

## CHAPTER ONE

### Traces of Theory, Tropes of Modernity

Perhaps it goes without saying that in order for ruins to exist, something whole must have preceded them. Nations and communities are built; they neither appear out of thin air nor disappear without a trace. They rest on principles as much as they do on the columns of their architectural creations; they are constructed on and through foundational documents; they are framed in legal and moral terms; they arise bit by bit as their founding generations erect the walls and portals that enclose or keep out. Even vestiges of those communities wiped out by natural disasters survive as traces amid the ash and sediment of volcanic rubble, buried under the silt of ocean deposits, or in the piles of debris remaining after great winds have blown through. Throughout the course of history these aspects of the social and the cultural lives of nations and their citizens leave behind remnants of all sorts.

Anthropologist Quetzil E. Castañeda proposes that cultural identities, in his case specifically referring to the Maya culture of Mexico's Yucatán peninsula, are invented and reinvented continually "through certain textual guises, forms, and tropes" (*Museum* 1). So we might conclude that besides the physical rubble, or perhaps even as a reading of its multiple strata, narratives themselves remain that rise as monuments or cultural markers to societies and their projects. While Castañeda posits his argument on the commercial guidebook as a prime mediating force in the production of utopian landscapes of "truth" (*Museum* 3) for tourists, I am concerned with the genealogy of the connections between the ruin as trope and its previous existence as the remnants of a purportedly resplendent past in which (one is told) all contemporaries have a stake. Such a connection, if not a "historical continuity" (Casanova 241) in the sense that some such as Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes have proposed, just might assist in articulating the problematic that most defines post-revolutionary Mexico: modernity. In particular, I call upon the models put forward by Walter

Benjamin for the development of an urban social critique to illuminate my discussion of the writings of Juan García Ponce and their context as components of what David Harvey calls the “creative destruction” (1) of European modernity and what Sibylle Fischer recasts as the “brutal modernity” (23) of transatlantic societies. The threefold Benjaminian models consist of the archaeological, the memorial, and the dialectical (Gilloch, *Myth* 13). The first involves the recovery and preservation of the traces from the past. The second privileges the forces of memory over the tug of amnesia. The third, and the most useful for us here, concerns “the momentary mutual recognition and illumination of past and present” (Gilloch, *Myth* 13) through an encounter with evocatory images.<sup>1</sup>

While I do not propose to graft these categories in situ onto Mexican culture, they nevertheless provide a pathway into the oppositional challenges to what are constituted as the myths of the modern. Eschewing the lure of some general notion of modernity as either radical break on the one hand or new inscription of the past on the other, I instead suggest, with Fredric Jameson, that what we will examine is “a dialectic of the break and the period” (23). The trope of construction and ruin, therefore, signals this dialectic in as much as new constructions are undertaken all the time, many of which fall under the rubric of modernity’s supposed innovations, the shadows and vestiges of previous, simultaneous, or even nightmarish otherness still haunt those configurations. Anthony Giddens refers to this internal set of contradictions as “the darker side of modernity,” which is frequently seen as outweighed by its “opportunity side” (7). Without an absolute historical (and historiographic) beginning and lacking a moment of definitive rupture, under this schema Mexico’s modernity becomes a significantly more difficult concept to quantify as it emerges as a more challenging notion to narrate. If, as Jameson submits, “tropes are themselves the signs and symptoms of a hidden or buried narrative” (40), then modernity needs to be considered less a singular conceptual category than changing narratives grounded in specific spaces and moments.

Illuminating the impressive task of uniting Brazil as a modern entity, Todd A. Diacon uses the trope of the telegraph wire as “stringing together a nation” (3). In addition to the power of the centralized federal government, the extension of health care to even the most remote territory, and the early twentieth-century universal conscription law, only the lines of the telegraph wires could establish contact and connectedness across Brazil’s vast geographies. Thus it is that Brazil is invented and reinvented, as Castañeda proposes, through the electrified lines laid out under the authority of engineer Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon. This trope reveals the loneliness of the frontier life for those engineers and telegraph workers who settle an unknown geography

which then becomes interconnected in the lightning flash of the telegraph spark. The intersection of open spaces and closed communication fires up encounters across the board, from politics to public works, from family structures to religious communities. The “Modern Brazil” of his title does not appear at some absolute date or time, springing out of the vast expanses of *os sertões* as wires are stretched across previously open spaces, but as an alternation of events and encounters among political structures, medical initiatives, civic rituals, military interventions, international expeditions, industrial investments, and advances in communications. Singing telegraph wires are the tropic manifestation (or the Jamesonian symptom) of a narrative of “creative destruction” that ends with the linkage of Brazilian states unified by certain ideologies of modernization.

If for the case of Brazil the hope of the “wired nation” (Diacon 16) trope serves best to address the modernizing forces at work, for Mexico the ruin solidifies and transforms sometimes ambiguous social experience into a tangible material form.<sup>2</sup> The language of construction resounds throughout the historical and literary texts issuing forth from Benedict Anderson’s imagined communities as cultures rise and fall, as they erect monuments to their greatest ideals and seek to prevail over rivals. References to the fashioning of buildings themselves and to the elucidation of cultural goals through them abound among the records taken from the stone bases of the pyramids and the stelae of Bonampak, from the ball courts of Chichén Itzá and the *zócalos* of Spanish settlements; they continue to appear in modern times among the architects of the political and cultural revolution that began in Mexico in 1910. In a larger sense there is little difference, really, between the organizing precepts of the builders of Teotihuacán or the designers of the modern nation. Each sets out a blueprint to serve as the ideal model for conduct and for belonging to a collectivity. Each envisions what society’s members must aspire to and makes it visible—in word or image—to all, to either live up to or fail to attain. Whether among the monumental tombs and mausoleums Anderson refers to (9), in the *crónicas* of the conquest that detail the mythical founding of Tenochtitlán,<sup>3</sup> in the blocks of stone that enclose the sacred spaces of Teotihuacán, or in the philosophical treatises on nationhood penned by Samuel Ramos we find the accumulated acts of construction of the nation followed by their remnants.

Taking as a point of departure the double strands of national narrative the historian Arthur Schmidt attributes to the last six decades of the twentieth century, Mexico may be said to have had two conflicting outlooks—“revolution to evolution” and “revolution to demolition” (25). The first would unify the nation under the myth of an ongoing revolution into whose vessel all historical events would fit. The second is, of course, the narrative of

rupture we have mentioned which mobilizes citizens on the road of modernity from the Reforma onward. Most engaging is the notion of “demolition,” both as the implied razing of the past and as that “creative destruction” through which we might cast modernity. Demolition produces ruins of the cultural as well as of the cement kind. If we turn to Octavio Paz at this juncture, he seems to agree on a very material level of cultural constructs. In “*América Latina y la democracia*” [Latin America and Democracy], he writes that “[l]a arquitectura es el espejo de las sociedades. Pero es un espejo que nos presenta imágenes enigmáticas que debemos descifrar” [Architecture is the mirror of societies. But it is a mirror that presents us with enigmatic images which we have to decipher] (165). Leaving aside the similarity between Paz’s mirror image and Carlos Fuentes’s use of the “buried mirror” of the Conquest, visible supports of modernist ideologies appear to converge on the facades of the emergent nations as they choose dwellings, offices, stadiums, and arenas to stand in for their power behind the scenes.

When Ramos addresses the “*abandono de la cultura en México*” [abandonment of culture in Mexico] (83) in 1934, after the implementation of the educational reforms suggested under Minister of Education José Vasconcelos, he cites a lack of interest in advanced studies and a corresponding loss of respect for intellectual activity as results of this popularizing process in which quantity substituted for quality. The verb he employs to mark this cultural turn—to him, for the worse—is that interest in higher education and the life of the mind “*ha decaído*” [has declined] (83). Such a crumbling and, in the end, fall indicate that a collective cultural edifice had been erected to the ideals of the Revolution but that, over time, those same utopian endeavors had fallen short. The inevitable outcome is “*decaimiento*” or a collapse into decay, ruin, and loss. The radical impulse to counteract reforms that seem to have run their course comes through in the language of this philosophical essay on the state of Mexican culture as Ramos studies the need to construct a new subject confident of the social and cultural edifice in which he or she lives. The question lies in just how this might come about and what to do with the material of the demolished structures. Evolutionary theory requires its preservation; demolition theory constructs the garbage dumps of cities and ideas.

These philosophical constructions are at once “marvelous and horrible,” in the words of Octavio Paz when he writes of the forces contained in pre-Columbian sculptural images that apply to theoretical systems as well. He clarifies that “[h]orror . . . is fear and repulsion, but it is also respect and veneration for the unknown or the sublime. Horror is not terror; it is fascination, bewitchment” (“Will for Form” 5). A fascination with the evocatory powers of the artifact (a previous construct in ruin) establishes a link to Benjamin’s third

category of the dialectical model of critique, proceeding beyond forgetting and mere nostalgia into the realm of analysis. “Bewitchment” with the monuments to a society’s glories is the first model of experience; when only the traces of those luminous times remain, another sort of fascinating circumstance occurs, equal in power but different in form. This is the encounter with the ruin in Benjaminian terms, what Castañeda calls “a dialogical process of reflective intercalation” (*Museum* 17) effected by the questioning subject. Holding together contradictory elements, what Jameson sums up as “belonging and innovation” (57), the ruin would then place questioning individuals on double ground, tangibly forcing an encounter with a force field of associations which had previously been relegated to the more facile continuity/rupture, evolution/demolition opposites. Both “marvelous and horrible,” modernity brings entire systems into contention. As Jameson invites readers to think of this flash point, he reiterates that “the trope of ‘modernity’ is always in one way or another a rewriting, a powerful displacement of previous narrative paradigms . . . the affirmation of the ‘modernity’ of this or that generally involves a rewriting of the narratives of modernity itself which are already in place and have become conventional wisdom” (35–36). So Castañeda’s “dialogical process of reflective intercalation” is nothing more than the restatement of the idea that there is no singular modernity (as Jameson’s title echoes), let us say a European version versus an American one, but a constant, reiterated, and challenged confrontation of ideologies. Harvie Ferguson elaborates, “Modernity calls into existence, as well as a new social world, new forms of knowledge and self-understanding” (189). As Jürgen Habermas famously states, modernity is a project never completed (3).

Among the “splendors” (according to Paz) of the unfinished edifice of what has emerged as modern Mexico, we find temples as well as promises (the imminent return of the god Quetzalcoatl, for instance, or the capitalist dream of Carlos Salinas de Gortari), ethnic *mestizaje* as well as social revolution, invasion as well as innovation, creation as well as destruction. As Carlos Fuentes concludes, the “unfinished business” of contemporary Mexican culture rests on the “concrete problem” embodied in a very material structure, which can be used as a metaphor for the “bewitching” encounter described above. He writes, “There is a very tall hotel in Mexico City that has never been finished. Year after year builders add to its height, but one can always look right through its hive of gaping stones. When, if ever, will it receive its hypothetical guests?” (*Buried Mirror* 316). The empty shell of the hotel-in-progress (even if later completed) is a visible sign of two simultaneous processes linked to two temporal moments. The first is the utopian urge of progress and modernization, symbolized by the upward surge of construction (reflected in official government discourse as

much as it is for Fuentes in sweeping architectural design). Curiously, Paz mirrors this same notion of “upward thrust” and “vertical movement” [“Will for Form” 15–16] in construction in his evaluation of the condensation of time-space symbolism in the architecture of the pyramid. A similar verticality is at the core of Fuentes’s gaze upon the changing skylines of the metropolis of Mexico City as it expands and contracts with post-revolutionary design. Calling it “the Cinderella city” during the 1960s (“New Wave” 126), Fuentes anchors the development of the Mexican nation of modern times in the surge of economic and architectural development after the Revolution. The falling away of the previous “mythical facade” (“New Wave” 128), however, gives way to the ambiguous constructions meant for incipient tourism and international display. The second process involves the paradoxical concept of construction-as-ruin since the wearing down of the girders and scaffolding witnesses the element of time passing, the constant threat of entropy overtaking the forces of construction. The “hive of gaping stones” simultaneously suggests a drive toward completion and an accompanying deterioration, for the structure of the hive is both presence and absence, both stones and spaces. The “hypothetical guests” can only be intuited, of course, in the interstices, but they form as central an aspect of this project in their imagined arrival as do the floors and rooms of the building they will (some day) occupy.

I suggest that the project of modernity might be considered through this double visual image: a thrust toward the future but a wrenching toward decay, a “creative destruction” not devoid of brutality in the form of political institutions which “operat[e] like a modernizing, rationalizing machine that k[ee]ps turning in disregard of human needs” (Fischer 23). The PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) [Institutional Revolutionary Party] created an efficient metro system, luxurious embassies, government offices on a scale that is able to deal with daily concerns, and even the tourist mecca teasingly called the Zona Rosa, but what of the killing of students and workers in 1968, what of the buildings devastated by the 1985 earthquake that never were rebuilt, what of the murder of presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio or the lack of housing or potable water for citizens, to say nothing of the indigenous uprising in Chiapas? The brutality factor could be analyzed as that which is deemed necessary to keep the machine of modernity in motion without the intrusion of technological glitches or dissident opinion. The ruin is not an either/or proposition; it is both construction and destruction. Castañeda finds this very same promising dilemma in the etymology of the word ruin: “derived from Latin *ruina*, a falling down, from *ruere*, to rush, and *origo*, to rise—[ruins] entail movements in opposing directions: a ‘falling down’ and a ‘rising up’” (“Aura” 452). We cannot lose

sight of the paradox of a city in the throes of ‘progress’ and modernization evincing not only an image of rising vertically but of static verticality in its standing in place. The ruins of the modern are not stone but steel; they rust and do not crumble. Yet the same impulses that apply to the reading of the ruin of antiquity are found in the paralyzed structure of the real and metaphorical hotel. Will the building progress or *decaer* [decline, fall] as Mexican culture did in the eyes of Ramos? The two tendencies do not cancel one another, but like the “dialectic of the break and the period,” coexist within an ambiguity worthy of critical examination.

Ruins are the result of wear, time’s passage, dilapidation, conquest, replacement, erosion, abandonment, transformation, or a combination of these factors. If we speak of ruins in literal terms, we might conjure up fallen statues, crumbling buildings, remnants of walls or pillars, columns in decay, arches precariously suspended overhead, rusty bridges long condemned to traffic, dusty highways leading to nowhere, or overgrown archaeological sites in the middle of the jungle. In a more symbolic form, however, we could evoke complex images of aged human beings whose life stories are written on their very skin, fragments of cultural detritus collected on library shelves or in museum cases, worn out discourses, or the ghostly shadows of previous glories embodied in aesthetic or linguistic turns of phrase. I propose to examine both material vestiges of construction and deconstruction, and imagined ruinations. In these two strands—the imagined and the ‘real’—the reader might find narratives of the rise of modern Mexico and see how they intertwine and collide to produce counternarratives, where one might imagine a revelation among the ruins. The writings of Juan García Ponce are the cornerstone of my project, for among his lengthy and monolithic texts many of these contrary impulses are brought to light. Let us now frame his literary works in a general cultural edifice of both mortar and image.

From the longer historical perspective, Mexico was invaded in the sixteenth century by Spanish conquerors who arrived at a period of ‘ruin’ in the Aztec empire, since by that time it had declined in both royal lineage and imperial splendor into a killing machine demanding economic and blood sacrifice to perpetuate its hegemony. Ceremonial buildings and complexes were at their peak, but the underlying narratives of social cohesion revealed weakened structures of community. As the writer Elena Garro portrays in her short story “La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas” [Blame it on the Tlaxcalans], the Tlaxcalans were just one of the conquered peoples who assisted the incoming European soldiers in the hopes of escaping the yoke of Aztec domination. The process of disintegration of the grand empire and its grand narratives left the geography and culture(s) in ruins, ripe for

European imperialism and its own narrations of mastery. Yet even this process produces new forms of narration and constant readjustment. The remains of this early period lie buried under layers of silt and debris that attest to past history, weather patterns, volcanic eruptions, broken dreams, and collective sympathies. But they also lie beneath newer constructions: what better way to offer evidence of entropy and decline, vanquishment and death, than to build atop the old? One system replaces the other, but the facade gives evidence of (false) continuity. The ruins of the old are also part of the glorious 'new,' for the same stones used in worship of native deities become the foundations for the syncretic institutions of an idealized *mestizaje*. Like the descent into the Templo Mayor in the very center of the modern Mexican capital or the secret side doors to the Great Pyramid of Cholula, which sits buried under the church of Nuestro Santuario de los Remedios, entrances and exits to the discourses of the past can be 'discovered' and 'rediscovered' through the archaeology of cultural debris. It would be difficult to avoid seeing the enormous mound of earth on which the sanctuary sits, or the handrail to the stairway leading down into the internal excavation, but the path to its heart lies hidden to the eye at first glance. The physical remains of two cultures lie one atop the other as a "palimpsest that operates like a 'text,' in the sense that Derrida has defined it: a text is a giant machine for reading and writing other texts" (Castañeda, *Museum* 98). It is hardly an unproblematic construction, yet it "bewitches" the observer in its very problematizing of cultural discourses and counter-discourses and in its potential as a site for self-fashioning amid contradiction. One is left to wonder whether this giant interpretative machine functions along the lines of the brutal "modernizing, rationalizing machine" or if the capacity to rewrite and innovate can win.

Octavio Paz projects a reading of the ruin as text in his collection of essays entitled *Vislumbres de la India: un diálogo con la condición humana* [Glimpses of India: A Dialogue with the Human Condition]. The title itself gives the reader a hint that for this particular observer walls, palaces, towers, and frescoes all provide a glimpse of something more than mortar and stone. As official ambassador and then as private traveler, Paz experienced an obvious fascination with traces of the subcontinent's past, which he then paralleled with Mexico's own. The ornamental arches, nooks, niches, corridors, terraces, and gardens he saw upon disembarking from his ocean liner "son los corredores de un sueño fastuoso, siniestro e inacabable" [are the corridors of a magnificent dream, sinister and endless] (*Vislumbres* 13). Both glorious dream and endless demonic nightmare, the colonial architecture of India astonished Paz into a "repentina fascinación" [sudden fascination] (*Vislumbres* 16) with the myriad of historical times and

feelings it seems to evoke. The light shining through the crevices reveals hidden forces at work and secret ideas underlying the construction. In the mausoleums of vast cemeteries, he contemplated what Anderson proposes as imagined communities in their own right: “el universo reducido a sus elementos geométricos esenciales. . . . Abolición del tiempo convertido en espacio y el espacio en un conjunto de formas simultáneamente sólidas y ligeras, creadoras de otro espacio hecho, por decirlo así, de aire. Edificios que han durado siglos y que parecen un parpadeo de fantasía” (the universe reduced to its essential geometric elements. . . . The abolishing of time converted into space, and space in a conjunction of forms at once solid and light, the creators of another space made, as it were, of air. Buildings that have lasted centuries and that seem only a single fantastic blink {of an eye}) (*Vislumbres* 23). Air and stone combine to conjure up collective dreams of past, present, and future, dreams that seem solid but melt into nothingness. Even as communities go the way of the ruin, they can be reimagined as solidly and inclusively utopian collectivities or, alternately, as vast social projects gone awry. The language of the stones, also reflected in Paz’s poetry collection *Piedra de sol* [Sun Stone], provides the ruins with voices which he then deciphered for us. These voices seem to call him back to India time and again after his service as a diplomat ended in 1968, and he rewrote himself time and again onto the exterior faces of the stones.

If the arrival of European culture and its hegemonic imposition over former empires did not encounter material ruins per se but ebullient cities, although the decline of the imperial monarch was evidence of other decay related to the social and religious structures, this event produced a scenario for the ruin to become a tourist splendor of modern times. While few Spaniards would gaze upon indigenous edifices as remnants of better times, nineteenth and twentieth century archaeologists would find in them what Laura U. Marks terms “[f]etishes and fossils . . . as two kinds of objects that condense cryptic histories within themselves. Both gather their peculiar power by virtue of a prior contact with some originary object . . . Fetishes and fossils translate experience through space and time in a material medium” (224). Like a fossil compressed into layers of earth, the “fascinating” ruins and traces of original Mesoamerican cultures survive compressed into the “cryptic” monoliths and temples of their modern cities. The fossil’s remains are pertinent as relics of meaning, for they have to be unearthed or cleaved from rocks in a secret, primordial landscape. The “cryptic” nature of the language of the stones (à la Paz in his privileged role as translator) is doubled by the similarly enigmatic message of the fossil. In each instance we require an interpreter, but in each we may write our own version as well. All of these form palimpsestic layers of discursive debris.

The identification of Mexico as a site of ruinous fascination has been and continues to be a commonplace of guidebooks and travelers alike. From the popular Frommer to Fodor, from Lonely Planet to the more erudite Knopf Guides, we find a celebration of the ruin as a carved-in-stone identifying symbol of the nation owing to its mysterious, powerful, and “originary” link to the past. As a palimpsest, in Castañeda’s terms once again, we see traces of prior cultures inscribed on the surfaces of these stones, but we also contribute to their meanings by writing ourselves onto them and by producing new communities of readers around them. This discursive practice produces a sense of the subject as it recalls—in Benjamin’s spark of memory recovery—others who then are either wiped away to produce a clean slate or phantasmatically written into contemporary narratives of individual and nation. In his meditation on ruins as mainstays of modern culture, museum director Christopher Woodward argues that “[w]hen we contemplate ruins, we contemplate our own future. To statesmen, ruins predict the fall of Empires, and to philosophers the futility of mortal man’s aspirations. To a poet, the decay of a monument represents the dissolution of the individual ego in the flow of Time; to a painter or architect, the fragments of a stupendous antiquity call into question the purpose of their art. . . . Each spectator is forced to supply the missing pieces from his or her own imagination and a ruin therefore appears different to everyone” (2–3, 15). Such a conquering of the forces of amnesia, as Benjamin refers to them, calls on the imaginary to furnish meaning—or not—for what is present before our eyes. At this moment, then, either a *tabula rasa* comes into being (in the schema of the modernist rupture), or a promising constellation of meanings is evoked. Rather than a true emptiness, nevertheless, even the blank slate remains as a material surface on which shadowy traces might eventually be deciphered. Then, conjecture on the violence exerted to prevent readers from this text can also be brought into view.

Nineteenth-century travelers and adventurers rediscovered the world of Mesoamerican ruins and continued to inscribe on their words, drawings, and watercolors the “missing pieces” of cultural narrative of which Woodward writes. Classical nudes appear in Jean-Frédéric Waldeck’s paintings of Maya sites, idealizing human and architectural forms into a harmonious whole. Europe and America are clearly integrated into some ‘natural’ scheme. In his artistic works the romantic myth of the noble savage acquires visible form and imbues indigenous feminine form with the whiteness and roundness of Rubenesque figures. Explorers appear in top hats and cutaway jackets, indicating with their walking canes the crumbling lintels and doorways of Mexican and Guatemalan archaeological sites. No beads of sweat

evident anywhere, these metropolitan travelers stroll the ruins amid jungle foliage and hard-working natives. Daily life is indeed represented on the canvases and watercolor papers, but archaeological ruins are the mere backdrops for such activity. Ruins frame work, but they do not belong to its world; they are solid evidence of the vestiges of something else. In 1841, John Lloyd Stephens (United States ambassador to Central America and budding journal writer) and Frederick Catherwood (the illustrator) produced two volumes entitled *Incidents of Travel in Yucatán* that pursue a similar enchantment with ruins as auratic signs. Both wonderment and loss, they indicate for two modern Europeans something genuine and legible missing in their own culture. Stephens writes that his contemplation of such scenes “inspired in me a state of excitement more acute than any I had experienced among the ruins of the Old World” (qtd. in *Route of the Mayas* 131). Their celebration of this moment in detailed words and images captures the spark of revelation for both men. Stephens writes that his journey is one of fascination akin to Paz’s: “In a few years, even these [ruins of Labná] will be gone; and as it has been denied that such things ever were, doubts may again arise whether they have indeed existed” (30–31). The old stones of the New World are the key to these explorers’ enchantment with the hidden ruins which they offer to preserve in journal and sketchbook lest they disappear into the jungles or be relegated to the domain of the mirage. While the Spanish feel no urge to do the same with the buildings they find upon arrival in a wondrous new world already imagined as utopia, for these represent beliefs and systems contrary to Christianity, romantic era wanderers read other stories into these edifices. But neither roots out contradiction between the imaginary and the real; a singular thread of discourse winds its way across stones and rubble to join all together.

After the pathways of the romantics began to recede and become overgrown as elaborate and aesthetic ruins in progress, another era of romantic-like fervor accompanied the early twentieth century as Mexico prepared to fight one of the bloodiest revolutions in history. Fellow travelers such as John Reed, Tina Modotti, and a bit later, Katherine Anne Porter, and a host of documentary news reporters invaded the country to experience for themselves the destruction of an old order and the construction of a new one on its ruins. Most often thought of as a modernist writer, Porter crisscrossed the border between her native Texas and Mexico in search of an idealized society she thought would provide her with space to develop her intellectual career as much as it would allow her to find herself. As Thomas F. Walsh sums up the complex and frequently ambiguous relationship between Porter and her utopian vision, “[a]lthough Mexico failed her as the Promised Land she vainly sought, it released her creative energy” (xiii).

Mexico, her Mexico at least, was a catalyst for writing, the source of an effervescent feeling of personal potential, and the space to recover some genuine spark of individual freedom she found stifled in the patriarchal society of Texas. Several decades after Porter left what she called her adopted land of Mexico, she wrote of an intimate relationship with that culture, albeit a romanticized vision of that relationship. At once a source of pride and an enigma, Mexico to her is “this sphinx of countries which for every fragment of authentic history yields two riddles” (Givner 22). The contradictions of everyday life and the underlying patriarchy which so reminded her of Texas are subsumed under the feminine figure of the sphinx whose interior is the darkness that must be deciphered. Both the sphinx and Mexico do not reveal their secrets easily, even after prolonged contact with so-called native informants and with the culture itself. This is an attempt to embody the mysterious and the impenetrable—Mexican society—and like the monument itself provides us with a riddle and a ruin at the same time.

Reed’s cinematic version of events in *Insurgent Mexico*, and the diaries that inform it, reflect no less fervor than the journals of Stephens and Catherwood. Half a century later, Reed’s wife, Alma, wrote a piece for *Venture* magazine in which she found in a modernizing Mexico the insistent vestiges of that romantic ruin on whose foundations the new nation will miraculously rise. To the U.S. market Alma Reed promises that “[t]he American visitor to Mexico will almost inevitably return home addicted to archeology. Even if he has managed to resist its lure elsewhere in the world, he is likely to succumb in this country, where the ruined indigenous cities are so spectacular . . . . A chance visit to one of the many astonishing archeological sites . . . , a chat with an informed guide, is all it takes to produce a sense of involvement in the fate of the peoples who first civilized our continent and who left such enduring relics of their mysterious lives” (156). Such an uncanny experience unlocks some sort of lost connection to a communal past now shared by the traveler confronted by the ruins of his own (forgotten) past. The “unknown and the sublime” of Paz’s evocation of the ruin, his sense of combined horror and wonder, echo the Freudian notion of the uncanny. Articulating the process of psychoanalysis as an entry into the “strata of mental life” (193), Freud relates the uncanny experience of a subject to an unexpected encounter with “what is frightening . . . what arouses dread and horror . . . what excites fear, in general. . . . the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (193, 195). The “excitation” of fear, horror, and amazement, for both Paz and Stephens, might be contained in this sense of the uncanny, for the ruin conjures up something in those mental “strata” long repressed but still visible in the glimpse of a momentary trace. Benjamin does not

write of the uncanny, yet he might see this same instant as the spark of an epiphany upon reentering an originary aura of an object in decay.

The consumption of geographies—Oaxaca, Chichén Itzá, Teotihuacán, Monte Albán, Mitla, Cancún, Cozumel, among so many officially-targeted places—as a strategy of knowledge has generated both a lucrative tourist industry and a self-satisfying act. As Castañeda writes, these preserved sites and the “truths” (*Museum* 4) they reveal about a culture are, like the Americas for Europeans, there for the discovery or “the rediscovery [as] an individualizing experience of identity with civilization in opposition to cultural other(s)” (*Museum* 3). Ruins confirm presuppositions, present the jaded with “an adventure,” and “pose a significant challenge to visit,” but their value lies not in themselves but rather in the persistence of the visitor to reach the destination (Coe 1). As Andrew Coe, son of the renowned Mesoamerican archaeologist Michael D. Coe, states in the preface to his recent volume for travelers, “there are other satisfactions. Once I began traveling to Mexico on my own, it became increasingly apparent to me that the ancient wonders of Mesoamerica are not simply the ruins of dead civilizations, but living works of art” (1). These statements would conform well to Benjamin’s first and second dicta on the resurrection of the past, evoking personal and cultural memories against the ravages of amnesia. The archaeological model concerns itself with “the salvation and preservation of the objects and traces of the past that modern society threatens to destroy” (Gilloch, *Myth* 13); this is the preserved site in and of itself, guarded and set aside from the hustle and bustle of ‘progress’ and assured of being unchanged despite all the aspects of modernization around it.

The second dictum admonishes those who would forget the past. This is also assured for the traveler through the establishment of official INAH sites (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia) [National Institute of Anthropology and History]. Both produce the concept of the ruin as a physical place, as a “wondrous” portal to the past, and as “art.” It is the dialectical aspect of Benjamin’s proposal that is not implemented in either, for a “momentary illumination” can only be garnered by that spark which Benjamin associates with the re-creation of an aura. The aura, for our purposes, is the paradox of Fuentes’s example which makes us stop in our tracks and contemplate actively, not passively, the ongoing construction of an edifice. The ruin can lull us to contemplation, mesmerizing us, or it can shake us into activity and critique as Benjamin so desires. Even before writing his monumental (and unfinished) work *Passages*, Benjamin haunts crumbling city streets (for instance the district of Marseilles known to night dwellers as “Les bricks”) and the arcades of Paris, not to fall under their spell but to happen on a chance encounter with the spirits of the ruin in

order to resuscitate his own past. Like the rubble from the shellfish and oyster stalls of that Mediterranean port city, Benjamin uses mineral images to portray what is left of past activity embedded in the city's alleys. Fossils of previous events litter its streets. For him, they are containers of "shell limestone" and the "mineral hereafter of sea shells" ("Marseilles" 134) rising in monumental display along the trajectory of his walks. Peter Demetz calls these nocturnal descents into the promising urban ruins the scenarios of Benjamin's "sensibilities" (x) since they have the potential to elicit so much from him.

Benjamin's concept of structure as architectural metaphor extends the idea of cultural ruin to an entire project, that of modernity, and to the artifacts produced within the specific time and place under consideration here. The discussion on the problematics of contemporary debates regarding the modern either as a "spent epoch" or as an "unrealized . . . potential" (d'Entrèves 1) will be extended throughout the chapters of this book. The "achievements and pathologies of modernity" (d'Entrèves 1), its splendors and horrors in the eyes of Paz and Fuentes, and its creative potential through confrontation, will serve our argument related to the language, contents, narrative structure, and aesthetics of García Ponce's texts. In these texts, modern times are neither glorified nor entombed as cemeteries of a dead past. Instead, cultural construction and demolition coexist as equal forces, creating something different out of fragmentation and destruction. In his collection of essays entitled *Desconsideraciones*, García Ponce advances the idea that a library shelf may hold the clue to this type of dynamic relationship between past and present, between insider and outcast, and between the world and the text. As he casts his gaze over his personal collection of reading matter, the narrator of "De la ausencia" [On Absence] sees not only titles and spines of books but empty places previously occupied by something. Neither a "spent epoch" nor an "unrealized potential," the missing books are the objects of contemplation and study, holding a relationship even in absence. The narrator thinks to himself: "Todos estos detalles crean un desequilibrio espiritual que determina nuestra relación con el mundo y se refleja en otras pequeñas acciones. Nuestra biblioteca está en continuo movimiento o, como diría Heráclito, en perpetua fluidez. . . . El agujero que dejan los libros prestados nos obsesiona y disminuye la realidad de todos los demás anulando su importancia. Sólo queremos saber cuál es ese libro que tan obviamente falta, que tal vez nunca recuperaremos y quizá nos era indispensable. Así el vacío, la nada, se hace mucho más real que la realidad" [All these details create a spiritual imbalance which determines our relationship with the world and which is reflected in other small actions. Our library is in constant movement or, as Heraclitus would say, in perpet-

ual fluidity. . . . The void that loaned books leave obsesses us and diminishes the reality of all the rest [of the books], annulling their importance. We only want to know which is the book that is obviously absent, that maybe we will never get back, and that perhaps was indispensable to us. In this way emptiness, nothingness, becomes even more real than reality] (“De la ausencia” 2001 14). The metaphor of the library shelf and its holdings, then, can even be a stand-in for the suggestive absences and no-longer-real presences of one’s surroundings. Books before our eyes disappear into the search for the ones we can no longer see. Like the layers of silt and debris underlying modern structures, the laws of the collection of books, the desire to fill shelves, and the texts as representations of ourselves all underpin that fluidity of identity we are considering under the aegis of the modern. What better to evoke the modern sense of confrontation than the dilemma of what to do about the visible absences: What are the books (ideas) that are no longer there? Where did they go? What of the faded covers of the books now exposed to sunlight for the first time?

Obviously for the narrator, missing tomes become even more prominent now that they are no longer among their cohorts; both are set into question by this new relationship. If one creates a library only for it to be ‘destroyed’—perhaps even ‘demolished’—by loaning out material, then what of the tradition of collection to begin with? Any owner of such a collection, therefore, will be a part of the process of making and remaking it, of reviewing its contents and its spaces, of providing new volumes to take the place of the old or, conversely, embarking on a quest to replace the missing with equal volumes. One constructs a library as one constructs an edifice (of cement, of ideas); as Heraclitus is quoted as remarking: this is another venue of fluidity and change, of “creative destruction” in the acquisition and dispossession of texts. As García Ponce’s essay ends, the narrator remarks on the ultimate question of this situation: is an absence empty or filled with something? He notes, ¿Debe dejar de existir el cuadro [o el libro] una vez que nos ha revelado la pared? Hecho el descubrimiento, ¿no sentimos que queremos tener a uno y otra? Y del mismo modo: ¿esa ausencia llena de presencia . . . no es el motor de una nostalgia irresistible que clama por su presencia? ¿Cuál de las dos cosas debemos elegir?” [Should a painting {or a book} cease to exist once it has revealed the wall {on which it was hanging} to us? Upon such an uncovering, don’t we feel that we want to have one just as much as the other? And in the same sense, isn’t the absence full of presence . . . the mechanism of an irresistible nostalgia that cries out to be present?] (“De la ausencia” 2001 16). The elements of this essay are reflective of the dilemmas of the provisional relationships of modernity: presence of the past in its absent shadows (the faded outlines of

missing books on the wall behind the stacks and related books flanking the empty spaces), the meaning of the wall or even its potential for an aesthetic of the void, the choice to fill the spaces or not, and, in the end, the ineluctable feeling of nostalgia that demands to take over the situation.

In the context of the ruin as text, we have seen that the traveler or observer writes upon the surface of a constantly revised stone (or other material), thereby creating the palimpsestic text. Instead of a whole, the ruin comprises a collection in which the “fragment” (Hanssen 69) is “superior to the harmonies of antiquity” (Benjamin qtd. in Hanssen 70). The “exuberant subjection” (Benjamin qtd. in Hanssen 70) of multiple elements as remainders across the face of the ruin creates a new text, just as in modern times “the work of art [is] a remnant, relic, or ruin left in the wake of the demise of transcendent meaning” (Hanssen 3). The text might be there materially but deciphering it may prove a more difficult challenge. Such a secularization—reflecting the Enlightenment’s faith in science and reason—exemplifies for Benjamin “the predicament of modernity” (Hanssen 4).

Now in the text as ruin, I propose that modernity’s successes and failures are part of the formal properties of the written text itself, encompassing both structure and content. All of the components of “creativity” and “destruction” contribute to the composition of the ‘new’ through language, storytelling, and the final product which, paradoxically, is also a part of the great fluid library of Heraclitus. The structures of ruin and allegory, for Benjamin, share a certain power of revelation, despite the “demise of transcendence,” for they hint at that previous link now defunct which still manages to survive as a glimmer [*vislumbre*] amid the cultural rubble. “[T]he fabricated nature of the artwork . . . , [and] its character as an artifact” (Hanssen 70) manifest and expose modernity as a construction built of cultural ruin predicated on the fossilized fragments of the past. (This is the narrative of historical coherence reduced to the detritus of the fragment.) Of Benjamin’s notion regarding this, Gilloch writes, “The modern [in its constructs and artifacts] reveals itself as ruin. This notion of ruination is rooted in a recognition of the importance of an object’s ‘afterlife’” (*Myth* 14). The afterlife of both physical ruin and allegorical ruin is inscribed, as the palimpsest mentioned by Castañeda, on building, geography and, now, on discourse. For Benjamin, in an instant the “arcane secret [a work] was believed to hold” can thus be destroyed, and “art’s links to the divine place (topos) on which the temple or shrine were formerly built” (Hanssen 78) broken if the trance of archaeological resuscitation is sundered. The cultural present is thus a ruin in itself for it problemizes the link to history and to the past (the third model in Benjamin’s schema), the perfect analogy of Jamesonian punctuation and rupture all in one space. What Jürgen Haber-

mas famously and polemically calls the “unfinished project of modernity” (3) duplicates this concept as much as it points to Fuentes’s unfinished tower in Mexico City. Both soaring (modern) project and vestigial (incomplete) structure, the tower stands as a monument to itself and to the work of erecting it, but it is also composed of fragments and stands in for the projects of the past as allegory. So modernity as ruin contains “the highly suggestive fragment, the chip” (Benjamin qtd. in Bolz and van Reijen 33) from which life continues to flow.

The two-directional pull of allegory, its reading either as a “subversion of the unifying grasp of systematic philosophy or as a remnant waiting to be redeemed” (Hanssen 83), advances interesting and innovative possibilities for reading García Ponce’s texts within this model of modernity’s project as it is articulated in the second half of twentieth-century Mexico. A singular reading of the modern toward which, as Jameson puts it, “the so-called underdeveloped countries might want to look forward” as if there were “the illusion that the West has something no one else possesses . . . but which they ought to desire for themselves” (8) is not proposed. Instead, how Mexican visions of tradition and modernity clash in the space of the text may construct a new set of questions regarding this writer, his generation, and the responses of the subsequent five or six decades. The pull of the frequently articulated need for subversion or alternatives and the equal regard for the role of the ‘new’ meets up with the enchantment of the remnant across the pages of his novels, essays, plays, and art reviews. Benjamin’s redemption comes to us disguised as ceremony, but even in what appear to be secular works the writer presents us with allegories related to some lost, sacred sense of the past somehow surviving amid today’s world without anomalies. The very ambiguities produced by the collision of these fragments is what Benjamin celebrates in allegory’s “excess of signification” (Hanssen 83). The result proves to be an expected clarity that becomes muddled, but muddled in a positive sense, for this is how Giddens’s “darker side” of modernity illuminates the “opportunity side” to produce questions about false security and hidden dangers, great risks amid the blind trust of a project (Giddens 7). What by now most Mexicans join other cultures in regarding as “a fraught and dangerous world” (Giddens 10) rests on a number of assumptions which need to be clarified (or revealed through allegory) as myths, especially in light of the everyday violence which has escalated in order to keep stories of progress alive. There is possibly no better rhetorical figure than allegory with all of its convolutions and excesses to approach García Ponce’s style and themes and to reveal the obscure recesses of Mexican modernity. The density, accumulated layers, and language and images that fold back on themselves and constitute his

texts are nothing if not baroque allegories of the contradictions of the modern in this particular version. These complex tropes and contradictory figures are the sites of further critique and investigation.

The *sexenio* [six-year term] of each Mexican president creates the scaffolding for the construction and implementation of promises made during each electoral campaign by both party and nominee. From the 1920s to the crisis of 1968, the Mexican State seemed to define its role in the modernization of the country as the promoter of a cultural production parallel to material urban development. On the constantly evolving landscape of urban Mexico, each president has inaugurated monuments in the form of public works visible to natives and tourists alike. What Claudio Lomnitz calls “the factory of Mexico’s ruins” (212), this emphasis on structures includes the substantial contribution of the federal government to the arts, sciences, and public image of modernization across those decades. Lomnitz writes of the “personal signatures” of these government sponsors as the motivations for their construction, but the same monuments become new ruins in their own right. In keeping with our previous consideration of the ruin as physical construction and as allegorical trope, Lomnitz concurs with the assessment of this double model. He observes that “[a]lthough the discussion of modernist ruins usually brings to mind housing projects, hospitals, bridges, and basketball courts, Mexico’s cultural world is also littered with these ruins” (214). We could find ruins not only at sites such as Monte Albán, but also at archaeological parks, the UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México), and the Mayan Riviera. These ruins help in the promotion of tourism by attracting dollars and euros. If Octavio Paz grants a “bewitching” quality to earlier monuments, postrevolutionary Mexican writers and artists find themselves within the spaces of even more fascinations and contradictions.

On the one hand, commitment to continuing the goals of the popular Revolution (without interruption, as evolutionary) finds its voice in Agustín Yáñez, Jaime Torres Bodet, and muralists such as Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. On the other, those intellectuals who reject the official monumentalizing forces of the State-led construction of modernity emerge as significant counterpoints to the products of the culture “factory,” contributing to the “demolition” of the historiographic connection but extending a new vision of a modern nation. One of the pivotal figures taking a critical public stance toward this hegemonic ideology, Juan Vicente Melo, clearly states the motivation of the second group of intellectuals: “Esta generación ha alcanzado una visión crítica, un deseo de rigor, una voluntad de claridad, una necesaria revisión de valores que nos han permitido una firme actitud ante la literatura, las otras artes y los demás

autores. Cada uno de los miembros de esa supuesta generación [la denominada ‘de medio siglo’] . . . ha alcanzado . . . responsabilidad y compromiso con el arte. No es raro que todos nosotros, poetas, novelistas, ensayistas, campistas, nos preocupemos por la crítica de una manera que, desde hace algunos años, no existía en México” [This generation has grasped a critical vision, a desire for rigor, a will to clarity, a necessary revision of values that has permitted us a steadfast attitude toward literature, the arts, and other authors. Each of the members of that supposed generation {the one called the Generation of the Mid-Century} . . . has reached . . . responsibility and commitment to art. It isn’t strange that all of us, poets, novelists, essayists, improvisational performers, are preoccupied with criticism in a way that, a few years ago, did not exist in Mexico] (Melo qtd. in Pereira, *Generación* 128–9). This commitment to something ‘new,’ something that comes about as a result of a rejection of the official policies of modernization (as understood by the ruling party and its governmental organizations), is the focal point of a collection of intellectuals who find among the ruins symptoms of sclerosis and decay. Instead of pure joyous celebration, which the State sponsors on an almost daily basis in the arts and sports, this generation seems to obey Benjamin’s mandate for a dialectical rereading of the ruins.

Composed of writers of the likes of Juan Vicente Melo, Inés Arredondo, Sergio Pitol, Salvador Elizondo, Sergio Fernández, Elena Poniatowska, Vicente Leñero, Carlos Fuentes, and Juan García Ponce, the *generación de medio siglo* in Mexico is generally characterized by a dedication to several of the fundamental features related to the concepts of history and aesthetics we have been discussing so far. The first shared characteristic is a preoccupation with the future of the postrevolutionary nation as it begins to traverse the uncertain and slippery terrain of modernity with the concomitant question of what to do with the traces and vestiges of a supposedly collective past, and whether they were or are valid for the rest of the century. As ruins are left to fall into ruin, what of culture should be saved and what might be cast aside, what defines the moment in terms of economics, politics, and society, and how does this dialogue with the past? At the forefront of intellectual debates and their edification through literary texts are concerns over the remnants of earlier European cultures, the value of indigenous heritage, and the increasing influence of U.S. culture as the new empire replacing Spain in the Americas. Should the nation and its inhabitants look inward or outward to provide sources for new “splendors” (Paz) for a new nation? Jameson’s notion of the modern being a “rewriting” (35) of other stories joins the debate over the mechanisms of social institutions such as monetary funds, the media, banking, the flow of cash and of information and, of course, the institutionalization of capital. The circulation of notions of modernity, ideas and images, and money

occurs as older faith (if any) takes on the risks of the new economics and as the security promised by the State to its citizens begins to be conceived by at least some of them as danger. One might look to the Olympic Games and subsequent political repression of 1968, to the government's inadequate response to the victims of the 1985 earthquake, to the stolen presidential election of 1988, or to the defeat of the seventy-year reign of the PRI in 2000. Are these instances of what Schmidt calls "nation building" or "nation destroying" (31)? Is this the triumph of modernity (if we consider it as a singular goal)? Or are these moments punctuated by both endings and beginnings, by the Marxian seeds of a culture's own destruction sowing themselves in different ways? Is reconciliation at all possible, between the global and the domestic, the native and the foreign, or what critic Maarten van Delden refers to in the works of Carlos Fuentes as "the ongoing tension . . . between nationalism and cosmopolitanism . . . [f]or each pole of the opposition simultaneously reflects and resists certain key traits of the modern era" (9)? The "reflection" and "resistance" within the same text or image or ideology present once again the Jamesonian dialectic of periods and renegotiations.

Melo and the others created their own cultural outlets in opposition to the purportedly splendid Mexican diorama of the sacrosanct values and achievements of the Revolution. In this sense, even the image of the Revolution, and perhaps especially so, becomes a ruin for it is always pronounced as unfinished and each building, statue, column, and amphitheater erected forms part of the monumental project. Modernity and the Revolution go hand-in-hand in this official scenario for both, if we again follow Habermas, are works in progress and goals yet to be met. This is the evolutionary standard across which periodically the nation is asked to stand back and take stock of things before moving on. But, for others, the myth and the "mystique" (Poniatowska, Foreword xi) of the popular uprising earlier in the century against social injustices and the culture of poverty meets the new myth of the modern in a less synchronized form and less coherent continuity. Some of the conduits of cultural difference for intellectuals such as these include the creation of literary supplements to newspapers of mass distribution; the introduction of writers' workshops in public universities; the translation of modern authors from Europe and the United States; the discussion of philosophical thought from sources such as Herbert Marcuse, Georges Bataille, and Theodor Adorno; and the opening of avant-garde film cycles with the participation of both European and American directors, including Spaniard-in-exile Luis Buñuel. All of these cultural structures give voice to a stake in the crucial debates surrounding modernity and its implementation, either in an official sense of "opportunity" or as a darker and more troubling yet equally creative challenge. They do not merely critique the

legitimacy of the enterprise of the State, with all of its ceremony and ruinous display, but they also address the issues central to modernity's debates, which Lomnitz concludes to be "[t]he central axis of cultural modernity—which is a productive relationship between science, art, and the constant improvement of the quality of life ('progress')" (214). Just how might such a productive relationship be articulated, especially in terms of economics and culture? How might the promissory tone of emancipation and enlightenment through 'progress' be achieved and what might it take to get there? Who benefits and who sacrifices for the good of all? Gilbert M. Joseph, Anne Rubenstein, and Eric Zolov address the grand narrative about the postrevolutionary era as an evocative tripartite mural composed, beginning on the left-hand side, of President Manuel Ávila Camacho spouting off on the end of earlier anticlericalism, a middle panel filled with the blood of sacrificed students in 1968, and on the right the implementation of neoliberalism under Presidents Bush, Clinton, and Salinas (3). How does the narrative pass from a national economy to a national collapse and how does one tell the story of the parts in-between? We shall address a variety of García Ponce's texts from the 1970s through the early twenty-first century with these inquiries in mind, carefully looking at the related concepts of "emancipation" and "enlightenment," and watching out for living remnants of previous tales as well as new roles for the storyteller.

Addressing forms that range from clothing styles to automobile models, García Ponce writes of the difficult yet provocative relationship between "lo viejo y lo nuevo" [the old and the new] in an essay of the same title. He writes, "Estamos en continuo movimiento. Lo de ayer se aleja y se queda atrás, perdido para siempre, con una rapidez alucinante. En medio del vértigo, viviendo dentro del espíritu de la época, uno no tiene tiempo ni siquiera para volverse y contemplar sus propias estatuas de sal. Estas caen al vacío, destruidas antes de alcanzar forma. Y sin embargo, en medio de la ininterrumpida desaparición de lo nuevo, persiste la nostalgia hacia aquello que, por su misma lejanía, aún podemos recordar como viejo. Apresado en los cambios incesantes, lo nuevo no llega a ser; en cambio, tenemos lo que fue" [We are continually on the move. What happened yesterday fades away and remains behind, lost forever, with hallucinatory rapidness. Amid the vertigo, living in the spirit of the time, one doesn't even have the chance to look back and contemplate his or her own statues of salt. These fall into oblivion, destroyed before they can take shape. And nevertheless, in the middle of the uninterrupted disappearance of the new, a nostalgia exists toward what, owing to its real remoteness, we can still recall as old. Trapped among endless changes, the new never comes into being; instead, we have what used to be] ("Lo viejo y lo nuevo" 2001 19). Caught by the past, one is

inexorably pulled toward the future like the image of Walter Benjamin's Angel of History. Despite the urgent desire to move on, something like unwanted nostalgia will not let the spectator be free. The contradictory statues of salt that spring fully formed in the dreaming mind of the individual never come to fruition but never fade away either. Time passes—from Ávila Camacho to Salinas, let's say—but "living in the spirit of the time" each round requires one's complete attention to the horizon of the 'new,' or vertigo will spin us out of control. Jameson reminds us that there is a "distinction between *novus* and *modernus*, between *new* and *modern*. Can we sort this out by observing that everything modern is necessarily new, while everything new is not necessarily modern? This is, to me, to differentiate between a personal and a collective (or historical) chronology; between the events of individual experience and the implicit or explicit recognition of moments in which a whole collective temporality is tangibly modified" (18). The dialectic between "living in the spirit of the time" and taking stock of one's own "statues of salt" enters into Jameson's description of the "personal" intersecting with the "collective" and, often, not having the chance to sort out the relationship(s) between the two. Less a question of the new intruding into the recollection of the old, the disjunction between the two is much more a signal of the modern dilemma than its prescribed outline. Just how García Ponce's narratives will tell this story is the subject of this book.

If we return to the question of the narratives of history, on the one hand, the emergence in Mexico of the Onda [Wave; Being on the Right Wavelength; Being Hip] during the mid-1960s reflects the transcultural influences of popular U.S. music, spoken language, youth fashion, commercial cinema, fast food, and slick media. A change from previous cultural influences, what Carlos Monsiváis terms a move toward "otras vivencias culturales" [other cultural lifestyles, other ways of living] (Monsiváis, "Cultura" 1500), this movement provides the narration of the new and the old with new language, new ideals, new rhythms, and a new economic turn from "la Cultura Universal . . . [al] bienestar de la sociedad de consumo" [Universal Culture . . . to the good life of consumer society] (Monsiváis, "Cultura" 1500). Such cultural artifacts are, then, new to whom: To the society at large as a "vivencia cultural" or to the individuals composing the youth movement? Are these, as Monsiváis sees them, part of a desire to be avant-garde (1500) or do they evoke the dangers and the fears of modernity by dragging with them the baggage of the dark side as well as the side of economic opportunity as Giddens has claimed? On the feet of many young people, the native-made sandals known as *huaraches* made of old tire treads (the ruins of a previous cultural heritage and a modern mode of transport) become a statement of international modernity for some, while they also

signal a reconsideration of the old, the past, and the national. The official discourses that recover folklore as the cornerstone of the nation are subverted through consumption into so-called avant-garde indigenous looks (Zolov 257). So the reading of a pair of rudimentary sandals might feed into our idea of allegory and the trope of the modern as well if we find in them a relic of the past cast into the role of the present by both the State and the so-called counterculture group.

Unlike the youthful writers of the Onda who look northward for totemic forms of transnational movements and groups which can be appropriated for other uses and other places, García Ponce does not find the only signposts for alternative nation-building there. Rather, he picks up the dilemma of the two-in-one, the period and the continuation of the modern, in his vision of Mexico's present. In the same essay "Lo viejo y lo nuevo" he examines the aesthetic of uncontrolled urban development in Mexico City and finds two ruins coexisting: "Lo viejo reaparece contaminado por lo nuevo, intentando ser nuevo, y esto mediante la inmediata aceptación, como elemento integral, de uno de los rasgos más característicos de nuestra época: lo gratuito" [The old resurfaces contaminated by the new, trying to be new, and this is done by means of the immediate acceptance, as if it were an integral element, of one of the defining attributes of our time: superfluousness] ("Lo viejo y lo nuevo" 2001 22). The gratuitous appearance of old and new pretending to be innovative, whether on the facade of a building or on the feet of an adolescent, does more than create an avant-garde aesthetic; it points out incongruities but it also calls the attention of all spectators to the consumption of the image. The first Spanish meaning of the word *gratuito* is "free," but the cost of exhibiting these images and ideologies is much more financially oriented than 'without cost' would lead us to believe. In cultural terms, nothing is free. Inhabiting that very problematic space where modernity pitches its most fervid battles for cultural and economic control, García Ponce fills a Mexico City of the imaginary with phantasmagoric signs of past and present in constant collision. In that nightmarish space of opportunity (for some) and danger (for others) he finds remnants of European discourses and American narratives left over from previous encounters hiding behind facades of new nationalist rhetoric and new youth culture. The boulevards of that megacity, its sports complexes and tourist Zona Rosa, its television studios and *discotecas*, all appear in dream form on the pages of his novels. From their whirlwinds emerge characters on ritual display caught up in the pageantry of modernity and, more often than not, trapped by it. If the modern is the moment, then more are asphyxiated by it than those who found the air to be clear in 1959 with the representation of the same city by Carlos Fuentes. The ceremonial

centers of Teotihuacán might be emptied of practitioners, but new sites abound infused with remnants of other societies and other cultures obeying their own new rites. These spaces and their architecture are the monuments to many of the hopes of the twentieth century; these are a combination of the mundane and the uncanny which allegorically open up the cityscape into its contradictory fragments. Mexico City is the stage on which the allegorical story of the new Mexico will take place and García Ponce turns to for it most of his fictional settings. Even if characters return to the provinces, drawn by the survival of old myths, they inevitably must repay the sins of these departures and live once again in the city.

We might now view this as the second shared characteristic between García Ponce and other writers of the *generación de medio siglo*: a vision of the metropolis as the privileged space of modernity, whether seen as “pathology” (d’Entrèves 1) or as celebration or, sometimes, as both simultaneously. While not all of his narratives are set completely in this venue, Mexico’s capital forms the crucible for the working through if not the working out of modernity’s deep-seated tensions. If Benjamin considers the French poet Charles Baudelaire the figure that gives “voice to the shock and intoxication of modernity in Paris; . . . as the lyric poet of the metropolis . . . who [sought] to give voice to its paradoxes and illusions, who participate[d] in, while yet still retaining the capacity to give form to, the fragmented, fleeting, experiences of the modern” (Gilloch, *Myth* 134), then we may now look to García Ponce as the Benjaminian or Baudelairean ‘poet’ of the Distrito Federal. Just as in the nineteenth century Parisians dreamed of themselves as inhabiting the great new imperial capital of the modern world, and just as they saw something of the hero of that world every time they looked in the mirror, so Mexico City is transformed in the twentieth century into modernity’s ruins filled with both the mundane and the uncanny, with loss and expectation.

Populated with ghosts, disembodied voices, and crumbling architecture, García Ponce’s narrators’ Mexico cannot be placed on a map. This is not the Mexico of the tourist guidebook, but it certainly contains the remote echoes of the Romantic wanderer, the archaeological explorer, and the utopian dreamer. It also functions as an allegory of the entire nation-building process, and is composed of problematic and intersecting relationships among many disparate elements. The city provides for García Ponce a kaleidoscopic background for his novels, essays, plays, and short stories between the 1960s and December 2003 (the time of his death). The characters in his fiction wander through urban spaces, landscapes of memory, literary spaces (in their homage to other authors and other fiction), and spaces of the psyche in search of some sense of subjectivity and roots amid

the ruins of change and innovation. If they live during a time of feeling the pull of the modern, then they fall into García Ponce's critical space of encounter between the new and the modern, the individual and the collective, the period and the rupture. These figures embody not cold, distant, remote observers but are, like Baudelaire before them, fiery, tortured, exuberant, and even celebratory—souls seeking bodies that will not fail them in their desire to experience all of the anomalies of modern life. Like the coexistence of the BMW and the Volkswagen on the streets of the capital, the bathing costume and the briefest bikini on the beaches of Acapulco, the *antiguas casonas* [old mansions] and skyscrapers on the Paseo de la Reforma, the human body and its constructs are the only set on which this challenge can play out. Set against the excesses of urban allegories, García Ponce's characters are both subjected to the rituals of modernity and are subjects of the same. As such, they are the true heroes of the modern age in that, like Benjamin, they fall into the purview of critique and not of nostalgia. Benjamin writes of such individual subjects that these survivors are “the true subject[s] of modernity . . . [for] it takes a heroic constitution to live the modern” (qtd. in Osborne 81). Given the fact that there is no return, what remains, if anything, is individual redemption among the ruins. As García Ponce sees it, the risk and the danger of this newness is that entropy comes quickly, the “modernos edificios . . . se hacen viejos de inmediato, amenazando con convertirse en ruinas” [modern buildings . . . age immediately, threatening to become ruins {almost as soon as they are built}] “Lo viejo y lo nuevo” 2001 22). He cites Walter Benjamin's desperate attempt to “salvar lo muerto, trayendo lo viejo a la vida otra vez, con la esperanza de que mediante esta operación se conservara su esencia humana” [salvage what has died, bringing it back to life again, in the hope that through this operation its human essence might be preserved] (“Lo viejo y lo nuevo” 2001 20–21) not as a temptation but as a danger. If individual as well as collective life is characterized by constant change, then there is not a permanent essence to resurrect. Yet the hope of finding oneself amid the ruins may be the true object of this operation.

Let us focus for a moment on the figure of the Ángel de la Independencia [Angel of Independence] at the heart of Mexico City as an icon of Mexico's path toward modernity and, as an allegorical figure, a ruin of that very movement toward some general vision of ‘progress.’ Situated near the crossroads of two symbolic boulevards—Paseo de la Reforma and Avenida Insurgentes—and overlooking the Zona Rosa, this androgynous gilded figure looks out over the vast extension of the urban landscape and has been a mute witness to earthquakes, floods, strikes, demonstrations, political repression, monumental traffic jams, and raucous celebrations of soccer victories. It has been an

eyewitness to the spectacle of modernity played out at its feet and to the phantasmagoria of daily violence which accompanies the spectacular. This angelic form echoes Benjamin's Angel of History in that it sits astride the allegorical ruins of past and present, from its perch on the column, casting its gaze outward and upward toward what used to be, but which has been covered over with the veneer of utopian dreams. Far more than the statue of salt alluded to by García Ponce, the angel is solid and, except for brief falls from its pedestal owing to the trembling of the earth, fairly permanent on the horizon.

So often referred to as an angelic figure, this metaphorically fallen angel (perhaps even demonic, for it has been cast into the thick polluted atmosphere of the largest city on earth) can be anthropomorphized as Benjamin has done to Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*. The painted image Benjamin examines turns our gaze to this statue as a witness to history. Seen as decay that is constructive, the producer of debris that marks a simultaneous building up, the origins of the pile on which the angel sits: "The Angelus stares open-mouthed at the pile of rubble that human beings have left behind them in history" (Bolz and van Reijen 42). Astounded at the enormity of the ruins, perplexed by the whirlwind that drives it forward, the angel remains at the crossroads, agape yet seemingly powerless to respond. If the angel is mute, however, García Ponce breathes life and voice back into this allegorical monument to independence, aesthetics, and maybe even progress amid the melee of the modern. It is imbued with a narrative voice not bereft of paradox, criticism, and irony. The observer's gaze is swept upward by the force of the floating angel's golden brilliance atop the pillar; the city's gaze is oriented in the same direction if we consider the pull of 'progress' and modernity in terms of lofty, celestial goals. But again we find the duality of the image, for if one looks skyward, one is propelled loftily forward even as the second allure is a downward fascination (à la Paz) with the earthly, flesh and blood, bricks and mortar, and steel girders of modernity's constructions. As the Zona Rosa has fallen into decay, now deemed by jaded inhabitants the Zona Negra [Black Zone] for all the political corruption that has led to its demise, and the drugs and crime associated with its geography, the angel can now turn 180 degrees in search of miracles. On the opposite side of the avenue from the previously Pink Zone, just across from the crumbling movie theaters, condemned nightclubs, questionable bars, and cheaply decorated Pizza Hut storefronts, lie the new Bolsa de Valores [Stock Exchange], banking centers, mercantile headquarters, and glass skyscrapers erected as signs of twenty-first century Mexico. The State never ceases to dream, even as the city collects the remnants and fragments of former fantasies-turned-nightmares on its public face.