Chapter 2

Cross-Dressing the Second Empire in Fernando del Paso’s Noticias del imperio

Fernando del Paso quickly distinguished himself as one of the most promising writers of the midcentury generation when he published José Trigo (1966). Structurally ambitious and stylistically innovative, the novel recreates the violent governmental repression of striking railway workers of Nonalco-Tlatelolco in 1959. Excitement for his work continued to grow with the publication of Palinuro de México (1977), which follows the adventures of a medical student in downtown Mexico City who dies during a breathtaking climax at the Tlatelolco Square massacre in 1968. Critics and readers anxiously awaited ten years for the publication of his third novel, Noticias del imperio (1987), and were not disappointed. It is no less ambitious in its scope than its predecessors and tells the story of the 1861 invasion of Mexico by French forces, the short-lived empire under Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian Joseph of Austria, and the definitive triumph of the liberal faction led by Benito Juárez. Each of these novels can be rightly considered a totalizing novel, which Ryan Long has defined as one that attempts to recreate a single day, event, or nation in its entirety. Each addresses a particular moment of crisis when authoritarianism was thrown into striking relief against the background of democratic institutions and progress. The portrayal of governmental violence employed against peaceably striking workers and protesting students in his first two novels is complemented by the image of European expansionist aggression against an independent nation that had only recently overcome militarism and established a democratic government. By highlighting these fissures in
the teleological narrative of power, these totalizing novels create a “site of open-ended negotiation, a space of overlap that helps explain how Mexican novels respond to a period when the representative authority of both state and novel was challenged by the consequences of contradictory historical tendencies” (Long 5). All three can be read as a response to the exercise of repressive power by a national government suffering a crisis of legitimacy.

Throughout his career, Del Paso has combined the highest aesthetic standards with a rock-steady political commitment against totalitarianism and in favor of historical justice. In an interview with Maruja Echegoyen, he admitted that *Noticias del imperio* was written for the express purpose of revealing “todo ese mundo de intrigas, de bajezas, de calumnias y de porquerías” [all that world of intrigues, despicable acts, calumnies, and dirt] that he discovered in European history while preparing the manuscript (Echegoyen 32). Indeed the novel, written during his long residence in London, has regularly been identified for its open opposition to foreign involvement in Latin American affairs. As a journalist working for newspapers and magazines in England, France, and Mexico, Del Paso criticized the Western powers for interfering in the Americas as in the case of the Falkland Island War. During the conflict, Del Paso chided the British for their presumption and belittled their anachronistic imperial pretensions. Beyond a criticism of the political involvement in the region, *Noticias del imperio* can be read as an indictment of any foreign encroachments in Mexico under the programmatic implementation of economic neoliberalism during the Miguel de la Madrid administration. As noted in the previous chapter, José López Portillo, the president who preceded De la Madrid, had pinned the nation’s economic hopes on artificially inflated oil prices such that when the petroleum market collapsed in the late 1970s, Mexico was forced to borrow additional funds at exorbitant interest rates. The end result was an economic disaster. De la Madrid was a Harvard-educated banker who believed that opening Mexico to foreign markets and investment was the key to its financial stability. His economic policy was characterized by a heavy reliance on foreign capital; acceptance of International Monetary Fund guidelines and policies for inflation, prices, and debt repayment; and rampant privatization (Camp, “Time” 629). Reflecting this concern for the matter of foreign economic interests in Mexico, *Noticias del imperio* opens with a brief prologue about Benito Juárez’s decision to suspend all payments on foreign debt in 1861 which, Del Paso notes, offered the French emperor, Napoleon III, the necessary pretext to launch a full-scale invasion of country and establish a European monarchy in the New World.

What is striking about *Noticias del imperio* is that it completes the arc of Del Paso’s denunciation of totalitarianism by doing something altogether