

THE SPANISH AMERICAN NOVEL

THREE AUTHORS OF ALIENATION: BOMBAL, ONETTI, CARPENTIER. By M. IAN ADAMS. (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1975. Latin American Monographs, No. 36, Institute of Latin American Studies. Pp. 128.)

THE EMERGENCE OF THE LATIN AMERICAN NOVEL. By GORDON BROTHERSTON. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977. Pp. 164.)

CURRENTS IN THE CONTEMPORARY ARGENTINE NOVEL: ARLT, MALLEA, SÁBATO, AND CORTÁZAR. By DAVID WILLIAM FOSTER. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1975. Pp. 155.)

The recent wave of interest in the Latin American novel by the English-speaking public has evoked a parallel response in critics to provide guidelines for evaluating the works that their audience reads so avidly in translation. The major challenge in such an undertaking is to succeed in informing a public likely to be ignorant of the precise location of Buenos Aires or the significance of Odría in Peruvian history, yet decidedly sophisticated in its ability to appreciate the structural innovations of the "new" Latin American novel. Self-confessed amateurs like Luis Harss and Barbara Dohmann attempted to bridge the cultural gap through their *Into the Mainstream: Conversations with Latin American Writers* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967) by supplementing their own interpretative statements, as well as the authors', with background information on the sociohistorical context in which the works discussed appear. While the conversational format proved to be a useful vehicle for introducing the individual writers and their work, of necessity it failed to result in a coherent theoretical statement on the nature of recent Latin American fiction. As Rita Guibert's *Seven Voices: Seven Latin American Writers Talk to Rita Guibert* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973) would reveal, books with a great reliance on the interview tend to allow the personality of the author to distract attention from the literary product.

It is with a view to fashioning a more objective critical standard that the books now being reviewed have appeared. Each represents a particular approach to the problems of narratology posed by the "new" Latin American novel. As the titles themselves indicate, Adams' study is thematic, while Foster's work is a stylistic analysis of a national literature, and Brotherston's book a more general, though still limited, survey. However, there is an element of convergence in their procedure, in that in all three instances, the critic has selected a single text by a representative author to illustrate the main points of his thesis. The underlying assumption of this method of analysis is the idea of arriving at a definition of the modern Spanish American novel through an examination of common tendencies in exemplary works. Obviously, this masterpiece approach is only successful to the degree in which the identity of the texts themselves is taken into account in the formulation of a general theory of the novel.

Indeed, it is his impatience with the meanings suggested by the works that he examines that makes Foster's book the least satisfactory of the three.

Foster's exasperation is particularly noticeable in his chapter on *Rayuela*, which is said to be "the high point of recent Argentine fiction" (p. 128). But if well over one-third of Cortázar's novel is dismissed as "tedious miscellanea" (p. 106), one of the "two best episodes" of the remaining two-thirds of the book seems "intolerably tiresome" (p. 120), the discussions that occupy much of the novel are regarded as "bargain-basement philosophizing" (p. 124), the main character whose presence unifies the work is simply a "pathetic egoist" (p. 119), and the milieu in which the protagonist functions is seen as a recycled version of "so much absurd nothingness" (p. 101), one wonders whether there are any features to which to attribute the "obvious excellence" (p. 100) of *Rayuela* to which Foster refers in his opening paragraphs, since even the language, by virtue of its being "not only Spanish instead of Parisian French but also Argentine Spanish" (p. 108), is said to be lacking in verisimilitude. Moreover, if "all of it may be rubbish" (p. 125), the implication is that the lesser landmarks of recent Argentine fiction are not worth the trouble of being read.

Foster's concluding chapter further reinforces the impression that recent Argentine fiction is a literature of exhaustion, despite his statement regarding the lively publishing activity now taking place in Buenos Aires. For of the six additional authors mentioned in the final chapter, only Manuel Puig can truly be considered as a "contemporary fictional heir" (p. x) of the four writers discussed in the main body of the text. Leopoldo Marechal is rather a contemporary ancestor of Julio Cortázar, who, in 1949, wrote one of the few favorable reviews of Marechal's *Adán Buenosayres*. The other writers—Antonio di Benedetto, Daniel Moyano, María Esther de Miguel, Pedro Orgambide—had already published experimental fiction by 1961, the date of publication of Sabato's *Sobre héroes y tumbas*, and two years before the appearance of Cortázar's *Rayuela*.

And yet, Foster's study is important, if only because, with the exception of Myron Lichtblau's study of the nineteenth-century novel, it is the only book-length work in English on recent Argentine fiction. Foster's stated aim is "to bring into focus works that [he regards] as the most significant manifestations of the genre and to give them in-depth consideration" (p. xii). He therefore attempts to do for the Argentine novel what Joseph Sommers did for the Mexican novel in *After the Storm: Landmarks of the Modern Mexican Novel* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1968), and what Raymond D. Souza has since done for the Cuban novel in *Major Cuban Novelists: Innovation and Tradition* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1976). But Foster's methodology is inadequate to the task he has set himself. For his particular blend of "concepts derived from North American neo-Aristotelianism and European structuralism" (p. x) is at its most lucid when dealing with closed structures. Hence the chapter on Mallea is the most convincing, since of the four authors discussed, Mallea is the only one whose work readily lends itself to an interpretation founded on the premise of the logical coherence of the work's components.

A reading grounded in "the rhetoric of irony" would have yielded more fruitful results, since, as Foster himself has recognized, the most salient feature of recent Argentine fiction is the gap between its avowed intentions and its

ultimate realizations. From Roberto Arlt to Manuel Puig, there is a marked preoccupation with exploring the underground currents of existence in counterpoint to the officially sanctioned patterns of behavior in a self-reflexive literary text, which progresses by episodic accumulation rather than by movement toward a climactic resolution. One would therefore have expected that in a work such as Foster's, which is intended to be a general orientation to the Argentine novel for the informed reader, a critical framework would have been adopted to make possible a discussion of Mallea's novel, as well as the open-ended structures of Mallea's compatriots, in a systematic manner. Without a focal point, such as the Mexican Revolution used by Joseph Sommers, or the dialectics of novelistic tradition and individual authorial innovations employed by Raymond Souza, Foster's book fails to give the reader a sense that Mallea and the other authors discussed have anything in common, besides the incidental factor of a shared nationality.

The most noteworthy aspect of Foster's study is the effort to revitalize the image of Roberto Arlt. But even this is a mixed blessing for the English-speaking public, since none of Arlt's work is available in translation. Moreover, given the controversial nature of Arlt's fictional creations, it is doubtful whether anyone would venture to translate *Los siete locos* at some point in the immediate future.

Seeking wider recognition for the work of a neglected author is also part of Adams' purpose in writing a critical evaluation of María Luisa Bombal, who, unlike Arlt, has been translated into English, no doubt because her novels have less of an improvised character. In keeping with the overall design of Adams' book, Bombal and the other two writers have been chosen for analysis "because each of them represents a different literary use of alienation" (p. 3). The three main chapters are therefore devoted to discussing the poetic treatment of alienation in Bombal's *La última niebla*, the schizophrenic image presented in Onetti's *El pozo* and *Tan triste como ella*, and the sociocultural aspect in Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos*.

This represents one of the first attempts to analyze modern Spanish American fiction in terms of international intellectual currents. And herein lies its greatest weakness. For the definitions of Marx, Erich Fromm, Erich Kahler, and R. D. Laing do not altogether apply to the situations presented in the Spanish American novels. There is no doubt that the protagonists of Bombal and Onetti fail to experience themselves as "the center of their world." But their condition is not caused by the impact of technological change on the socio-economic order, for they do not have a social identity as wage-earners. Rather, their self-estrangement stems from an inherent defect in their personality, which causes them to lose contact with reality and to live in a world of the imagination. Carpentier's protagonist, on the other hand, initially appears to fit the classic Marxist definition by being alienated from the product of his labor. But in his taking active steps to alter the source of his frustration, he, too, ceases to be bound by the Marxist premise, for he is no longer "out of touch with his inner world." If, in his concluding remarks, Adams had attempted to add a Spanish American corollary to the general aspects of alienation that he had summarized

in his first chapter, the reader would have been left with less of a feeling that good individual textural analyses have been undermined by an inadequate theoretical underpinning.

Neglecting the Spanish American setting is not Brotherston's shortcoming, since one of the merits of his book is that it situates the texts in a specific context. Combining practical criticism of selected works with insights from literary and social history, it attributes the rise of the modern Spanish American novel to the sense of a hemispheric identity reflected by certain writers whose works thereby transcend the immediate sociopolitical reality of their individual nation-states. At the same time, Brotherston's preoccupation with capturing the ethos of the entire continent leads one to question his judgment in certain instances. For example, why does he devote a chapter to José María Arguedas, when none of the pages of the incomplete *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* can equal the lyrical power of Miguel Ángel Asturias' *Hombres de maíz* in capturing the essence of a pre-Columbian culture? Or, if writers who reflect a continental consciousness are truly Brotherston's concern, why has he omitted Carlos Fuentes? One possible reason is that had he included Fuentes, his present list of eight novelists—Asturias, Carpentier, Onetti, Rulfo, Cortázar, Arguedas, Vargas Llosa, García Márquez—would have been simply a shortened version of Luis Harss' earlier list of ten.

Be that as it may, the book fulfills its stated purpose as "an introduction to the Latin American novel" (p. vii), although here again, one might wonder why the "Latin" of the title, when only a sum total of ten pages are devoted to the Brazilian novel. Without attempting to match the encyclopedic scale of John S. Brushwood's *The Spanish American Novel: A Twentieth-Century Survey* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1975), Brotherston's book is a convenient starting point for those seeking to be informed about major trends in the modern Spanish American novel. Each of the chapters on the individual authors is sufficiently detailed to convey a sense of the writer's style, his novelistic technique and thematic concerns. Since these chapters are preceded by a preliminary one describing the tradition that the writers inherited, and are followed by a concluding chapter summarizing the distinctive features of these authors' work, the reader is given an idea of what is new about the "new" Spanish American novel.

Those seeking a more in-depth treatment of the individual writers would no doubt consult one of several books already serving that purpose, such as Evelyn Picon Garfield's *Julio Cortázar* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1975), or Roberto González Echevarría's *Alejo Carpentier: The Pilgrim at Home* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1977), while those interested in a more theoretical approach to genre studies would probably turn to Alfred J. MacAdam's *Modern Latin American Narratives: The Dreams of Reason* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1977). Monographic essays like Seymour Menton's *Prose Fiction of the Cuban Revolution* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1975), are also an invaluable source of information about a particular subject. But Brotherston's book will be a useful guide for readers in search of a point of reference among the embarrassment of riches that is the

“new” Spanish American novel, particularly for those not wishing to be overwhelmed by a plethora of names, or having to contend with the hermeticism of the specialist’s vocabulary. The bibliography further enhances the book’s usefulness, since it lists additional titles of important novels not discussed in the body of the text.

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