

LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND THE CRITICS

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- MODERN LATIN AMERICAN FICTION: A SURVEY.* Edited by JOHN KING. (London: Faber and Faber, 1987. Pp. 336. \$12.95 paper.)
- REINVENTING THE AMERICAS: COMPARATIVE STUDIES OF LITERATURE OF THE UNITED STATES AND SPANISH AMERICA.* Edited by BELL GALE CHEVIGNY and GARI LAGUARDIA. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. Pp. 343. \$39.50.)
- DE LA CRONICA A LA NUEVA NARRATIVA MEXICANA: COLOQUIO SOBRE LITERATURA MEXICANA.* Edited by MERLIN H. FORSTER and JULIO ORTEGA. (Oaxaca, Mexico: Editorial Oasis, 1986. Pp. 480.)
- ISLA A SU VUELO FUGITIVA: ENSAYOS CRITICOS SOBRE LITERATURA HISPANOAMERICANA.* By ROBERTO GONZALEZ ECHEVARRIA. (Madrid: Ediciones José Porrúa Turanzas, 1983. Pp. 264.)

The first books to go in those too rare prunings of one's library are usually collections of critical essays, especially those by diverse authors. Such collections usually contain a few worthy essays that can be preserved by the photocopier, making cuts in one's library virtually painless. What remains on the shelves is a record of collections of critical essays that one considers invaluable, such as Djelal Kadir's impressive if demanding *Questing Fictions*,¹ the essays in *Latin America in Its Literature*,² and Julio Ortega's *The Poetics of Change*,³ to mention a few recent collections of essays in English in the "to be kept" category, and not to mention any books on poetry, such as Octavio Paz's exquisite *Children of the Mire*.⁴

Modern Latin American Fiction, edited and introduced by John King, offers a readable collection of essays in English that introduce in more than summary form major contemporary Latin American authors such as Jorge Luis Borges, Alejo Carpentier, Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, Clarice Lispector, and João Guimarães Rosa. Its subtitle, *A Survey*, is a misnomer, however. *Modern Latin American Fiction* provides not a comprehensive overview but rather some twenty selective and engaging essays along with a useful nine-page bibliography. Those assisting newcomers with annotated notes on their authors are Charles Perrone, Gerald Martin, and Randal Johnson. This volume presents authors in some depth and with a

sound appreciation of their status but without employing obscure critical vocabularies or much critical complexity, and it consequently belongs in all college and university undergraduate and graduate libraries as well as on the "to be kept" shelf of Latin Americanists' personal libraries.

Modern Latin American Fiction fulfills something of the same role as Gordon Brotherston's 1977 collection of essays, *The Emergence of the Latin American Novel*.⁵ Perrone's fine essay, "João Guimarães Rosa: An Endless Passage," should do as much to attract new readers to its subject's corpus as the essay Brotherston wrote on Miguel Angel Asturias's *Hombres de maíz*. Just as Brotherston's book enticed new readers to sample Latin American authors, so will the diverse essays of this collection. Among the good authors well-served by these essays is Mario Vargas Llosa, Peru's noted novelist and announced presidential candidate. *Modern Latin American Fiction* opens with an essay about reality and fiction by the prolific Vargas Llosa himself, and the collection also includes an excellent article on Vargas Llosa by Gerald Martin. Similarly, the volume features two extremely short pieces by Argentina's Manuel Puig and Paraguay's Augusto Roa Bastos as well as short critical essays on them.

An absolute newcomer to the field of contemporary Latin American letters, restricted to English language introductions to Latin American literature, would also do well to look at Enrique Anderson-Imbert's two-volume *Spanish-American Literature*,⁶ which offers thorough, albeit entry-like and now outdated, coverage, or Kessel Schwartz's *A New History of Spanish American Fiction*,⁷ or *Modern Latin American Literature*,⁸ compiled and edited by David William Foster and Virginia Ramos Foster. Other essays that have received considerable critical acclaim are the critical introductions by Emir Rodríguez Monegal to the *Borzoi Anthology of Latin American Literature*.⁹ For introducing the field in a broad context, John Crow's *The Epic of Latin America*¹⁰ and Jean Franco's *The Modern Culture of Latin America* remain essential.¹¹

No research library should fail to own the other three volumes under review: *Reinventing the Americas*, *De la crónica a la nueva narrativa mexicana*, and *Isla a su vuelo fugitiva: ensayos críticos sobre literatura hispano-americana*. Each one contains several important essays. Taken altogether, however, the four collections contain some ninety essays that are at best loosely related and uneven in quality. Given the vast terrain and the tremendous diversity of critical ability represented as well as the range of interests and styles, this reviewer is reduced to selecting for special note primarily those essays that make a significant contribution to knowledge.

Reinventing the Americas, edited by Bell Gale Chevigny and Gari Laguardia, offers eighteen essays that are overshadowed by the glorious title. The range of choices spans centuries and continents and includes authors from the United States as well as from Latin America. But the disproportionate expectations raised by the title indicate one nagging

problem with this collection: no other America nor American author is "reinvented." One essay, "The Poet as Critic: Wallace Stevens and Octavio Paz," is only eight pages long, including notes. Its title, which almost outdoes the hubris of the volume title, is also more ambitious than the content, leading to high expectations that are bound to be disappointed. I had read *Reinventing the Americas* before receiving the review copy, but because the title had proved misleading, I had not read the individual articles as carefully as some of them deserve to be read. Only on a second reading, in a different context, did the quality of several of the essays emerge in their own right.

Evidently, the editors of *Reinventing the Americas* chose not to discriminate between competent essays and distinguished ones because a number of competent essays, some very short, appear among a few distinguished ones. As a general rule, brief essays rarely make significant contributions to the understanding of major authors, and few academics can afford to risk what short essays probably require: the glitzy vocabulary and confident judgment calls of critics like D. H. Lawrence. In fact, the last three of these four volumes under review should have been edited far more rigorously.

The rationale proffered in the introduction to *Reinventing the Americas* for including a range of critical stances is to "present a variety of approaches to the issue of comparison" (p. 32). But few issues germane to the processes of careful comparison are addressed (Alfred MacAdam's preface to *Textual Confrontations: Comparative Readings in Latin American Literature* discusses some of the difficulties of the comparatist enterprise in the absence of historical connections).¹² Chevigny's "'Insatiable Unease': Melville and Carpentier and the Search for an American Hermeneutic," one of the best essays in *Reinventing the Americas*, moves boldly and luminously from Cuba's revolutionary essayist, José Martí, to North America's Ralph Waldo Emerson, and from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* to Alejo Carpentier's *Explosion in a Cathedral*. Good as this essay is, however, simple contrast offers the greatest insights, as opposed to genuine comparison through considerations based on influence, tradition, or genre. Doris Sommer's "Supplying Demand: Walt Whitman as the Liberal Self" is fair criticism of Whitman, but to be comparatist, it requires more than an interpretation of how Whitman's "open" poetry returns his reader to a "founding moment." Julio Marzán's "Mrs. Williams's William Carlos," a straightforward biographical piece, is even less comparatist than Sommer's contribution.

Reinventing the Americas nevertheless contains some excellent essays, either by way of interpretation as in Susan Willis's article on differences in perception, "Caliban as Poet: Reversing the Maps of Domination," or by way of being informative, as in the interview with Margaret Randall. The collection also includes a very short essay by Luisa Valen-

zuela in which Valenzuela claims women writers have been brainwashed into thinking of themselves as part of Mother Earth. Yet she goes on to speak of women's writing as having to do with "obscure discourse coming from the depths of the guts" (p. 243), of writing being associated with mud, visceral feelings, and menstrual blood. Ironically, all these images have also been traditionally associated with Mother Earth. Would women who welcome being identified with Mother Earth be able to speak of their own work expansively or even oozingly in a feminist reevaluation of blood and mud? Considering that Valenzuela's fiction is top-notch and has begun to receive the critical attention it deserves and that one of her collections of stories (recently translated as *Other Weapons*)¹³ is first rate "feminine" writing, it is a pity that Valenzuela expends several paragraphs of her essay on Erica Jong but says nothing about her own work.

Another shadow over the virtues of *Reinventing the Americas* is the absence of an adequate principle of organization. Although the temptation to publish collections of essays is understandable, should not the conferences that give rise to such publishing ventures define the issues to be addressed more clearly beforehand? If they did, then the organizers might improve the essayists' chances of sailing safely between the narrows of too much restriction and the shallows of inchoate permissiveness and thus reaching the deeper waters navigated in outstanding critical works.

Another work that fails to deliver what its title suggests is *De la crónica a la nueva narrativa mexicana*, edited by Merlin Forster and Julio Ortega. It does not cover the trajectory of relationships in literature in Mexico from the chronicle to the modern narrative. Disappointing also is the absence of an essay by Ortega. Nonetheless, the first three essays on chronicles are excellent. Walter Mignolo, Enrique Pupo-Walker, and Robert Lewis start this volume of "colloquy" off with enough verve to render the collection valuable. Pupo-Walker works out the "extraordinary latitudes" that the chroniclers allowed themselves in defining what constituted *lo histórico*. Mignolo concentrates on "verbal play" in the chronicles and the different writing models invoked, such as the songs that constituted the book or the historical record of indigenous peoples.

This collection is also weakened by essays that are too short or do not develop the connections of their themes to wider contexts. Miriam Echeverría's "Texto y represión en *Los perros de Elena Garro*" is too brief to create any potential Garro readership. Wendy Faris's "¿Proustitución?: una familia lejana" is less witty than its title promises, despite the fact that Carlos Fuentes has become open game these days, doubtless a victim of his own successes. Moreover, this volume follows no overarching, cohesive principle. On the positive side, *De la crónica a la nueva narrativa mexicana* (as well as *Reinventing the Americas*) does not neglect women as authors or as critics and includes a section devoted to women authors. The

old guard is still more than amply represented, however, by six essays on Juan Rulfo and four on Carlos Fuentes.

Roberto González Echevarría's *Isla a su vuelo fugitiva: ensayos críticos sobre literatura hispano americana* concentrates on the literature of the Caribbean, principally the island of Cuba. Not all these reviews and essays are worth preserving in book form either. But the collection does contain two splendid essays on Carpentier by perhaps the foremost critic on his work, Roberto González Echevarría, who has written two critical works on this subject: *The Pilgrim at Home* and *The Voice of the Masters: Writing and Authority in Modern Latin American Literature*.¹⁴ González Echevarría's knowledge about and passion for the work of Carpentier continue to win new adherents. Deeply informed in the history of ideas, imbued in the traditions influencing his chosen authors, and widely read in pre- and poststructuralist criticism, González Echevarría offers superbly fresh critical readings of Carpentier in the title essay and in "Historia y alegoría en la narrativa de Carpentier." This book is indeed one "to be kept."

The first essay in the collection, "Humanismo, retórica y las crónicas de la conquista" is excellent. González Echevarría argues that the chroniclers should be accepted as historians because, despite the various writing formulas and rhetorical postures they adopted, they looked upon themselves as historians. Precisely because the chroniclers did not make clear distinctions between life events and their enletterment, González Echevarría grants them the same credibility as historians and an equivalent contact with circumambient "reality" ("*realidad*" *circundante*) (p. 21).

González Echevarría himself becomes less the conventional historian and more the probing historiographer when he argues in other essays for Carpentier's sense of the concordance of text and context, connects the written world and the cosmic vision, and shows how the family of tobacco and that of sugar form the history of Cuba in José Lezama Lima's *Paradiso*. The essay on Lezama, "Lo cubano en Paradiso," ranks among the best in the book. Essays on Severo Sarduy and Luis Rafael Sánchez balance out the coverage between established and recent authors. "La vida es una cosa phenomenal" on Sánchez's *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* illuminates the "always historical" epic elements, the musical components, and the grotesque and the comic in the search for nationality in Puerto Rico, all of which are made graphic in the novel.

I wonder, however, why González Echevarría pays no attention to Sánchez's compatriot, Rosario Ferré. Perhaps someday, when critics of the caliber of Julia Kristeva and Susan Willis become more widely read, González Echevarría may add in his second edition of this book a complement to his essay on Derrida and Borges, "BdeORridaGES." A second such deconstructionist extravaganza, with a title equally winged with pun could be a fictive festschrift in honor of Rosario Ferré entitled "Fe(r)KRISré(TE)VA," unless perhaps so feminine an islandscape may

seem to Echevarría to be too fugitive. Even without such an essay, this collection has the honor of having been the first of the works under review to be borrowed by one of my colleagues, who subsequently ordered a copy for himself.

In reflecting on these four anthologies of diverse essays, I begin to see the wisdom of Harold Bloom's current publishing enterprise. With editorial help, he is selecting articles to be organized by theme or area and republished by Chelsea House. The four collections of essays reviewed here could provide many useful contributions to a collection of essays on the chronicles, to another collection on problems in comparative literature in the Americas, and to one or more volumes introducing various major Latin American novels. Indeed, many of these essays merit an opportunity to reach wider as well as more carefully defined audiences.

NOTES

1. Djelal Kadir, *Questing Fictions: Latin America's Family Romance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).
2. *Latin America in Its Literature*, edited by César Fernández Moreno, Julio Ortega, and Ivan A. Schulman (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1980).
3. *Poetics of Change: The New Spanish American Narrative*, edited by Julio Ortega (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984).
4. Octavio Paz, *Children of the Mire: Modern Poetry from Romanticism to the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974).
5. Gordon Brotherston, *The Emergence of the Latin American Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).
6. Enrique Anderson-Imbert, *Spanish-American Literature: A History*, 2 vols. (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1969).
7. Kessel Schwartz, *A New History of Spanish American Fiction*, 2 vols. (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1971).
8. *Modern Latin American Literature*, compiled and edited by David William Foster and Virginia Ramos Foster (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1975).
9. *The Borzoi Anthology of Latin American Literature*, 2 vols., edited by Emir Rodríguez Monegal, with the assistance of Thomas Colchie (New York: Knopf, 1977).
10. John A. Crow, *The Epic of Latin America*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980).
11. Jean Franco, *The Modern Culture of Latin America: Society and the Artist* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1967).
12. Alfred J. MacAdam, *Textual Confrontations: Comparative Readings in Latin American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
13. Luisa Valenzuela, *Cambio de armas* (Hanover, N.H.: Ediciones del Norte, 1982); the English edition is entitled *Other Weapons*, translated by Deborah Bonner (Hanover, N.H.: Ediciones del Norte, 1985).
14. Roberto González Echevarría, *The Pilgrim at Home* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977); and Roberto González Echevarría, *The Voice of the Masters: Writing and Authority in Modern Latin American Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985).