

From the Introduction to *Manuel Puig and the Spider Woman: His Life and Fictions*¹

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"This dream is short but this dream is happy" are the last, redemptive words uttered in *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*, Manuel Puig's most famous novel. This dream reached a vast audience as an Oscar-winning film and then as a Broadway musical hit, but its dreamer never saw the musical that opened in 1992 and won seven Tony awards—he died July 22, 1990, at the age of 57, in Cuernavaca, Mexico. The film was his "entrance into immortality."² Whether or not his name is remembered by the public, his prison romance under the stars of Hollywood nostalgia—in which William Hurt as a gay window dresser falls in love with Raul Julia, a Marxist journalist who looks like Che Guevara—still remains. The novel was Manuel Puig's most affirmative, most daring, and the only one with heroes: the Marxist, prejudiced by his politics or blind to their contradictions, learns that tolerance for the Other is essential for true political action, just as his gay cellmate is liberated by a selfless act.

Movies made from novels prolong their source's literary lives even as they reduce them to marketable images; to the surprise of both the author and the makers of the film, when it opened in September 1985 at the height of the Reagan era, it captivated not only gay but mainstream audiences. The conservative First Lady's rueful reaction after viewing it upon the passionate recommendation of White House aid Mike Deaver was perhaps the film's highest praise. Deaver recalled that he

did not attempt to describe the plot, knowing how distasteful it might sound... The homosexual has nothing in life he desires except to give and receive love with another human being. The radical couldn't care less for that kind of love; for him life is a cause... In the end, the radical discovers there is grace in giving of yourself—not necessarily in a physical way. And the homosexual finds that he is willing to take a risk for a cause... In the end, both die, the homosexual while trying to deliver a message for the

radical... They had a print delivered to Camp David and watched it one weekend. Nancy could not wait to see me that Monday morning. "Mike," she almost gasped, "how could you recommend that film? It was dreadful. We turned it off halfway through the reel." "Once you get past the subject," I said, "it was an incredible picture." She shuddered slightly. "How can you get past that?" she asked.³

Manuel's childhood, he always said, was rescued by his discovery of the movies: "I grew up in the pampas in a bad dream, or rather a bad western" was the fable he invented, hoping to wake up to find that real life was the daily matinee imported from Hollywood. On the flat silver screen the world became three-dimensional, peopled with glamorous men and women. Like many children, he was able to construct a safe and imaginary paradise, an idyll to which he would always return. More than simply loving the movies, he wanted to live in them; he would have liked to be a diva like Norma Shearer, but more than that, he wanted to be the character she played.

He would immerse himself in movie magazines,

anticipating the great moment of the next show. I even went so far as to cut out ads for the coming attractions in Buenos Aires. Even though we lived 12 hours by train from Buenos Aires we always received the newspaper a day late. I would organize them in piles and one day somebody who was mad at me messed them up! But at age 6 or 7 I would remember the order of the openings in Buenos Aires – what a futile use of memory, but it just shows what an outsider I felt.⁴

This apparently useless exercise of memory would serve the future novelist well; from life's harsh contrast with these engrossing fantasies, his first novel, *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth* (1968), would emerge. Manuel's childhood friends took for granted that he would have a career in music or movies: "I didn't choose literature... Literature chose me. I never fantasized about writing fiction. My only fantasy about writing was that in my old age, after directing many masterpieces, I would write my memoirs."⁵

He would not reach old age, but his first novel remains as a fictional chronicle of his childhood. More than a memory machine, writing turned out to be a way of life in which he was continually creating himself—in visions that would vanish like the image of Rita or Greta after the lights went on—as if he were one of his own fictions.

Are we fascinated with the lives of writers because we want to be writers? The writer's life seems ideal, free; he or she seems to have minimal material needs—and can travel, live anywhere—in order to work.

Manuel wanted to make music, then movies; then, as a failed screenwriter, he became a novelist. Like his own characters, he embraced a model idealized in Western culture, shaping his life around the myth of the Writer. The reader's biographical curiosity, then, is to find out the "truth" behind the fictions, compare the life lived and the life written, understand why the writer feels compelled to make life over in fiction, to "add another room to the house of life," as another Argentine storyteller, Adolfo Bioy Casares, once explained his writerly urge. Dylan Thomas was struck cold when a friend said to him: "If you didn't write those poems, nobody would know you." As Manuel Puig wrote in his penultimate novel, *Blood of Requited Love*, "Death is the worst thing because people forget you."

It was a hot summer day in November 1995 when I visited Manuel's home town in the pampa, General Villegas, seeking glimmers of him. My guide was a former schoolmate of Manuel's, a short energetic gray-haired woman named Hebe "Chiquita" Uriarte, a schoolteacher. Chiquita informed me, in a brisk, proud manner, that in 1925 the Prince of Wales made a special visit to the region's most impressive *estancia*, the Drabble ranch, in recognition of its contribution to the Empire. Before lunch, we strolled along dusty streets in the glaring midday sun, revisiting the three-block radius along which home, movie house, and school stood, consecrated sites that native Villegans easily recognized from Manuel's descriptions in *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth* (whose name they pronounce,

lovingly, as "Highword"). Lecturing me on local history, Chiquita explained that language, as well as cultural differences, kept the English isolated from town life on their rambling estates. Never integrating, by the time of the drought of 1927 most of their heirs had sold the ranches and left General Villegas for town houses in Buenos Aires or had migrated back to the old country.

To reach Villegas (there is no airport, and the trains are still slow and infrequent), I took an overnight split-level bus whose reclining cloth seats were surprisingly comfortable, if well-worn. For six hours the lumbering vehicle sped across infinite plains, and from my window all I could see in the moonlight was a landscape speckled with low shrubs, sparse hamlets and sporadic telephone poles. As the moon peeked in and out of the clouds, I nodded off, but an occasional jolt awakened me; groggily I glimpsed what beyond the fogged dusty window could be either land or sea—or was I dreaming a Dalí-scape? I had a sense of Manuel's claustrophobia—and that of those British ranchers who fled to bustling Buenos Aires or lush English countrysides.

The task of the biographer is tricky, to say the least. The danger is to testify only "to the long worldly corruption of a life, as documented deeds and days and disappointments pile up," John Updike recently observed: the ideal, to "convey the unearthly lunar innocence that attends, in the perpetual present of living, the self that seems the real one." Biography then must be fiction as well as fact—for how can the intensity, the passion, the "self that seems the real one" be resurrected without conjecture? Like a translation, a literary biography can be measured against (to paraphrase Borges) a visible original, can be measured with a cold eye against not one but at least two "visibles": the life itself (the reader wants facts) and the corpus. No biography, for example, can resurrect more vividly the world of Manuel Puig's childhood than *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth*, his own fictional autobiography. But by retracing his life, we may gain further insights into the person behind the mask of literature.

What made Manuel Puig a disarming figure in modern Latin American literature was that he was the continent's first literary pop novelist. The

distinction is no longer novel as we enter the millenium in a cultural environment that has obliterated the classical, but in the sixties he dared, almost out of innocence, to defy the innate elitism of the Argentine and Hispanic intelligentsia—both left and right political wings. He reinvented literature out of the nonliterary, living culture of his times. He understood how movies, soap operas, and popular songs seductively manipulate our hearts and minds, how the language of the melodramas on radio and in films programmed intellectuals and housemaids alike. Hence he would always combat stereotypes of how a writer, particularly a Latin American writer, should present himself on the world stage. But he would also complain of being misunderstood, of being pegged as non-literary. His narrative tricks were mostly inspired by popular genres, the movies, and a strong desire to make films, but in his youth he had read extensively and was drawn to a wide variety of styles, from the economy of Gide to the labyrinthine prose of Faulkner. He stopped reading (he explained only half in jest) because writing ruined it for him; he would read any written page—even by Proust!—always with pencil in hand. Old movies, on the other hand, were often perfectly constructed inventions—without need of revision—and he could simply sit back and enjoy. He began writing as a way of understanding how, in so many ways, we have been molded by the persuasive images on screen, and, in the process, his love for those glamorous old stars has perhaps deepened for his readers the pleasure of seeing movies.

He molded his fiction out of the makeshift, the devalued, and though, like many writers, he was always creating himself, that self was more a child of celluloid than a man of letters. He was the writer as playful mime. Whether channeling, in his novels, the voices of shopgirls or, in private display for his friends, the hip-thrusting of redheaded Rita Hayworth when the lights came up on *Gilda* or the mesmerizing facial expressions of Greta Garbo, the “Divine Woman,” Manuel was a performer, a magician who could resurrect the ephemeral.

Notes

1. Excerpts from Suzanne Jill Levine, *Manuel Puig and the Spider Woman: His Life and Fictions* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, and London: Faber

and Faber, 2000; paperback edition: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002).
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2. The official words uttered upon Evita Perón's death in 1952.
3. Mike Deaver, *Behind the Scenes* (New York: Morrow, 1987), 101.
4. Olga Nolla, Manuel Ramos, and Manuel Puig, "Escritura y ensoñación," *Cupey: Revista de la Universidad Metropolitana* 5, no. 1-2 (September 1988), 64.
5. *International Herald Tribune*, August 14, 1985, 11.