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Salvador Novo. *The War of the Fatties and Other Stories from Aztec History (Texas Pan American Series).* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994. $14.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-292-79059-9; $14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-292-75554-3.

Reviewed by Charley Shively (University of Massachusetts)
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The first book of Salvador Novo (1904-74) translated into English since 1935, *The War of the Fatties* should sharpen a taste for more of his writings outside Mexico. While he played a central role in the history of Mexican poetry, theater and prose, Novo has been curiously neglected in the Anglophone world. Not to know Novo would be not to know Mexico. There is a Novo museum in the Colonia Roma and a street with his name in Coyoac'an. In 1994, a month long conference at the Palacio de Bellas Artes celebrated the ninetieth anniversary of his birth and the twentieth anniversary of his death. Several television stations covered the event on their evening news. The Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes also began publication in 1994 of Novo's *Obra Completa* (ISBN 968-29-6472-5) with three initial volumes: Tomo I: *La Vida en M'exico en el Periodo Presidencial de l'Azaro C'Ardenas* (ISBN 968-29-6474-1); Tomo II: *La Vida en M'exico en el Periodo Presidencial de Manuel 'Avila Camacho* (ISBN 968-29-6473-3) and Tomo III: _La Vida en M'exico en el Periodo Presidencial de Miguel Alem'an (ISBN 968-29-6475-X)–all three volumes compiled with notes, chronologies and indices by Jos'e Emilio Pacheco.

Novo chaired the committee which planed the celebrated Mexican Archaeological Museum (1968) for which he wrote the guide, *Una Visita a la Mexica*. Novo also scripted a 1968 light show for the Teotihuac'an sun and moon pyramids. In return for such government support, he publicly backed the government's murder of student demonstrators at Tlatelolco, but while that soured his reputation in Mexico, doubtless few north americans even remember the massacre much less Novo's response. Octavio Paz rose to eminence after he resigned his ambassadorship to India in protest against the massacre. But his great fame in the United States grew after he denounced Cuba. Ten years Novo's junior, Paz included Novo in his *New Poetry of Mexico* (1966, 1970). Paz obliquely acknowledges Novo's influence on him: "The youthfulness of these three poets [Carlos Pellicer, Xavier Villaurrutia, and Novo] is proved by their acceptance of the proximity of other young poets."

The War of the Fatties contains an excellent but brief introduction to Novo's life and works by Michael Alderson; the translations are superb and the notes and index contain a condensed history of the ancient Aztecs. Often not Mexican themselves, students of Aztec life present the pre-Columbians as grimly serious. They may be startled by Alderson/Novo's portrayal. Novo gives us chatty, gay Aztecs– something of a mix between Oscar Wilde, Jean Cocteau and Jean Genet (all of whose works Novo brought to the Mexican stage). More should be written on the Mexican sense of humor, a wonderful dish of eggs, peppers, tacos, sausages, *copa negra (u azul)*, and other tasty quips. Novo's recipe for drama includes essential ingredients that others delete from the Aztec story.

The work of Diego Rivera and Jos'e Clemente Orozco has become much better known outside Mexico than Novo's. But his voice and vision need to be studied if only to give some balance to their monumentality. Rivera's precolumbian museum (Anahuacalli) is a grim mausoleum that clumps Aztec, Maya and everything else together. Novo makes us laugh with the Aztecs as he did in his parodies of Rivera, which pocked fun at the artist's stolid heterosexuality. On the other hand, Novo may have been one of the most astute early admirers of Frieda Khalo's work. His understanding of the Aztecs remains much closer to hers than to the muralists.

For example, the title drama *The War of the Fatties* plays with the idea that Mexican men like their women plump. (Ironically Frieda was *una flaquita* and Diego *un gordito*.) In an appendix essay, Novo notes that "One of the reasons Carlota wasn't liked much in Mexican society was her slenderness, and the fact that, in contrast to the aristocratic ladies of her time, she drank only tea, while they put down large cups of chocolate, which is so fattening." The Spanish tried to stamp out chocolate (like peyote, morning glory seeds, and mescal). They believed chocolate was an aphrodisiac.

Like members of the Revolutionary generation, Novo

invented pre-Columbian Mexico. During the 20s he worked under Jos'e Vasconcelos, who celebrated the Cosmic Race. Novo learned Nauhuatl and followed new developments in Mexican archaeology. Alderson translates the Aztec chapter of Novo's *History of Coyoac'an* and the plays on Nauhuatl themes: *In Pipilzintzin, Cuauht'emoc: Play in One Act*, Cuauht'emoc and Eulalia: A Dialogue, Malinche and Carlota: A Dialogue*, and* In Ticit'ezcatl or The Enchanted Mirror: Opera in Two Acts_.

Alderson's introduction situates Novo in the context of Mexican gay and Lesbian history. (Perhaps Novo's queerness may explain his neglect in the Anglo world.) Alderson quotes generously from two other gay authors, Carlos Monsiv'ais (born 1938) and Jos'e Joaquin Blanco (b. 1951), who knew and have found inspiration in Novo's life. In gay studies, I have only one small complaint about Alderson's translating "cuate" as "twin;" of course, it means that but it means much more: something like "bloodbrothers," and among Mexican queers "cuate" has a resonance even stronger. (See Luis Zapata, *En Jirones*.) On the other hand some things are beyond translation. Proletarian artists denounced Nalgador Sobo; "bun fondler" would have worked better in translation if the author's name were Fon Bundler.

By design *The War of the Fatties* contains only Novo's Aztec writings. Novo's other writings (immense in their volume) await translation. Some of his gay reminiscenes and of his poems were translated in Winston Leyland's pioneering anthology, *Now the Volcano: An Anthology of Latin American Gay Literature*. San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1979.

Salvador Novo felt (and I would agree) that his poems contain the finest expression of his spirit. Poems present special problems for the translator and even when well translated find few readers. In general Mexican novelists have been better served by translators (Carlos Fuentes or Elena Poniatowska, for example) and by readers; Novo wrote little fiction. His histories may be too playful for historians. Those who read Spanish can find representative selections gathered by Antonio Castro Leal in a *Salvador Novo Antologia* (1966, 1979). Editorial Porrua included this anthology in their *Coleccion de Escritores Mexicanos* along with others of Sor Juana de la Cruz, Salvador Diaz Miron, Justo Sierra, Servando Teresa de Mier, Amado Nervo, Manuel Gutierrez Najera, Alfonso Reyes and others who like Novo have had haphazard crossover border experiences.

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