narrative structures’.\(^10\) This reflects Rulfo’s own views on his writing, expressed in an interview with Fernando Benítez:

quería leer algo diferente, algo que no estaba escrito y no lo encontraba. Desde luego no es porque no exista una inmensa literatura, sino porque para mí sólo existía esa obra inexistente y pensé que tal vez la única forma de leerla era que yo mismo la escribiera.\(^11\)

Rulfo’s writing, as a necessary response to a gap, is thus seen by the author himself as a break from existent literature. Yet this is not to say that it is completely divorced from cultural forms that precede it; or that, as Manuel Durán suggests, twentieth-century Mexican literature should be divided into two great phases, ‘Antes de Juan Rulfo y Después de Juan Rulfo’.\(^12\) My contention is that Rulfo’s innovation consists in his construction of a site in which residual forms are refashioned through emergent forms; in which inherited narrative forms are broken up, collected, and combined in an active process of transculturation; in which tradition is renewed in the ruins of residual narrative forms.

On one level, this fragmentation or ruination is symptomatic of certain processes of socio-political fragmentation that characterize Rulfo’s contemporary Mexico, a social situation that begs comparison with that discerned in the European context by Walter Benjamin. In his essay ‘The Storyteller’ (1937) Benjamin attributes the death of the traditional storyteller to the divorce of narrative from wisdom and orality. ‘The art of storytelling is reaching its end’, Benjamin explains, ‘because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out’, a death that constitutes ‘a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history, a concomitant that has quite gradually removed


narrative from the realm of living speech’. The modern writer who has displaced the storyteller is a ‘solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others’; an individual divorced from a living relation with a ‘community of listeners’ because, in Benjamin’s terms, ‘there is no more weaving and spinning to go on while they are being listened to’. Cut off not only from the past, but also from others and himself, the modern writer is unable to provide counsel. Whereas the traditional storyteller was a man of ‘practical interests’, whose stories were not just entertaining but also useful—like those of Gotthelf, ‘who gave his peasants agricultural advice’—the modern writer is helpless. The death of the storyteller is therefore a symptom of a triple break from tradition, religion, and authority, and the consequent decay of meaning and relations.

By bringing Rulfo’s literary works and Benjamin’s philosophical writings under a shared umbrella, we shall see how the death of the storyteller is not only implied and manifested in Rulfo’s stories, but also staged and dramatized. Yet, as I shall argue, the short-story form is not just a passive result, or symptom, of socio-historical circumstance; it is not only the product of processes of cultural fragmentation, or in some cases, transculturation. It is also a site that potentiates active processes of fragmentation, where fragmentation is seen not as a negative factor of social decay, but rather as a deliberate literary technique, which enables new meanings and relations to emerge in and from the ruins of traditional narrative. Rulfo’s own reflections on Pedro Páramo are highly suggestive in this context:

la intención fue [. . .] quitarle las explicaciones. Era un libro un poco didáctico, casi pedagógico: daba clases de moral y no sé cuántas cosas y todo eso tuve que eliminarlo porque no soy muy moralista y además . . . sí, fui dejando algunos hilos colgando para que el lector me . . . pues, cooperara con el autor en la lectura. Entonces, es un libro de cooperación.16

Rulfo’s purpose, then, is to break from systems of morality, rationality, and didacticism in order to leave space for what Cortázar terms the ‘lector cómplice’. The consequent fragmentation of narrative results less in a loss to be mourned than a gain to be celebrated: the democratization of the reading process through the elimination of a traditional storyteller, whose traces, in Benjamin’s terms, ‘cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling

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15 Ibid., p. 86.
to the clay vessel’. In his interview with Benítez, this process of authorial elimination is linked explicitly by Rulfo to the discipline of writing short stories: ‘Pedro Páramo es un ejercicio de eliminación. [. . .] La práctica del cuento me disciplinó, me hizo ver la necesidad de que el autor desapareciera y dejara a sus personajes hablar libremente.’ In other words, narrative fragmentation is not an inherited aspect of existent, residual oral forms, as Rama and Mignolo suggest; rather it is something artificial, inextricable from the labour of writing. As suggested by the terms ‘exercise’, ‘practice’, and ‘discipline’, it is an inherently technical process. By exploring the particular form of the short story that underpins Rulfo’s aesthetic innovation, my reading will seek to offer a response to Jorge Ruffinelli’s insistence that con excepción de ‘Luvina’ (un cuento de atmósfera enarhecida, semi fantástica, perfecto umbral al mundo fantasmagórico de Pedro Páramo), el estilo de Rulfo en los cuentos no parecía anunciar las originalísimas maneras de narrar de su novela, la sofisticación y la maestría que ella demostró.

On the contrary, we shall see how the logic of formal fragmentation that underpins the stories of El llano en llamas lays the ground for the narrative sophistication of Pedro Páramo.

I shall begin, then, by exploring the remnants, residues, and shadows of the Benjaminian storyteller that persist in Rulfo’s short stories. The aim is to examine the ways in which the stories stage the storyteller’s dissolution, decay, or death, which results from a dual process of fragmentation: that of communication and community. In this vein, I shall seek to shed some light on the ways in which the fragmentation of narrative inherent in the short-story form relates to the particular historical, social, and political context of Rulfo’s Mexico, namely the advent of a modern, urban, capitalist state, and the consequent rupture of traditional communities and relations.

The decay of a rural community constitutes the historical backdrop against which ‘Luvina’ is staged. This story is narrated by a schoolteacher, who has returned from Luvina having failed in his didactic project, the vain attempt to transmit the messages of the modern state to the villagers. This might be read, as Rowe points out, as a critique of post-revolutionary desarrollismo, and more specifically as a pointed reference to the policy of rural education adopted by José Vasconcelos, Minister of Education from 1921 to 1924. Faced, as Rosario Encinas explains, with ‘an eighty per cent illiteracy rate, an acute shortage of schools and schoolteachers in the state education system, as well as a very inadequate capacity for teacher training’, Vasconcelos

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19 Benítez, ‘Conversaciones con Juan Rulfo’, p. 15.
20 Jorge Ruffinelli, ‘La leyenda de Rulfo: cómo se construye el escritor desde el momento en que deja de serlo’, in Rulfo, TO, pp. 447–70 (p. 449).
inaugurated a dramatic campaign, in which he cast himself in the role of ‘redeeming messiah’ and teachers as ‘the bearers of the revolutionary messianic message’. The figure of the teacher as missionary can indeed be located in the narrator of Rulfo’s ‘Luvina’, whose participation in the project of redemption through education is arguably the ‘experiment’ to which he refers in the following passage:

En esa época tenía yo mis fuerzas. Estaba cargado de ideas . . . Usted sabe que a todos nosotros nos infunden ideas. Y uno va con esa plasta encima para plasmarla en todas partes. Pero en Luvina no cuajó eso. Hice el experimento y se deshizo . . .

The teacher is left defeated by the peasants, whose entrenchment in traditional values leads them to react with indifference to the grand ideas of the modern state. The villagers’ rejection of the government, on the basis that ‘no tenía madre’ (a reference to the filial ties of their feudal order), is finally vindicated by the narrator. The admission that ‘tienen razón’ (p. 119) constitutes a resigned acceptance of the gulf between Mexico’s traditional social structures and the state system that came to occupy their place. Feudal power, passed down paternal and maternal lines, is replaced by the fragmented power of the state, represented here by the lone, withered teacher: ‘Allá dejé la vida . . . Fui a ese lugar con mis ilusiones cabales y volví viejo y acabado’ (p. 115). The bathetic juxtaposition of ideals and reality renders ridiculous Vasconcelos’s redemptive project. Finally, all that remains for the teacher to transmit is his own downfall, which reflects that of Luvina:

un lugar moribundo donde se han muerto hasta los perros y ya no hay quien le ladre al silencio; pues en cuanto uno se acostumbra al vendaval que allí sopla, no se oye sino el silencio que hay en todas las soledades. Y eso acaba con uno. Míreme a mí. Conmigo acabó. (p. 120)

Instead of counsel for his interlocutor (his successor, the next ‘generation’ of state teachers), all the maestro has to offer is the proclamation of solitude and helplessness. By pluralizing ‘solitudes’, Rulfo points to the connection between the isolation of individuals as solitary beings and the sickness of tradition. The rural community in the throes of death, whose silence is interrupted only by the roaring wind, symbolizes the vacuity of the didactic project.

In ‘Es que somos muy pobres’, the triple break from tradition, authority, and religion is enacted not at the level of the community, but rather at that of the family unit, whose breakdown is caused by the daughters’ prostitution:

Mi mamá no sabe por qué Dios le ha castigado tanto al darle unas hijas de ese

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23 Juan Rulfo, El llano en llamas (Madrid: Cátedra, 1985; repr. 2008), p. 115. Hereafter, all references to this edition will be made within the body of the text.
modo, cuando en su familia, desde su abuela para acá, nunca ha habido gente mala. Todos fueron criados en el temor de Dios y eran muy obedientes y no le cometían irreverencias a nadie. Todos fueron por el estilo. Quién sabe de dónde les vendría a ese par de hijas suyas aquel mal ejemplo. Ella no se acuerda. (p. 55)

The girls’ severance from a family tradition of god-fearing obedience and goodness leads to incomprehension, isolation, and alienation. Rowe points out the significance of the mother’s failure to explain her daughters’ ill behaviour in terms of inheritance: ‘the failure of the parents’ explanations is the inadequacy of authority and tradition, i.e. of culture, to supply a language which can contain what is occurring’.24 That is to say, the mother’s amnesia is a manifestation of the tears in the fabric of tradition, the web of past experience, that lead to an inability to make sense of present experience. Moreover, the girls’ rebellion from their Christian upbringing is such that Christian beliefs, displayed in the narrator’s constant references to sin, evil, and punishment, are incapable of providing explanation or comfort. Their prostitution—the ultimate manifestation of the more general Marxist paradigm of the prostitution of the labourer—indicates the replacement of a rural social order, based on human relations, by a new capitalist order dictated by monetary relations. Yet this process of social disintegration is not always presented by Rulfo as a mere symptom of capitalism, modernization, and progress. In other stories it is regarded as the result of a deliberate project: the exclusion of an entire community from the dominant cultural process, the post-revolutionary nationalist project. As Monsiváis says in relation to Pedro Páramo, Mexico is a country in which ‘marginalidad y amnesia han sido tácticas indispensables en la estrategia de la modernización y el crecimiento capitalista’.25 Incommunication and alienation in Rulfo’s world, then, are not simply a symptom of historical circumstances as Benjamin explains them in ‘The Storyteller’, but also an active method of control and containment. This is evident in the theme and language of ‘El día del derrumbe’, in which the state official, under the guise of providing support for a rural community in the aftermath of a devastating earthquake, addresses the villagers thus:

Conciudadanos —dijo—. Rememorando mi trayectoria, vivificando el único proceder de mis promesas. Ante esta tierra que visité como anónimo compañero de un candidato a la Presidencia, cooperador omnímodo de un hombre representativo, cuya honradez no ha estado nunca desligada del contexto de sus manifestaciones políticas y que sí, en cambio, es firme glosa de principios democráticos en el supremo vínculo de unión con el pueblo, aunando a la austeridad de que ha dado muestras la síntesis evidente de idealismo revolucionario nunca hasta ahora pleno de realizaciones y de certidumbre. (p. 146)

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His speech constitutes an accumulation of rhetorical structures that add up to nothing but a shimmering surface of signifiers. Grammatical structures lead nowhere; obscure, formal, bureaucratic terms fall into meaninglessness; contradictions are left unresolved. The speech is also ridden with irony: while he talks about togetherness, community, and unity, he severs himself from the villagers through his inflated, and self-inflating, rhetoric. Rather than providing a communicative bridge, the delegate thus erects a barrier that serves to exclude, marginalize, and subjugate. Wearing his ‘bureaucratic mask’, as Rowe calls it in his analysis of ‘Nos han dado la tierra’, he creates an alienating persona that controls the community through sheer incommunicability.

In a sense, the delegate’s vacuous words and excessive gestures turn him into a caricature of the traditional storyteller. As he is about to give his speech, the governor’s movements are described thus: ‘se fue enderezando, despacio, muy despacio, hasta que lo vimos echar la silla hacia atrás con el pie; poner sus manos en la mesa; agachar la cabeza como si fuera a agarrar vuelo’ (p. 146). The inflation of his bird-like gestures serves to satirize state rhetoric, which is exaggerated to the point of deflation: ‘este lugar [...] antaño feliz, hogar enlutecido, me duele. Sí, convidados, me laceran las heridas de los vivos [...] me duele vuestra desgracia [...] ¡me duele!, con el dolor que produce ver derruido el árbol en su primera inflorescencia’ (pp. 146–47). His grotesque attempt to feign empathetic suffering through the hyperbolic repetition of ‘dolor’ is self-defeating, divesting his words of any solemnity or significance. By caricaturing the figure of the storyteller, Rulfo theatricalizes the severance of community ties that results from the deliberate evacuation of communicative content.

Rulfo’s short story, however, is not just a passive product of the death of the storyteller and the correlative dissolution of communicative content and meaning. It is also a purposeful severance from such an authority, a means of foregrounding form by changing the focus from message to medium. As we shall go on to see, Rulfo’s short-story form is erected as a ghostly void that must be fleshed out, both by the characters or settings (that gain a life force of their own) and by the reader (who co-operates in their revival). Content, in this sense, is dependent not on the past, but rather on the future. This reading will be underpinned by Raymond Williams’s theory of the emergent: ‘what matters, finally, in understanding emergent culture, as distinct from both the dominant and the residual, is that it is never only a matter of immediate practice; indeed it depends crucially on finding new forms or adaptations of form’.

Because emergent cultures are in a gradual process of articulation and formation, form precedes meaning. Since Rulfo’s literary work, as he himself
claims, is an attempt to fill a gap, to find a language that has yet to be fully developed, his texts must be forged not as narratives that transmit pre-existing meaning, but rather as sites, containers, or vessels that might hold new meaning(s). The attempt to find a form of expression for that which still evades understanding is linked to the following notion articulated by Williams:

if the social is always past, in the sense that it is always formed, we have [. . .] to find other terms for the undeniable experience of the present: not only the temporal present, the realization of this and this instant, but the specificity of present being, the inalienably physical, within which we may indeed discern and acknowledge institutions, formations, positions, but not always as fixed products, defining products. And then if the social is the fixed and explicit—the known relationships, institutions, formations, positions—all that is present and moving, all that escapes or seems to escape from the fixed and the explicit and the known, is grasped and defined as the personal: this, her, now, alive, active, 'subjective'.

The form of the short story is arguably forged by Rulfo as an aesthetic space, a container for the inalienably physical, the undeniably present, the ungraspably mobile; for what Cortázar in his 1962 lecture ‘Algunos aspectos del cuento’ conjures up through the evocative images of ‘un temblor de agua dentro de un cristal, una fugacidad en una permanencia’. In what follows we shall see how the narrative-as-container becomes the dialectical underside of the narrative-as-ruin—which are both in turn the decadent remains of the storyteller, of narrative-as-content. In each example I shall begin by exploring the ways in which the narrative container is figured metatextually by characters and settings, bodies and buildings; figures whose gaps, cracks, and openings leave room for invasion, intrusion, and infection, or, seen more positively, escape, reconstruction, and imagination. I shall then examine the different literary techniques that are employed to produce these texts-as-containers. These techniques are inextricable from the spatio-temporal constraint of the short story, which is highlighted by Rulfo in his essay ‘El desafío de la creación’ (1986):

Para mí el cuento es un género realmente más importante que la novela, porque hay que sintetizar, hay que frenarse; en eso el cuentista se parece un poco al poeta, al buen poeta. El poeta tiene que ir frenando al caballo y no desbocarse; si se desboca y escribe por escribir, le salen palabras una tras otra y, entonces, simplemente fracasa. Lo esencial es precisamente contenerse, no desbocarse, no vaciarse; el cuento tiene esa particularidad; yo precisamente prefiero el cuento, sobre todo, a la novela, porque la novela se presta mucho a esas divagaciones.

For Rulfo, therefore, the short story is closer to poetry than to the novel; in fact its aesthetics of containment constitutes precisely a reaction against

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28 Ibid., p. 129.
30 Rulfo, *TO*, p. 385.
the novelistic tradition of ‘divagaciones’, and thus a modern reformation of literary genre rather than a return to oral, traditional forms. In this respect, Rulfo aligns himself with the theories of other short-story writers. In ‘El arte narrativo y la magia’ (1932) Jorge Luis Borges analyses the narratives of William Morris and Edgar Allan Poe, and implicitly forges an ars poetica for his own art of brevity, through a dictum by a master of poetry: “Nombrar un objeto”, dicen que dijo Mallarmé, “es suprimir las tres cuartas partes del goce del poema, que reside en la felicidad de ir adivinando; el sueño es sugerirlo”. In this way, Hemingway’s tip of the iceberg technique is brought side by side with Mallarmé’s (and Baudelaire’s) notion of suggestion. Similarly, Cortázar in ‘Algunos aspectos’ describes the modern short story as ‘secreto y replegado en sí mismo, caracol del lenguaje, hermano misterioso de la poesía en otra dimensión del tiempo literario’. Whether that of Franz Kafka, Catherine Mansfield, or Horacio Quiroga, the short story as analysed by Cortázar shares with poetry its secrecy and hermeticism, its withdrawal and retreat. Taking these notions as a point of departure, I shall argue that the power of Rulfo’s short-story form derives from its interplay between narrative suspension and poetic suggestion; that its uncontainable force is paradoxically potentiated by its strict containment.

At this point, a link must be drawn between this aesthetics of fragmentation and that of transculturation. In Rama’s analysis of the latter, he delineates the cosmopolitan narrative, or narrative of ‘cosmovisión’, which might be defined as a narrative that opens one culture up to another. Cosmo-narratives, according to Rama, were ushered in by an avant-garde that challenged ‘el discurso lógico-racional que venía manejando la literatura a consecuencia de sus orígenes burgueses en el xix’, a discourse represented most firmly by the genre of the novel. These are illustrated in his account, first, by ‘la narrativa fantástica, que aprovechó su permeabilidad a la pluralidad de significados gracias a su construcción abierta y a las corrientes subterráneas, inconscientes, que mueven su escritura’, and second, by ‘la que Jorge Rivera [con referencia a la nueva novela argentina de los años 40] ha preferido llamar de la ambigüedad’. As prime examples of these two subversive trends, Rama significantly cites two eminent short-story writers: Julio Cortázar and Juan Carlos Onetti, respectively. Rulfo’s work will be read in this line of transculturators who challenge logical, rational discourses through open, ambiguous narrative constructions.

In ‘Es que somos’ the severance from traditional structures is embodied by the character Tacha, who has lost her cow—her dowry—in a flood.  

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32 Cortázar, La casilla de los Morelli, p. 135.
33 Rama, Transculturación narrativa, p. 48.
34 Ibid., pp. 52–53.
consequent ‘falta de su vaca’ (p. 55) has, in the narrator’s view, deprived her of her substance: ‘se quedó sin nada’ (p. 54). She is left with nothing in the sense that she has lost her sole means of entering into the social institution of marriage. Her social ruination is underlined by the lyrical connection with a flooded building:

estaba metiéndose a toda prisa en la casa de esa mujer que le dicen la Tambora. El chapaleo del agua se oía al entrar por el corral y al salir en grandes chorros por la puerta. La Tambora iba y venía caminando por lo que era ya un pedazo de río, echando a la calle sus gallinas para que se fueran a esconder a algún lugar donde no les llegara la corriente. (p. 53)

Like the house, in which the normal content (the hens) are thrown out, and replaced by the intruding river, Tacha has been emptied out, left void, a mere vessel. The intrusion of the flowing (piece of) river into la Tambora’s house, through two openings—that of the courtyard, and that of the door—becomes a negative metaphor for sexual penetration and rape, ominously foreshadowing Tacha’s possible fall into prostitution. But it also foreshadows the possibility of release and liberation. Indeed, later, the overflowing river banks become a synecdoche for her overflowing emotions: ‘de su boca sale un ruido semejante al que se arrastra por las orillas del río, que la hace temblar y sacudirse todita, y, mientras, la creciente sigue subiendo’ (p. 56). Uncontained and uncontrolled, her trembling body is depicted here not as a feeble, vulnerable structure (like la Tambora’s house) but rather as a site of power. Her mouth, an inlet for invasion, is also an outlet for a different language, a throbbing cry that, like the alien noise of the current, eludes human language. The overwhelming force of the flooding river is highlighted elsewhere:

Allí nos estuvimos horas y horas sin cansarnos viendo la cosa aquella. Después nos subimos por la barranca, porque queríamos oír bien lo que decía la gente, pues abajo, junto al río, hay un gran ruidazal y sólo se ven las bocas de muchos que se abren y se cierran y como que quieren decir algo; pero no se oye nada. (p. 53)

The narrator’s impression is that the villagers’ mouths have been invaded by the sound of the river, that language has been replaced by an irrational sound, an unfathomable otherness, and an inalienably physical force, which does not mean anything but simply is, a force which becomes synonymous with Tacha’s emotions, her suffering and her grief, her desire and her freedom. As underlined by the dual imagery that connects her body both to the invaded house and the invading river, Tacha is an uncontained container, a paradoxical figure who might be read as an incarnation of the fragmentary artwork. On the one hand, it is a residual form, a remnant of a past order, that demands to be completed and filled; it is thus as a kind of container that can be invaded by the thoughts or emotions of any reader. On the other hand, it
is an emergent form, which has yet to acquire fixed contours, and thus always evades the grasp of any particular viewing or reading; it is an uncontainable fount of thought and emotion. In brief, it is not merely a symptom of the rupture of past relations, or relations with the past, as Benjamin suggests, but also foregrounds the formation of new relations, based on the experience of the present, and the presence of experience.

Some crucial questions, however, remain to be answered: how does Rulfo’s story communicate to the reader? How does it preserve the otherness of present experience without assimilating it into narrative? How is the effect of presentness achieved when authorial presence is erased? The clue arguably lies in the narrator’s description of the river as ‘la cosa aquella’, suggesting an inability to comprehend the event of the flood. As Rowe points out:

The child’s inability to rationalize, a feature in greater or lesser degree of all the characters, comes out in the way he uses language. The river has taken his aunt’s tamarind tree away ‘porque ahora ya no se ve ningún tamarindo’. He does not understand what is happening—and thus begin to come to terms with it—as a sequence of cause and effect: there is simply the raw fact of the tree’s not being there.35

Similarly, by describing the river simply as ‘la cosa aquella’, the narrator presents the flood as an isolated, unexplained occurrence, unassimilated and unassimilable into pre-existing rational structures. Rulfo’s text thus preserves the materiality—the thingness—of the present experience, but also its strangeness, as the flood becomes an event shrouded in mystery. The narrator’s inability to understand, explain, and rationalize, then, allows otherness to remain as otherness, preventing the absorption of the unexplained into the explained, the folding of the strange back into the normal.

The filtering of the story through the narrator’s present experience, though, has an effect not only of estrangement, but also of narrative openness. Because the story is recounted in mediis rebus, restricted to a moment in which the action is still unfolding, the outcome of the flood is still uncertain: ‘La única esperanza que nos queda es que el becerro esté todavía vivo. Ojalá no se le haya ocurrido pasar el río detrás de su madre. Porque si así fue, mi hermana Tacha está tantito así de retirado de hacerse piruja. Y mamá no quiere’ (p. 87). In this paragraph dominated by the subjunctive and the conditional, every sentence exudes provisionality, a temporality that contains two uncontained forces: a shred of hope (the ‘only’ hope that the calf might still be alive) and a glimpse of desire (albeit the mother’s negative desire that she should not become a whore). As Henri Bergson asserts:

Time is what prevents everything from being given all at once. It retards, or rather, it is retardation. It must, therefore, be elaboration. Would it not then be a

vehicle of creation and choice? Would not the existence of time prove that there is indetermination in things? Would time not be indetermination itself? The narrative’s entrenchment in a restricted time-frame is therefore a paradoxically liberating one, as temporal enclosure results in indeterminacy. Like Tacha’s mouth, the subjunctive mood constitutes an opening that renders the text inexhaustible. It is the same delay that allows Tacha to exceed the frame imposed by the narrator’s gaze: ‘crece y crece y ya tiene unos comienzos de senos que prometen ser como los de sus hermanas: puntiagudas y altos y medio alborotados para llamar la atención’ (pp. 55–56). Her uncontrollable, unpredictable growth exceeds any complete knowledge. In other words, the temporality of the passage is such that the narrative transcends its content: its hyperbolic use of the present tense, emphasized by the childlike repetition in ‘crece y crece’, creates an effect of phenomenological presentness; its future tense has an effect of narrative promise, of uncontainable potential. We might in this context draw attention to Williams’s assertion, in his examination of emergent forms, that ‘perhaps the dead can be reduced to fixed forms, though their surviving records are against it. But the living will not be reduced, at least in the first person; living third persons may be different.’ The triumph of presence and presentness in the text certainly prevents Tacha from being reduced to a fixed form. Yet it is precisely as the third person that Tacha resists reduction, as the restricted perspective of the first-person narration endows her with both inalienable presence and unstoppable futurity.

In Rulfo’s literary world, though, it is not just the living but also the dead that exceed reduction to fixed forms, as I shall go on to argue by looking at the corpse in ‘Talpa’ and, later, the ghosts in ‘Luvina’, two other metatextual figurations of the Rulfian fragment. In ‘Talpa’, the corpse is in an ongoing process of transformation:

Quizá hasta empecemos a tenernos miedo uno al otro. Esa cosa de no decirnos nada desde que salimos de Talpa tal vez quiera decir eso. Tal vez los dos tenemos muy cerca el cuerpo de Tanilo, tendido en el petate enrollado; lleno por dentro y por fuera de un hervidero de moscas azules que zumbaban como si fuera un gran ronquido que saliera de la boca de él; de aquella boca que no pudo cerrarse a pesar de los esfuerzos de Natalia y míos, y que parecía querer respirar todavía sin encontrar resuello. De aquel Tanilo a quien ya nada le dolía, pero que estaba como adolorido, con las manos y los pies engarra-
ñados y los ojos muy abiertos como mirando su propia muerte. Y por aquí y por allá to-
das sus llagas goteando un agua amarilla, llena de aquel olor que se derramaba por todos lados y se sentía en la boca, como si se estuviera saboreando una miel espesa y amarga que se derretía en la sangre de uno a cada bocanada de aire. (p. 81, emphasis added)

Tanilo’s corpse defies death, maintaining a life-force that it expresses through

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37 Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p. 129.
its different openings, whether the mouth and eyes that refuse to close, or the wounds that continue to ooze with pus. Tanilo’s open mouth—the mouth through which he communicated, albeit with ‘una voz apenitas’, in his final days (p. 75)—seems to carry on speaking through the buzzing flies, a kind of posthumous groan that exceeds ordinary language. Just as Tacha’s body communicates through overflowing tears and quivering limbs that seem to gain almost autonomous power, Tanilo’s corpse speaks through its otherness, through buzzing flies and oozing wounds. A different type of communication is foregrounded here: that of a presentness or physicality of experience that exceeds understanding and therefore narrativization.

This gains significance in the context of the complete breakdown of communication between the adulterous couple since Tanilo’s death, which—though it might be explained externally by their rupture from traditional morality or by the shock of his death—is presented internally as a strange, alien experience: ‘esa cosa de no decirnos nada’. Yet the thingness of the experience of fragmentation is precisely that which gives way to new relations between the characters, the corpse, and the reader. It is through the fragmented, sensory effects of smell, taste, and sound that Rulfo creates new lyrical connections. The corpse is presented, or rather made present, to the reader less through story—through a rationalizing, causal narrative—than through lyrical effects, which connect the smell of the open wounds to a taste in the mouth of the characters, and perhaps the readers. The poetic technique, here, is akin to Baudelairian correspondances, whose principal device is synaesthesia. As Hassan puts it in his article on Baudelaire, ‘a synaesthetic image reflects a certain totality uninhibited by logical classifications. It puts the reader in contact with a forceful sensory presence, a primitive wholeness or synthesis of impression.’ Indeed, Rulfo’s synaesthetic narrative, by producing unexpected connections between the senses, offers a different type of relation that might be seen as a solution to the state of incommunicability and fragmentation discerned by Benjamin: it communicates not in spite of a rupture from wisdom, knowledge, logic, and rationality, but thanks to that; it achieves synthesis through fragmentation.

Rulfo’s originality, however, arguably lies in his artful combination of the lyrical techniques of suggestion and correspondances with narrative constructions of ambiguity and openness, which together serve to invoke what Rulfo calls ‘co-operation’. Like most of Rulfo’s narratives, ‘Talpa’ is seemingly self-enclosed and end-oriented: at the start, the narrator asserts that ‘ahora todo ha pasado’ (p. 75); the narrative is framed by the verse-like sentence ‘lo llevamos a Talpa [allí the second time] para que se muriera’ (pp. 73, 80). Yet it soon emerges that the narrative is riddled with openings

and indeterminacies: ‘ahora Natalia llora por él, tal vez para que él vea, desde donde está, todo el gran remordimiento que lleva encima de su alma’ (p. 75); ‘tal vez de eso [llevar a Tanilo sobre los hombros] estábamos [. . .] con el cuerpo flojo y lleno de flojera para caminar’ (p. 78); ‘tal vez al ver las danzas [Tanilo] se acordó de cuando iba todos los años a Tolimán, en el novenario de Señor, y bailaba la noche entera hasta que sus huesos se aflojaban’ (p. 79: emphasis added in all of these quotations). These are but a few illustrations of the way in which the narrator’s limited perspective produces an effect of narrative openness: since he is unable to comprehend the thoughts, feelings, and memories of other characters, he is reduced to conjecture. Every ‘tal vez’ leads the reader to question the causes or purposes of certain emotional and physical manifestations, whether Natalia’s tears, the couple’s weakness, or Tanilo’s dance; every ‘quizás’ produces a crack in the narrative through which another reality can be glimpsed, but only ever partially.

Indeterminacy comes to a head in the final section, which functions as a supplement to the story of Tanilo’s fatal pilgrimage, destabilizing any finality through presentness and futurity:

Ahora [. . .] yo comienzo a sentir como si no hubiéramos llegado a ninguna parte, que estamos aqui de paso, para descansar, y que luego seguiremos caminando. No sé para dónde; pero tendremos que seguir, porque aquí estamos muy cerca del remordimiento y del recuerdo de Tanilo. (p. 80)

Highlighted by the emphatic ‘ahora’, the blinkered vision of the narrator, restricted to the present, creates an opening in the narrative. The seemingly predetermined story is thus ultimately revealed to be indeterminate and incomplete. At the end of the single path of the pilgrimage that leads Tanilo to his predetermined death lies a Borgesian garden of forking paths, which opens the fate of the remaining two characters onto an uncertain future.

It is not just (living or dead) bodies, though, that embody the structural dialectic of containment and uncontainability in and of Rulfo’s narratives, but also the settings. In the passage that opens ‘El día del derrumbe’ the trope of the ruin becomes a metaphor for the dialogic narrative from which it emerges:

—Esto pasó en septiembre. No en el septiembre de este año sino en el del año pasado. ¿O fue el antepasado, Melitón?
—No, fue el pasado.
—Sí, sí yo me acordaba bien. Fue en septiembre del año pasado, por el día veintiuno. Óyeme, Melitón, ¿no fue el veintiuno de septiembre el mero día del temblor?
—Fue un poco antes. Tengo entendido que fue por el dieciocho.
—Tienes razón. Yo por esos días andaba en Tuxcacuesco. [. . .] La gente salía de los escombros toda aterrorizada corriendo derecho a la iglesia dando de gritos. Pero espérense. Oye, Melitón, se me hace como que en Tuxcacuesco no existe ninguna iglesia. ¿Tú no te acuerdas?
—No la hay. Allí no quedan más que unas paredes cuarteadas que dicen fue la
Whereas the title leads the reader to expect the description of an earthquake on a particular date, he or she is instead presented with a series of disorienting questions: was the earthquake this September or last September, was it 21 September or a few days before, was it in Tuxcacuesco or in El Pochote? Any fixed reference points are eroded, leading to the replacement of substance and content with dialogue and invention. At the centre of the story, then, lies a hole, a gap in knowledge, which is filled only by the dialogic narrative. The storyness of history is laid bare, here, as the past is subjected to personal feelings, active creations, and subjective views.

The narrative-filled historical void is figured in the image of the ruined church, a shell-like structure that has lost any fixed function or meaning, and has become a site of discontinuity, polyvalence, and fluidity: it is reimagined as an abandoned farmyard, plagued not by a congregation, but by fig trees. As can be seen in the dialogic narrative, time and oblivion have led to metamorphosis and renewal; the ruins of history and memory have been filled by illusions and imaginings. The church thus functions as a spatial figuration of the temporality of the story, whose centre, like the epicentre of an earthquake, opens up deep, destabilizing cracks in the surrounding narrative ground. Significantly, at the centre of the village lies another slippery structure, the symbolic statue of Juárez, which is also subject to oblivion, dislocation, and metamorphosis:

[El gobernador] habló de Juárez, que nosotros teníamos levantado en la plaza y hasta entonces supimos que era la estatua de Juárez, pues nunca nadie nos había podido decir quién era el individuo que estaba encaramado en el monumento aquel. Siempre creíamos que podía ser Hidalgo o Morelos o Venustiano Carranza, porque en cada aniversario de cualquiera de ellos, allí les hacíamos su función. (p. 144)

History is decidedly demonumentalized, as Juárez’s statue loses its fixity and solidity, dissolving into a fragile and malleable structure. Severed from its specific referent, it is transformed into a series of different historical figures. The emptying out of historical reference, then, leads to infinite possible substitution and supplementation, as suggested by the repetition of the conjunction ‘o’. Detached from any historical knowledge that would provide temporal continuity, the village community is left with a hole in the weft of tradition that it fills with plural inventions. Like the church, then, the statue might be regarded as a metaphor for the short story itself, which offers not a closed narrative strand, but rather a site in which multiple threads, severed from a single voice of authority (a storyteller), are free to interlace and converge.
The trope of the text-as-ruin recurs in the central setting of ‘Luvina’, the hollow, decrepit church:

Era un jacalón vacío, sin puertas, nada más con unos socavones abiertos y un techo resquebrajado por donde se colocaba el aire como por un cedazo. [. . .] Aquella noche nos acomodamos para dormir en un rincón de la iglesia, detrás del altar desmantelado. Hasta allí llegaba el viento, aunque un poco menos fuerte. Lo estuvimos oyendo pasar por encima de nosotros, con sus largos aullidos; lo estuvimos oyendo entrar y salir por los huecos socavones de las puertas; golpeando con sus manos de aire las cruces del viacrucis: unas cruces grandes y duras hechas con palo de mezquite que colgaban de las paredes a todo lo largo de la iglesia, amarradas con alambres que rechinaban a cada sacudida del viento como si fuera un rechinar de dientes. (p. 116, emphasis added)

Like Tacha’s body and la Tambora’s house, Tanilo’s corpse and Tuxcacuesco’s remains, the hollow shell of Luvina’s ruined church, with its holes and openings, is an uncontained container; a space for invasion, this time by the howling wind. The physical, spiritual void at the core of the church—represented by the dismantled altar, the spatial and symbolic centre of the Christian ceremony—is a metaphor for the psychological emptiness of the teacher, narrator, and storyteller (examined above). Yet the ruin, again, is a site to be filled. As the ‘symbolic centre of the story’, Rowe argues, the church is the space in which ‘the various threads of symbolism are brought together’. Rowe’s contention is that the dishevelled Christian building is occupied textually by indigenous Mexican symbolism. The wind as Christian symbol of the Holy Spirit is displaced by the Indian mythology of Quetzalcoatl as god of wind: anthropomorphosized, it howls in a human voice and shakes the crosses with its hands. The plural, pluralizing power of the wind is arguably a prime example of what Rama calls the ‘force’ of transculturation: ‘se trata de una fuerza que actúe con desenvoltura tanto sobre su herencia particular, según las situaciones propias de su desarrollo, como sobre las aportaciones provenientes de fuera’ (p. 34). The wind’s insinuating entrances and exits, threatening howls and violent knocks indicate precisely such ‘desenvoltura’.

Moreover, the church itself is reminiscent of a skull, with its eye sockets (‘socavones abiertos’), grinding teeth (the crosses that ‘rechin[an]’), and death crown (‘corona de muerto’). As Rowe points out, it symbolizes the cult of the dead, the Mexican mythology that has survived the Christianization of Mexico by occupying Christian spaces, whether physical or symbolic:

Native beliefs and rituals related to death tend to survive precisely by adopting as an outer shell or protection the Christian symbols and practices which were supposed to replace them. This is the case with el día de los muertos, whose outer form is All Saints’ Day, but whose dominant image in Mexico is the skull.  

40 Ibid., p. 63.
The church is therefore not merely a negative figure of decay, death, and ruination, but also a figure of renewal, which is precisely that which is celebrated in Mexico on the Day of the Dead. More broadly still, it figures for the power of the fragmentary narrative itself, whose shell-like quality renders it infinitely open to infiltration or contamination by different readers, discourses, and systems; whose transculturative power lies in its poetic ability to connote, suggest, and symbolically unite different cultural practices and meanings.

As is becoming clear, the emergent form of the short story is not only the incidental product of transculturation (of the encounter between traditional and modern narrative structures), but also constitutes a site in which further processes of transculturation are set in motion. Yet these processes, crucially, are dependent on an active reader who might tie different narrative, symbolic, and cultural threads together; who, like the symbolic wind of ‘Luvina’, is able to insinuate himself through the narrative fissures. This co-operative reader is arguably represented in the same story by the internal viewers who are forced to look through the partially open, cracked door:

Allí tras las rendijas de esa puerta veo brillar los ojos que nos miran . . . Han estado asomándose para acá . . . Miralas. Veo las bolas brillantes de sus ojos . . . (pp. 116–17)
Me detuve en la puerta y las vi. Vi a todas las mujeres de Luvina con su cántaro al hombro, con el rebozo colgado de su cabeza y sus figuras negras sobre el negro fondo de la noche. (p. 118)

The meta-frame (the door frame within the narrative frame) restricts vision, barring characters and readers alike from the secret world of the ghostly women of Luvina, and ‘presenting’ them through a sensual play of light and shadow: the internal viewers glimpse them through the tiny reflections in their glimmering eyes, as black spectres only minimally differentiated from the black background. Rather than seeing these spectral remainders face on, clearly, completely, we glimpse them as if in a mirror, as shadows, in darkness. As fleeting reflections, moving shadows, and partially veiled figures, the ghosts of Luvina, like the corpse in ‘Talpa’, refuse to be reduced, in Williams’s terms, to fixed forms. The totality—‘all the women of Luvina’—viewed through the restrictive door frame functions as a mise en abyme of Rulfo’s metonymic artistic technique, which cuts narratives to the bare minimum in order to suggest, rather than to reveal, the totality; in order to produce a partial picture that only a co-operative reader can complete through imaginative participation.

Through these four examples, then, we have seen how traditional forms—whether narrative, cultural, or religious—are transculturated by Rulfo in two principal ways. Evacuated of any fixed substance that might be passed down from one generation to the next, they become a timeless container of infinite potential. Crumbled and fragmented, they are reduced to a pile of decontextualized debris that might be combined and constructed
anew. In a sense, the first logic parallels that of Kafka’s writing, as read by Benjamin in his essay ‘Max Brod’s Book on Franz Kafka’. As Rebecca Comay succinctly puts it, for Benjamin,

the eclipse of meaning by the material force of its presentation [in Kafka’s writing] defines, for Benjamin’s Kafka, at once the ‘sickness’ of tradition (the complete evacuation of any determinative content to be handed down) and, paradoxically, the latter’s supreme vindication (a transmission that occurs in the absence of anything to transmit and which indeed transmits essentially its very absence).

Certainly, Rulfo’s mausoleum-like short stories suggest a triumph of form and that of tradition as form rather than content. Like the symbolic church in Luvina, Rulfo’s texts uphold tradition as ruin, as a shell-like form, or formal shell, that can be filled by anything and anyone. As I have argued, this empty shell might be regarded as the remains of the traditional storyteller: the container that can be filled by any reader, but that simultaneously exceeds any given reading, is the liberating product of the decay of wisdom. This is suggested by Rulfo’s own comments in ‘El desafío de la creación’: ‘el trabajo es solitario, no se puede concebir el trabajo colectivo en la literatura, y la soledad lo lleva a uno a convertirse en una especie de médium de cosas que uno mismo desconoce’. As the collective aspect of storytelling gives way to the solitary process of literary creation, the storyteller is disembodied. Emptied of wisdom, the writer becomes a ghostly figure, a cipher, vessel, or ‘medium’ through which alien, unassimilated realities can emerge. Transmission of existing wisdom and knowledge (based on experience inherited from the past) has given way to the transmission of something that remains to be known: experience in and of the present. This chimes with Rulfo’s self-description, ‘por lo sombrío que soy creo que nací a medianoche’, but also with the impression he made on others. Elena Poniatowska, for example, describes him in the following terms: ‘Rulfo siempre tiene un aire de poseído, y a veces se percibe en él la modorra de los médiums, anda a diario como un sonámbulo.’

The death of the storyteller is thus dramatized in these vivid images of the short-story writer as spectral mediator, as shadowy medium who is able to ‘[dejar] a sus personajes hablar libremente’ (cited above).

These characterizations also resonate with Cortázar’s assertion, in ‘Algunos aspectos’: ‘En mi caso, la gran mayoría de mis cuentos fueron escritos—cómo decirlo—al margen de mi voluntad, por encima o por debajo de mi consciencia razonante, como si yo no fuera más que un médium por el

42 Rulfo, TO, p. 384.
44 Cited ibid.
cual pasaba y se manifestaba una fuerza ajena. Writing short stories, for him, is a form of exorcism that liberates him from his demons. Severed from their author, the stories become living creatures: ‘son criaturas vivientes, organismos completos, ciclos cerrados, y respiran’. As I have sought to demonstrate, it is not just Rulfo as author who constitutes a medium, but also his texts, characters, and settings which achieve autonomous life not as substantial entities, but as empty forms; as products of decay. This is figured in the stories themselves, whether in the breath that resurrects Tanilo’s corpse with an afterlife or the wind that animates Luvina’s ruins. These life-filled, breathing forms are the repositories that hold what Rulfo calls ‘cosas que uno mismo desconoce’, things that preserve their thingness and presentness, and thus exceed the author’s knowledge or comprehension. To that extent, Rulfo’s account of the challenge of creation might be supplemented: the challenge is not just for the author to become a facilitator, rather than an arbiter, of meaning; the greater challenge, to which Rulfo rises to an exceptional degree, is to craft a text that itself functions as a vessel, a channel through which characters might speak directly to the reader. Moreover, Cortázar’s account of the short story as ‘ciclo cerrado’ might be contested: as we have seen, it is not as complete, closed organisms, but rather as partial, open forms that Rulfo’s texts, characters, and settings gain a life of their own; it is the stories’ openness that allows them to be revived through the breath of new readers and readings.

Yet one could not say that Rulfo’s short stories are ‘completely evacuated of any determinative content to be handed down’ (Comay’s terms). As Benjamin says in relation to Kafka, even when ‘we can no longer speak of wisdom’, ‘the products of its decay remain’. This remainder is a crucial one in Rulfo’s writing. As we have seen in El llano en llamas, the logic of evacuation is inextricable from that of fragmentation: in Benjaminian terms, his short stories embrace and renew tradition in and through its ruins; in Williams’s terms, his artistic innovation elaborates emergent forms from the products of residual ones. The empty shells that abound in Rulfo’s stories are invariably filled with fragments—whether the flies in ‘Talpa’, Tacha’s cries in ‘Es que somos’, or the indigenous myths in ‘Luvina’—whose partial incommunicability gives them boundless power of suggestion. We might in this context return to the critical tradition that situates the fragmentariness of Rulfo’s writing in relation to a folding back into tradition, to argue that, far from a mimetic replication of oral narrative styles, his fiction constitutes the calculated product of a process of literary labour. The ‘yuxtaposicion de pedazos sueltos de una narración’ discerned by Rama must be seen as the result not of the calque of an oral style but also of the elaboration of an eminently

45 Cortázar, La casilla de los Morelli, p. 140.
46 Ibid., p. 113.
modern narrative technique. Rulfinian fragmentation, in this reading, is not a regressive reproduction of the non-causal logic of oral cultures, but rather an avant-garde resistance against the dominant novelistic genre through limited perspective narrative, temporal containment, and poetic suggestion. And it is precisely these modern literary techniques that allow Rulfo’s short stories to rescue and redeem residual cultural forms, whether oral forms, ancient indigenous traditions, or ghosts of rural communities.

Whereas Escalante insists that the time of Rulfo’s fiction is ‘el tiempo contrario al universo de la lectura’ (cited above), I must insist that, on the contrary, the time of Rulfo’s fiction is precisely the present time: the time of reading. Rulfo’s work can be seen as the literary quest to articulate what Williams calls ‘the undeniable experience of the present’; ‘the specificity of present being, the inalienably physical’; ‘all that is present and moving’ (cited above). As I have argued, presence, physicality, and movement in El llano en llamas are products of the process of reading, of the relation between the metonymic text and cooperative reader; an active process that reactualizes and redeems the narrative and cultural fragments of the past. Though it is true, as Escalante affirms, that the reader lacks proper cognitive structures through which to understand the worlds of Rulfo’s fictions, it is precisely this resistance of understanding that allows the fragments to survive as fragments. Rulfo’s stories do not, therefore, simply mourn the death of the storyteller. They also promise a rebirth. Formally—whether through poetic suggestion or narrative suspension—they are firmly future-oriented in spite of their apparent pastness.

Yet this is not to say that it is merely the triumph of formalism that is at stake in Rulfo’s art of fragmentation and evacuation; nor that Rulfo’s work as a transculturator has no further reach than an isolated literary challenge, the elaboration of a literary genre. On the contrary, a connection might be discerned between his aesthetic form and his ethical practice; between the fragmentary subconscious that lies behind El llano en llanos and that which is manifested in Rulfo’s work for the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI), from 1963 until his death in 1986. This is displayed, for example, in his report for the INI, published in 1962, where he comments on the continued presence of indigenous chinantecos in Oaxaca:

Los chinantecos han sobrevivido como grupo no sólo por su lengua, en la cual existen numerosas formas dialectales, sino por costumbres y tradiciones todavía vigentes. La región abunda en vestigios precortesianos: pectorales, orejeras y objetos de jade y oro, así como zonas arqueológicas casi inexploradas.48

As Rulfo suggests, the chinantecos have managed to survive through their language, customs, and traditions; that is to say, through different cultural forms. These forms, however, are inherently fragmented: just as their vestiges have

survived as remains, residual, pre-Cortés cultures have resisted the intrusion of emergent cultural forms thanks to their fragmentary quality, their ability to take on qualities imposed by the modern state while preserving elements of their traditional social structures. As Rulfo observes in relation to their political system, they are obliged to respect state and federal laws; but as well as Presidente Municipal, Alcalde, Síndicos, and Regidores, they have a Primer Mayor and a Segundo Mayor, ‘nombramientos que recaen siempre entre los “ancianos” o “principales” del pueblo’ (TO, p. 397). The same residual forms of government, based on inherited power rather than state power, are manifested in ‘Luvina’, particularly in the question posed by the villagers, cited above: ‘who is the government’s mother?’ More generally, though, Rulfo’s fiction rests on the power of form (whether that of language, custom, or tradition) to provide a scaffolding structure around which new systems can be perpetually erected.

In the above analysis I have offered some suggestions of the ways in which Rulfo’s status as a transculturator, as Sharman suggests, lies not so much in his withdrawal from modernity into traditional cultural structures, but rather derives from his ostensibly modernist technique of withdrawal—the withdrawal of author-ity and wisdom, content and substance, detail and explanation. Rulfo’s work, in this sense, calls for the expansion of Williams’s terms, since his short story is not only an emergent form but also a form of emergence: the temporality of the irretrievable past is always dialectically intertwined with the unpredictable future; the logic of the decaying remainder with the suspended supplement; the tone of irredeemable despair with unending hope. In other words, not only does the short story, as emergent aesthetico-cultural form, or adaptation of existing forms, constitute a cultural opening; but also, each fragmentary story of El llano in llamas produces different narrative, lyrical apertures that promise new meanings, forms, and relations. Its poetics of (un)containment render the short story a site of infinite potential in which unassimilated structures of experience, whether isolated events, physical sensations, or subjective presentness, are brought to the fore. Figured in the texts’ internal ruins, through which gales continue to blow, rivers to flow, and plants to invade, Rulfo’s short story foregrounds form as ruin which will continue to move in and through the present; in and through which the present will continue to move.