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“Globalizing Pollution”

The Fountain at the Center of the World

Robert Newman

Soft Skull Press

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by Jeff Bursey

A roman à thèse is “a novel written in the realistic mode (that is, based on an aesthetic of verisimilitude and representation), which signals itself to the reader as primarily didactic in intent, seeking to demonstrate the validity of a political, philosophical, or religious doctrine,” as Susan Rubin Suleiman explains in *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre*. In the main, Robert Newman’s third novel fits this definition. *The Fountain at the Center of the World* has generated favourable press in Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States for its critical position on the immediate and long-term implications of globalization and neoliberalism. A *New York Times* reviewer believes “it reads like what you’d get if Tom Wolfe clambered into the head of Noam Chomsky—it elegantly and angrily scorches a lot of earth...” The same audience that enjoys Jon Stewart’s interpretation of politics on *The Daily Show*, and those who have been pepper-sprayed by the RCMP for not staying well away from heads of state, will welcome this sharp polemic. Among other things, it describes how campaigns are devised on the corporate and grassroots levels, how governments seem incidental to the running of a nation’s affairs, and how language has been corrupted by business and interest groups.

Generally, *The Fountain At the Center of the World* contains crisp writing as well as the occasional, and not accidental, piece of evocative description:

“Nuevo Leon can take the river out of *la frontera*, but can’t take *la frontera* out of the river. The river remembers what it did last year: sent north and put to work in the gardens, kitchens, and semi-conductor plants of the rich. It leaned its drunken head against Friday-night urinals in pay-day bars blurry with zero-hour contract-workers, and had nothing left to send back to the family smallholding. The following spring Nahuahuas finds the river too fucked up to hide its junk-food addiction, its substance abuse, its sinister hoardings of trophy tampons and women’s shoes as it crawls along the ground like an old wasp, a groggy ditch mumbling to itself and breeding jejen mosquitoes. No one blames the river if, when it does at last come back, it goes on a bender and is discovered next morning sitting mildly and peaceably in the ruined crops, a clumsy swirl of its reach describing a broad, haphazard domain while slurring the words *All mine!*”

This stream of anthropomorphism, metaphor, the demotic and breathless magazine-speak (three hyphenated words in one sentence) courses throughout the novel, and the fluid nature of the prose suits the narrative as it moves from the business world to protest sessions and pictures of village life. /9/ Unfortunately, there is sometimes a lecturing tone when simple things are

spelled out—as an example, what NGO stands for—and, in certain conversations on democracy and global concerns, Newman displays a tin ear: what is written comes across more like the talking points of policy analysts than conversation. Those mistakes are infrequent, but when they occur the novel is robbed of momentum and pleasure.

Drawing on his varied labour experiences and involvement with groups such as Indymedia and Earth First, Newman writes with familiarity on activist movements and the consequences of NAFTA. The action takes place in a Mexican village called Tonalacapan, in London, and, for its culmination, on the streets of Seattle during the 1999 protests against the WTO meetings.

Mariano (Chano) Salgado and Evan Hatch are brothers who were separated early in life, the latter raised by an English couple. He handles public relations for corporations. Salgado's wife Marisa is killed, prior to the novel's opening, by a bullet during a demonstration, after which Salgado takes part in a shoot-out with Mexican authorities, disappears, and is presumed dead. Their one child, Daniel, is adopted by a couple who move to Costa Rica; after the mother dies the father goes to the United States, leaving Daniel to be raised by his dead wife's parents. When Salgado eventually returns to Tonalacapan no one can tell him exactly where his son has gone or with whom. Daniel knows little about his father, but decides to search for him, hoping the scarce clues he has will help. What brings Hatch to Mexico is more fatal: he is ill from a mysterious disease, which his English doctors describe as a form of leukemia, and needs blood and marrow donations. The only person he can turn to is Salgado.

Finding him may be difficult. A company called Ethylclad, which owns and operates a toxic-waste plant in Tonalacapan, Salgado's home, pumps "sixty thousand gallons of groundwater a day." Protests by a citizens' group against this pollution have done no good, and to add to the misery of the villagers, "the people of Tamaulipas state had to pay Ethylclad ninety million dollars compensation for the ten months' lost profits." Convinced by a friend to put his experience with chemicals to work for a just cause, Salgado blows up the pipeline, becoming an eco-terrorist (if such fine distinctions still exist). He flees, but his name and face are known to the police. A picture of him pops up on Hatch's laptop when he is "on a branch line somewhere in England after a flood." Hatch and Daniel arrive in Tonalacapan just after Salgado disappears for the second time.

The brothers are not flat characters but they are not entirely convincing. Narratively, too often Salgado sounds like a tract come to life. His lack of faith in a positive outcome from the Seattle demonstrations may be attributed to fatigue and the loss of both his wife and son. "He was hoping to see this Protest of the Century fail. Its failure would confirm a view of universal hopelessness." Further, he knows that "whenever things came to a head, capitalism could always coopt a movement's reformists and isolate its radicals." There is little hope for positive change.

As one reviewer put it, "Newman's vast political knowledge and the desire to share it can, at times, overwhelm his characters, and detract from their humanity." This is correct. However, the observation perhaps misses Newman's intention. In the Mexico of *The Fountain at the Center of the World* characters are not products of their environment so much as they are by-products. From conception they are shaped by the local water supply, air quality, working conditions, an assortment of toxic chemicals and value-neutral nature. Hatch is ill because his mother was bitten by a beetle while pregnant with him. The insect transmitted chagas disease, which the mother died of after passing it on. A doctor tells Hatch: "Good nutrition, a healthy environment, fresh air have all given you—or gave you—a stronger immune system than most chagas victims." Salgado tells his brother: "The point was to get you somewhere nice where you

could have a life. [The adoptive parents] wouldn't have been told [of the disease]... And it may be they hoped that in Europe you'd have the drugs to treat chagas, said Chano (knowing all the while that there were no drugs for chagas because it was a disease of the poor)."

Similarly, Salgado's life around dangerous chemicals has altered his makeup, resulting in one small, odd benefit that emerges during the Seattle demonstrations. "Alone among the fifty thousand protesters [his] long years of marination in sodium metabisulfite had rendered him immune to tear gas. Both the oleoresin-capsicum of pepper spray and the orthochloro-benzalmalononitrile of tear gas had been neutralized by the sodium metabisulfite."

Two of Salgado's friends, Oscar and Yolanda, have worked around toxic chemicals, with the result that their only child, Oscar Jr., is born with Sturge-Weber syndrome, which they do not have the money to treat. The boy's life is miserable and short. Industrial activity shapes characters in ways that are even more insidious. While Yolanda and Daniel have a long-distance conversation, she considers "all the things she will have to do without to pay for this call," among them bus fare, electricity, coffee, washing powder and kerosene. In a way, she is made up of gas, power and chemicals (Newman might have non-free trade coffee in mind).

There is no escape from industrialization, not even for nature itself:

"Like steel rolling off a press, a smooth sheet of water is always pouring off the fountain's lowest ledge, before it joins the broad pool of the fountain. The deep round still subdues these new, tumbling, churning arrivals to the restrained mores of pond life. The sheety roll, however, shucks a last foaming hem of white water which bounces—with amazing consistency—tiny beads clear as Monterey glass. To and fro the beads are thrown in an arc. Constant pops of glass beads—hoopla—still emerge perfect and round, perfect and round, to disappear into the frothing shuck before Yolanda—much as she tries—can ever see them burst."

To describe the water fountain of Tonalacapan, one need only utilize the language of industrial processes. "The fountain had enjoyed a short burst of flourishing life after Chano and Ayo blew up Ethylclad's groundwater pipelines. So much so, in fact, that its full-bodied celebration had made everyone nervous." The fountain is an indicator of the water system's health and the nervous system of the villagers; it is has been tamed for so long that its increased activity—a flaunting of public "mores"—causes unease.

The psychological shallowness of characters who possess a surprising ability to find each other in strange cities, the transformation of a fountain from a sign of nature to a marker of industrial activity, as well as the notable omission of objects, values and beliefs higher than the material world (the reader is told about love, but it comes across as more of a gesture on Newman's part; happiness is in the past or maybe in the dim future; religion and art have no place; communal bonds don't last), indicate that Newman's philosophical approach is deterministic. Salgado doesn't believe in the activists who purposefully visited Seattle. Any notion of progress or unified vision among them in their fight for a cleaner environment is set against the more implacable, in some cases inert, politicians, union leaders and policy makers. Madeleine Albright, then-Secretary of State for the U.S., comes in for a particularly withering description. Overlooking the protests from her hotel room, breathing out hatred, she "swivels slightly on the stool to find her face's strong angle, to remind herself of her power." (That is not a casual use of the word "stool," nor is it over-emphasized.) The head of the AFL-CIO, John Sweeney, is dressed in a garment with an "elasticated hem" that visually mirrors the earlier

mention of the “elasticated leather jackets” worn by Seattle’s sheriffs. After hearing Sweeney’s speech, Salgado “realized this was exactly the sellout he’d been expecting.... It was twenty years since he’d last heard a union-boss speak and nothing had changed!” Third World delegates to the WTO are shown to be as frustrated and powerless as Salgado. Clearly, the narrative says to readers, it is useless to think that these people can (or even want to) rescue the world from global capitalism and environmental degradation, which may be one reason why Patrick Lejtenyi in *The Montreal Mirror* considers the novel “at times a bleak read.”

Within this grim story is an energetic presentation of radical ideology scraping against established ideology. A *Salon* reviewer stated that “the anti-globalization movement” may have found its Theodore Dreiser, but that comparison is misleading. Newman is most like John Dos Passos in his middle period (the U.S.A. trilogy). Instead of the ‘objectivity’ of Dos Passos’ polemical work, Newman offers a charged and slanted subjectivity which examines, and exploits, in a shameless and brash fashion, the tedium and mysteries behind the workings of the WTO, activist movements and globalization. *The Fountain at the Center of the World* is most alive where Newman concentrates on politics and *agit-prop*. The “fat flies in the flammable river and... chemical froth in the irrigation trenches” and the shaping of international policies fascinate him and engage his talents more than character or plot development, and his excitement and anger leap off the page. Though flawed, Newman’s third novel is serious, timely and important.

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