

LITERATURE, CULTURE,
AND SOCIETY IN THE
NEW LATIN AMERICA

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- LATIN AMERICA IN ITS LITERATURE*. Edited by CESAR FERNANDEZ MORENO, JULIO ORTEGA, and IVAN A. SCHULMAN. Translated by MARY G. BERG. (New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1980. Pp. 347. \$44.50.)
- CULTURA Y CREACION INTELECTUAL EN AMERICA LATINA*. By KINHIDE MUSHAKOJI ET AL. Edited by PABLO GONZALEZ CASANOVA. (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1984. Pp. 363.)
- HACIA LA LIBERACION DEL LECTOR LATINOAMERICANO*. By ARIEL DORFMAN. (Hanover, N.H.: Ediciones del Norte, 1984. Pp. 286. \$10.00.)
- ALTERNATE VOICES IN THE CONTEMPORARY LATIN AMERICAN NARRATIVE*. By DAVID WILLIAM FOSTER. (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1985. Pp. 160. \$22.00.)
- THE VOICE OF THE MASTERS: WRITING AND AUTHORITY IN MODERN LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE*. By ROBERTO GONZALEZ ECHEVARRIA. (Austin: University of Texas, 1985. Pp. 187. \$20.00.)
- POETICS OF CHANGE: THE NEW SPANISH-AMERICAN NARRATIVE*. By JULIO ORTEGA. Translated by GALEN D. GREASER. (Austin: University of Texas, 1984. Pp. 189. \$20.00.)
- ONE EARTH, FOUR OR FIVE WORLDS: REFLECTIONS ON CONTEMPORARY HISTORY*. By OCTAVIO PAZ. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1985. Pp. 224. \$14.95.)

Just before his execution, the Black Caribbean protagonist in Gillo Pontecorvo's provocative movie *Burn*, spitefully inquires of his British colonial oppressor, "Civilization belongs to whites, but what civilization, and until when?"¹ In answer to José Dolores's second question, most of the books under review here suggest that the critical voices of a frozen continent are now launching an interrogation into the relationship between literary expression and the unjust sociopolitical and economic institutions still obstructing the human potential of most Latin Americans. But less agreement exists to answer Dolores's first

question as to what kind of civilization is or should be emerging, and consequently, what kind of revolution should be promoted to bring it about.

Some of the most authoritative commentators on Latin American literature and culture are represented here, and it is therefore fitting that several of the works are now accessible to the English-speaking public (the books by González Echevarría and Foster are English originals). The age-old debate about the power of writing within society has been refreshingly renewed by the far-reaching effects of a “poetics of change” or a “liberation of the reader” supposedly occurring in the literature of the region. These authors allude to something about serious Latin American literature that is being dramatically transformed, but what is it? Analysts like Angel Rama and José Guilherme Merquior have produced worthy sociocultural interrogations on the complex question of what is literature in Latin American society today.² But many questions remain unanswered. As a means of approaching the larger issue of the evolving relationship between intellectual culture and social transformation, I will summarize recent changes observed in who is reading, who is writing, and who is criticizing Latin America’s “high” or “serious” literature.³ I will then consider the books under review and attempt to put into perspective the postmodern or deconstructive ideology that figures prominently in Latin American literature and the criticism written about it.⁴

Has a change occurred in who is reading literature? In Latin America’s most urbanized societies, the dramatic shift has already become the stuff of history with the rise of a middle-class reading public in the early decades of the twentieth century. Have more recent changes been associated with the boom? The information available on this question (which is generally old or impressionistic) is hardly conclusive. The unprecedented sales figures for the boom literature in Latin America point to at least a change in the reading preferences of the region’s small proportion of serious readers. Only a few decades ago in Argentina, the sale of translated works by European or North American writers frequently outstripped sales of works of Argentine or Latin American writers by as much as twenty-five or thirty to one.⁵ Now in most countries of the region, interest in works written by Latin America’s boom superstars is substantial.⁶ Less known, but hardly less significant, is the growing interest of cultured readers in works by national writers.⁷ These trends have given rise to two conflicting and, in my opinion, largely erroneous interpretations. On one extreme, *dependencistas* argue that the “universalization” of boom texts (in terms of international commercial success and the incorporation of aesthetic norms disseminated from cultural centers in the developed West) has signaled the progressive and irreversible “disintegration” of nationality

and national culture.⁸ The optimistic counterthesis claims that the same trends announce an emerging nationalist commitment by the educated middle class that significantly transcends reading tastes.⁹ The first thesis errs in equating novelists' technical virtuosity with reactionary politics; it also ignores the relationship between the rise of the new narrative and the spread of the liberation practice of reading among marginalized groups throughout Latin America. The counterthesis errs in failing to observe that the bullish commercial trend within Latin America toward serious national literature has accompanied, but not seriously challenged, the growing influence of multinational agencies and ideas in the region's cultural and economic institutions and the spread of a debasing, even repressive mass media culture.¹⁰ These last two factors contributing to the erosion of local cultural roots have undoubtedly become even more pervasive after a decade of totalitarian military rule and the devastating economic crisis that continues to affect most of Latin America.

While the reading tastes of the serious literary public in Latin America have undergone a qualitative change, what probably remains unaltered is the tiny proportion of its members in relation to society as a whole. A fairly safe conjecture is that even in Latin America's most educated countries (excepting perhaps in Cuba), the number of serious readers has never exceeded 1 percent of the total population.¹¹ Furthermore, the total number of serious literary works bought and read by this small group is minuscule—perhaps 3 or 4 percent of all literary works—when compared with the vast quantities of thriller, romance, and pulp fiction consumed.¹² Has the market success of boom narratives among cultured readers also implied greater popularity among other reading groups? The answer is, only slightly. One must respect Angel Rama's conjectures about a new reading public, "an entirely new sociological phenomenon," emerging at the beginning of the 1960s that largely accounts for the surge in popularity of weekly magazines resembling *Time* or *Newsweek* across urban Latin America and the jump in sales of novels by Julio Cortázar, Gabriel García Márquez, and the like.¹³ Although such changes should not be ignored, more convincing is the sober opinion of Chilean novelist José Donoso that the success of the boom has been "more than anything else, literary, confined to an elite, each time more extensive, certainly, but always an elite."¹⁴ Ariel Dorfman reaches a similar conclusion by a different path. He recounts that in one poor community, García Márquez's journalistic writing was better known and far preferred over his fiction. Dorfman also tells of the mixed successes of specially funded programs to teach short fictional or theatrical works (by such authors as Juan Rulfo, Eduardo Galeano, Manuel Rojas, and Gabriel García Márquez) in working-class communities. Although some participants demonstrated initial interest,

the majority could not be budged from their previous conception that the value of such stuff was less than that of *concón* (or *con Colón*), the burnt rice left at the bottom of the cooking pot. Thus some individuals always prefer *concón*, but the vast majority continue to follow the dictum that “la cultura no se come.”¹⁵

Although little has changed with regard to the slight participation of the masses in Latin America’s serious cultural discourse (and should one expect otherwise?), the intellectual distance between the cultural elite and the continent’s majorities has undergone significant transformation in other ways. For example, few if any writers today haughtily cultivate an expression out of reach of “the thinking majority of our continent” because of their supposed “absolute lack of mental elevation,” as did Rubén Darío at the turn of the century.¹⁶ On the contrary, what stands out about numerous literary works is the combining of linguistic complexity with a style that is accessible to new reading publics—as has been accomplished by Rulfo and García Márquez. Also of note is the continuing trend toward a “democratized” literature filled with characters from the popular classes. A third example of the dissolving distance between intellectuals and the masses is the emerging popularity of hybrid genres, such as the testimonies written by Rigoberta Menchú and Omar Cabezas and the narrative documentaries by Elena Poniatowska and Manlio Argueta. A different manifestation of lessened distance is the protagonist role played by serious writers and critics in Latin America’s most revolutionary national projects: the high Sandinista posts of novelist Sergio Ramírez and poet Ernesto Cardenal; and the image of Fidel Castro as *lector predilecto* of the region’s *autor predilecto*, García Márquez.¹⁷

Recent trends in reading find their correlate in developments affecting Latin America’s writers: the twentieth century has also witnessed a significant shift in who writes. Today’s writers overwhelmingly hail from the lower-middle and professional middle classes, in contrast to the privileged origins that were the rule a century ago. This trend has accompanied a parting of the ways between cultural and socioeconomic elites in Latin America and elsewhere in the West. The reasons for this divergence comprise an issue that falls outside of the scope of this essay, however. Carlos Fuentes writes, “What is happening is that when the North American capitalist world superimposed itself on the feudal and semifeudal structures of Latin America, the writer lost his place in the elite and became submerged in the petite bourgeoisie He became a true writer.”¹⁸ One may criticize this overly mechanistic diagnosis of causes, but Fuentes’s chronology seems accurate: the critical stance of Latin American writers in opposing socioeconomic privilege and regional dependency vis-à-vis the developed West is a relatively recent phenomenon that has become increasingly pronounced since

World War II. As Ariel Dorfman critically observes, it has become almost a truism that “los intelectuales latinoamericanos tienen el corazóncito a la izquierda” (in González Casanova, pp. 321–53). Emir Rodríguez Monegal and José Miguel Oviedo (both included in the Fernández Moreno anthology) associate the solidification of this critical attitude toward power with the revolutionary climate that prevailed following the Cuban Revolution. Similar is David William Foster’s observation that the rise within the past two decades of documentary narrative and the Buenos Aires school of demythifying novels resulted from young writers’ urgent objective of challenging official discourse. Finally, Roberto González Echevarría argues that many of Latin America’s younger writers adopt the implicit, if not explicit, mission of undermining authoritarian structures in texts, an operation that either announces or promotes extratextual transformations such as the receding power of the bourgeoisie and the increasing failure of the colonialist venture in Latin America (p. 69).

The emphasized self-referential and critical focus of much of Latin America’s new narrative has blurred the traditional distinction between writers and critics, but this tendency has not negated the existence of a separate and influential group of critical writers primarily associated with academic institutions in the developed West. Perhaps most noteworthy about this group is the high number of Latin American intellectuals who, having fled from oppressive conditions in their homelands during the past two to three decades, now live in permanent exile in Venezuela, Mexico, Western Europe, and the United States. While this “brain drain” has altered the ideological balance of the intellectual community left behind, this trend has also had a seismic effect on the academic agencies in the host societies that deal with Latin American literary and cultural issues.

Although all these phenomena deserve extensive commentary, space allows elaborating on only one related aspect: the effect of exile on the critical orientation. Only a few decades ago, it was fairly automatic to associate the academic image with official history.¹⁹ This association has become largely a thing of the past. Voluntary exile undoubtedly shaped the Latin American narrative of the 1960s to a considerable degree.²⁰ Then geographic exile during the 1970s and early 1980s offered Latin America’s most socially oriented writers and critics personal safety and the space to analyze and publish their critiques without censorship or fear of economic retaliation by disgruntled elites. Consequently, González Echevarría’s thesis regarding exile needs a slight, friendly amendment. He is on solid ground when he argues (in relation to a text by Alejo Carpentier) that exile itself affords no distinct, privileged position out of which a literature poignant with social or political relevance emerges (p. 129). What must be added is that exile, whether

of the writer, the critic, or the text, has frequently served as the facilitating vehicle without which this critical vocation could not have been exercised.

The writers of the books under review generally converge in their awareness of the links existing between the critical spirit promoted by the new literature and the forces of change in contemporary society. In several of the works, the issue of liberation through cultural and literary praxis is motivated by the sensed need for Latin Americans to possess a well-fortified identity that can resist the incessant and inevitable encroachments in all spheres of life by the hegemonic powers of the West. César Fernández Moreno states in the introductory essay to *Latin America in Its Literature* (originally published in Spanish in 1972) that "literature is primarily an intense form of language which, in its turn, is the most direct and profound communication medium men have at their command to express the spirit of any given community . . ." (p. 22). A clear intuition of Latin America's cultural reality therefore becomes a prerequisite for considering intelligently any issue related to the region's sociology, economy, or institutional structures. The question of cultural identity becomes a political issue because different individuals representing various class or regional interests use the media to propagate their preferred images. *Latin America in Its Literature* therefore seeks to rival the cultural space previously occupied by writings on Latin American culture by North American and European scholars. Its goal is to disseminate a collective, but eclectic, portrait of the culture of the continent based on the opinions of Latin America's foremost critical writers, including Emir Rodríguez Monegal, Severo Sarduy, Noé Jitrik, Fernando Alegria, Guillermo Sucre, Roberto Fernández Retamar, Antonio Cándido, José Antonio Portuondo, José Miguel Oviedo, and José Lezama Lima. The diverse ideological positions of the contributors attest to the editors' intention of constructing a multifarious view of Latin America's cultural experience.

The general guideline for the contributing essayists was that they were to consider Latin America, in all its diversity, as a single "cultural unity." Unfortunately, in the process of shortening the original Spanish edition for publication in English, the five essays that perhaps best fulfilled this stipulation were left aside.²¹ The essays that survived this suppression, with few exceptions, merely compare and contrast the distinct manifestations of the region's "high," elitist literary experience. Thus a more appropriate title for the work might have been "Tradition and Renewal in Latin America's Literature." Even so, the resulting volume is no small accomplishment and deserves a place on every English-language bookshelf on Latin American literature. It simply does not fulfill the ambitious promise of its title because it largely ignores the cultural experience of Latin America's silent and silenced majorities.

The reader might wonder whether this weakness bothered Fernández Moreno. In translating his original introduction into English eight years later, he added to his stipulation about “cultural unity” another proviso—that the contributors were not to eschew entirely the previously predominant elitist image of the region’s European influences but were to view these influences in dialectical relationship with the “existential” culture that directly relates to the daily life of common people (p. 18). This approach would indeed yield a profound rereading of the Latin American cultural experience, but this task unfortunately still awaits the appropriate investigator, a new volume of critical writings, and a more enlightened English-language publisher.

Fernández Moreno’s project is realized to some extent in Pablo González Casanova’s *Cultura y creación intelectual en América Latina*. This anthology of twenty-four essays displays the strengths and weaknesses of having originated as the proceedings of a symposium in Mexico jointly sponsored by the Universidad de las Naciones Unidas in Tokyo and the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Given the multiple meanings of the terms *culture*, *intellectuals*, and *creation*, the collection brings together a variety of focuses: philosophy (González Casanova, Leopoldo Zea, Jean Casimir, Francisco Miró Quesada), history (Julio Le Riverend, Germán Carrera Damas), economics (Celso Furtado, Theotônio Dos Santos), political science (Emilio de Ipola, Hugo Zemelman, Manuel Maldonado-Denis), sociology (René Zavaleta Mercado), Indian studies (Guillermo Bonfil Batalla), popular culture (Carlos Monsiváis, Rodolfo Stavenhagen), and literature (Gabriel García Márquez, Roberto Fernández Retamar, Mario Benedetti, Ariel Dorfman). Unfortunately, most of the essays adopt an abstract, theoretical focus, which is not to say that they sin on the side of erudition (notes and bibliographies are absent from the majority). It would also have been helpful to have some biobibliographical information on the impressive list of contributors.

The few essays that touch on the articulation between the high or serious literary experience and the new forces for change in Latin American society are the most outstanding of the lot. Three essays by Mario Benedetti, Carlos Monsiváis, and Ariel Dorfman base their analyses and projections on specific cases of writers’ involvement. Benedetti’s “La cultura del hombre de acción y la creación intelectual” calls attention to the torture, imprisonment, and “disappearance” of several writers in past decades as evidence that literature’s identification with popular concerns is hardly “inoffensive” to Latin American military overlords and reactionary oligarchies. He optimistically posits that poets and writers, especially those with a revolutionary vocation, are “hombres de acción de tinta y papel”: their literature alone will not

topple unjust regimes, but it does convert real concerns into effective images that clarify issues and sensitize readers.

In contrast to the euphoric Benedetti, Carlos Monsiváis views the *vaso comunicante* of Latin America's serious literature as half-empty in "Cultura urbana y creación intelectual: el caso mexicano." Despite whatever influence this expression might have exercised in recent decades, it has not seriously altered several alarming trends in Mexican popular culture: the dominant class's control of the means of disseminating popular and media culture; the domination since the 1920s of middle-class standards in all mass cultural production; the North Americanization of popular culture; and the centrality of patriarchal values (the state, religion, sexual roles) in that discourse. Monsiváis calls attention to the need for intellectual creators, if they are indeed serious about promoting the emergence of a better social order, to accept the challenges posed by the oppressive urban mass culture that detrimentally affects what has recently become the vast majority of Latin America's population.

In the same volume, Ariel Dorfman's "El estado y la creación intelectual: reflexiones sobre la experiencia chilena de la década de los setenta" soberly recounts the successes and failures of one such project initiated by Chile's Unidad Popular government (1969–1973) under Salvador Allende. Prior authorship of literary works hardly provided adequate preparation for the tasks urgently awaiting those writers willing to become involved. Their intellectual activity or agitation, not their writing, proved most effective in the difficult task of forging new institutions that could overcome the absolute noncommunication between elitist and popular cultural experiences. But in the period following the coup, Dorfman reevaluated this implicit disdain for the literary experience: any act of self-expression now glittered against the somber background of the junta's brutal repression. Dorfman elucidates the rhetorical stratagems employed by a courageous handful of progressive writers who continue to publish under the strict censorship of the junta, a topic yet to be adequately addressed by critics (one exception is David William Foster's essay on the demythifying literature of the 1970s in Argentina, discussed below). Among the many studies of the Allende years, Dorfman's is unique in its penetrating reflections about that regime's attempts to create a revolutionary *puéblico* (*pueblo* combined with *público*).

Readers anticipating a similar level of provocative introspection and analysis will be disappointed by Dorfman's *Hacia la liberación del lector latinoamericano*. The work's short introduction lyrically treats the topic announced by the title of the collection. Dorfman's "revolutionary" aesthetics, as presented here, hark back to the theories of Sartrean

engagement: through literary creation, “[un] acto de placer y comunión, el escritor funda y revela la necesidad del otro, de otros, de otras . . .” (p. xiv). The writer strives to “desarrollar el lector, participarlo, activar sus cromosomas . . .” (p. xvi). The experience of reading therefore leads to action that will “llevar a cabo esa democracia . . . hacia las últimas consecuencias” (p. xvi). The point that art is a propagandistic, educational, or ideological weapon “no rebaja inevitablemente su función artística. . . . No es fácil estar a la altura de los lectores” (p. xvii.)

Dorfman’s introduction is followed by five essays of socioliterary criticism on works by José María Arguedas, Alejo Carpentier, Antonio Skármeta, Pablo Neruda, and Ernesto Cardenal. The selection obviously followed ideological, rather than aesthetic, criteria—how else might one explain the bracketing of Carpentier’s erudite *El siglo de las luces* with the other more popular works studied? One can also question whether Dorfman’s analysis “attains the level” of the serious reader. Particularly objectionable to me are his romantic dualisms (primitive myths versus socialist comprehension, traitors versus heroes, social man versus natural man, infantile games versus adult games); eschatological interpretations (the “satanic” Somoza; the “infernal” or “purgatory” living conditions of Arguedas’s and Skármeta’s protagonists; the “sacred space” of Arguedas’s Indians); the ornate, charged descriptions; and his moralizing tone. Dorfman molds the texts studied and the resulting essays with idealistic enthusiasm into untroubled *romances*: early dissonance yields to harmony; alienation is replaced by communication; bourgeois individualism is overcome by socialist communitarianism. One generous interpretation might be that perhaps these essays were published with the goal of offering simplified instructional models for teachers determined to utilize Latin America’s serious literature as one component of a pedagogy for the oppressed.

The last four works to be considered reflect to a greater degree than Dorfman’s book the current directions and concerns of the academic critical mainstream while articulating similar revolutionary goals for literature. As expected, the influences on postmodern inquiry in these four works are erudite and mostly foreign. These works build on theoretical contributions of previous generations, such as Sartre’s deliberations over the production of phenomenological-existential writing, as well as the ideas of José María Castellet, Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, and Roland Barthes on textual receptivity and reader-centered interpretations. Newer influences include Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida on discourse deconstruction, Michel Foucault on the archaeology of understanding and the power of discourse in society, and Mikhail Bakhtin on literature’s “carnivalizing” of social reality. But the primary sources of these works reflect the maturity of the literature they

study: the self-referential and critical aspects of the writings of Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Severo Sarduy, Augusto Roa Bastos, and other writers of the boom and post-boom periods.

The objective of David William Foster's collection of essays, *Alternate Voices in the Contemporary Latin American Narrative*, is to provide an international sounding board for other voices in Latin America's writing tradition. He focuses on writers of the region's cultural elite, with the exception of his polemical chapter on Evita Perón's *La razón de mi vida*, a work of "popular" orientation in its propagandistic objectives. Foster includes it in a critical collection otherwise dedicated to serious literary culture because of his ground-breaking realization that "in terms of modern theoretical postulates and in view of the need to see Latin American literature apart from Western priorities, the distinction between literature and nonliterature, between narrative and nonnarrative, between narrative and political tract, is a tenuous one that does not significantly contribute to our estimation of writing in Latin America" (p. xv). Foster is critical of the ways that individuals in the developed countries of the West, as well as elites in different Latin American countries, generally depict the region's culture. In his opinion, the self-serving views of Latin America (which assert its "primitivism" or "exoticism") emanating from the West's "colonial" or "imperial" centers must be challenged and replaced with the thoughtful views of Latin America's own creative figures.

Writing about the diffusion of Latin American literature and criticism in the English-speaking West, Foster explains that the attention given by the mass media to some texts and the oblivion that befalls others result from decisions made by a small group of critics and publishers. In his judgment, several classes of narrative have not received the attention they deserve from a conformist and doctrinaire critical mainstream because they have not corresponded to this mainstream's a priori literary and artistic criteria. The essays in *Alternate Voices* are intended to correct this imbalance, at least in part. Foster devotes chapters to a wide range of works: Eva Perón's autobiographical hymn to her husband; Latin American documentary narratives (by Elena Poniatowska, Rodolfo Walsh, Gabriel García Márquez, Hernán Valdés, Miguel Barnet, and José Louzeiro); the "pulp" or "popular" novels that demythify the official discourse of Buenos Aires in the 1970s (Manuel Puig, Enrique Medina, Reina Roffé, Jorge Asís, Héctor Lastra, and Hugo Corra); and miscellaneous categories such as detective fiction, erotic narrative, science fiction, and children's literature.

Foster attempts to apply appropriate reading strategies to reveal how the texts under study are situated in their multiple contexts. His approach is not a return to the largely discredited practice of reducing literary discourse to a sociological or political script. Instead, Foster's

analysis largely focuses on the difficult issue of “narrativity”: the question of how—and even more problematically, why—lived experience is reconstructed in an explicit narrative framework. He recognizes the need for critics of the developed West to accommodate their analytical and methodological tools to the innovative mechanisms used by Latin America’s new writers to conceptualize more fully their rapidly transforming situation.

Like Foster, Roberto González Echevarría announces in *The Voice of the Masters: Writing and Authority in Modern Latin American Literature* a fairly ambitious extratextual objective for his largely literary and analytical function: his writing is to participate in the movement to discredit the ideological mystifications that have been used over time by the region’s elites to justify their predominance in an oppressive system. Such cultural “masters” as Rodó and Sarmiento, although progressive in their respective situations, laid the founding beliefs on which was constructed the authoritarian (and now repressive) bourgeois system predominating in most Latin American societies. According to González Echevarría, the traditional Latin American novel, like the “writerly” cultural essay of old, reflected and justified the individualistic, power-centered role of society’s elites (p. 70). He optimistically posits that the new self-referential literature and criticism will demonstrate the artificiality of “all mediations, all codes erected by social and political humankind to process and interpret its world” (p. 135). He targets for deconstruction all ideological systems that mystify privilege. The demise of the authoritarian author in literature therefore parallels the erosion of power for entrepreneurs and power brokers in society (p. 83). What would result from this intellectual onslaught on the organizing principles of culture and society? On the one hand, the open, decentered text, which is already beginning to dominate the serious cultural scene, playfully “dismantles” literature itself (p. 85). On the other hand (and here González Echevarría is careful not to advocate, but merely “translate,” the literature he studies), the decentralization of bourgeois society seems to leave “no real world, no original, no truth. . . .” Authentic and disillusioned, humankind will be free to climb aboard a toy train and go round and round; this toy, like their literature, will symbolize their sanctuary, their elaborate form of exile (p. 136). González Echevarría concludes, “Violent, perverse, bent on demolishing authority without dutifully offering viable alternatives of order, Latin American literature refuses to endorse pieties about the future or to project a programmatic sense of optimism” (p. 13).

The Voice of the Masters confirms González Echevarría’s well-deserved reputation as one of the most respected “maestros” writing on Latin American literature and culture today. The reader will find convincing applications of recent theories of textual deconstruction that

expose the layers of signification that distort or enrich the texts of the region's cultural legacy. González Echevarría's analyses of *Ariel*, *Doña Barbara*, *Los reyes*, and *Biografía de un cimarrón* are among the finest available. Hurried readers should not pass up his short essayistic gems treating nature myths, the philosophical quest for mythological origins, and the dilemmas associated with producing a modern literature in the context of Cuba's revolutionary experience. My only caveat is that surely González Echevarría confuses Sarmiento with Flaubert in crediting the former with an idea such as "I am Facundo" (p. 71). Finally, it must be González Echevarría's ambition to become "secretary to great writers and works" (p. 85) that leads him to tack onto otherwise balanced discussions the supplementary paragraphs treating Severo Sarduy's *Barroco* (pp. 30–32) and *Cobra* (p. 61), and Guillermo Cabrera Infante's *View of Dawn in the Tropics* (pp. 80–82).

Julio Ortega, like González Echevarría, is regarded as one of the most eloquent interpreters of the new Latin American narrative, as he demonstrates in *Poetics of Change: The New Spanish-American Narrative*. Unfortunately, however, the "critical model" promised in his introduction for developing a coherent interpretation of this "poetics of change" never really emerges. Even so, Ortega's individual essays (half of them translated from his 1969 collection *La contemplación y la fiesta*) are a string of pearls. He demonstrates unrivaled ability at synthesis and penetrating conceptualizations in separate essays on works by Borges, Cortázar, Lezama, García Márquez, Carpentier, Cabrera Infante, Sarduy, José Emilio Pacheco, and José María Arguedas. The methodological suppositions of Ortega and fellow deconstructionist González Echevarría are remarkably similar, as are their theoretical influences. But while González Echevarría's critical discourse alternates between textual exegesis and sociopolitical interpretation, that of Ortega remains largely within literary and philosophical parameters.²² This approach does not prohibit Ortega from hypothesizing about the social effects of the post-modern narrative, however.

Ortega's opinions on the new narrative's social relevance are often expressed in dense prose that will be understood only by those already initiated into the lexical complications of postmodern theoretical discourse. He proposes that the "poetics of change" involve a "radical" change for "reality." But his erudite task of defining the relationship between text and context, between change in poetics and change in reality, deflects the reader's attention away from lived reality. For Ortega, the precise use of inherently unstable words becomes impossible, ergo the proliferating quotation marks. In a phenomenological universe, all experience is reduced to a state of consciousness: "History and the narrative are, then, the work of the reading, whose drama is the form itself of the text" (p. 182). Reality and even history (or should

one write History, or "history"?) become reduced to something marginal, like literature. This view is the "radical" message of Borges, which Ortega has interpreted for the Hispanic world perhaps better than anyone: "Literature is a possible and fortuitous way of seeing the world from a dimension of certainty. However, literature is improbable: the criticism that liberates it, returning it to myth, also questions it and makes it relative. Its marginal function is also stoical, because there is a final stoicism in cultivating this writing against a world in which its place is precarious" (p. 18).²³

Commentary on literature, in addition to literature itself, becomes "improbable" in a "precarious" world. Ortega, like González Echevarría, relinquishes the responsibilities of "critic" in favor of "translator": their role is not to judge but to transfer the text from one code to another in order to display the process that holds it together. González Echevarría lucidly perceives that commentary such as his own is inevitably "caught up in the same process of distortion and deflection" as the writing he studies (p. 136).

One explanation for the alternation in the criticism of Ortega and González Echevarría between highlighting and minimizing writing's power, between revolution-affirming and reality-denying perspectives, results from looking at boom and post-boom discourse within an imaginative political order as projecting the writer's or critic's deflected desire for power. This wish is deflected because today's writer cannot control the political process and is not esteemed by society's power elites, in contrast to the status of writers until about half a century ago. But if the writer today cannot be an agent of history in the style of the old bards, at least he or she can claim a central position as the most important speaker who interprets culture and history and exercises social control over the reading public.²⁴ Thus the postmodern rhetoric of revolution and change, although hardly corresponding to realized or potential power, pays homage to the latent social forces that may be emerging.

Another troubling issue is the unlikely association commonly made between the literature of Jorge Luis Borges (whose politics have been described by leftists as repugnantly reactionary) and a "revolutionary" postmodernism. How can one explain this apparent contradiction: that the postmodernism of Fernández Moreno, Foster, González Echevarría, and others fuels (at least in theory) the search for progressive textual interpretations and social transformations, while in the hands of Borges, it justifies an intellectual role as a stoic and perhaps cynical observer of society's ineludible decline? Ortega's confusing rhetoric adds to the general perplexity, as do recent gyrations in the ideological trajectory of Octavio Paz.

Paz's most recent English publication is *One Earth, Four or Five Worlds*, a translation of *Tiempo nublado* (1983), with the addition of three

recent essays on current events and politics in Central America. It stands apart from the rest of the books under review here in focusing on the present condition of society and political culture in different areas of the world rather than on Latin America's serious literature and culture. I have discussed elsewhere how his often-brilliant analysis of the developed West and East is counterbalanced by a dogmatic, even demagogic political discourse on the side of reaction, rather than revolution, in his treatment of Latin America.²⁵ More relevant here is Paz's evolving position with regard to the ideology of postmodernism. His previous works, whether poetic, essayistic, or theoretical, established Paz's reputation as one of its most persistent and respected advocates. From Paz came the poetic vision of "signs in rotation," and his *Labyrinth of Solitude* is a paradigmatic study of Mexican culture's "inexorable ambiguity of reality."²⁶ In short, Paz's credentials as postmodern critic and thinker could not be more solid. In this light, how does one account for *One Earth's* abandonment of that sensitivity? His poetic persona was previously content to recreate itself in the multifarious and chaotic phenomena of the human experience. Now Paz has become the qualified judge of which political programs are faithful to the "soul" or the "true values" of a country, which intellectual schemes manifest "total sterility," which movements are characterized by an "absence of critical thought," which ideologies are "more real than reality itself," and where and when there exists a "lack of communication between the real country and the classes leading it." In short, Paz's intellectual role has gravitated from that of inspirer of dialogue to pontiff absolute. His mission has changed from dissolving the self in the unlimited to concretizing his person as Magister Ludi of a metaphysics of democracy.

Related to the discussion here is Paz's largely deterministic interpretation of historical change, which leads to his totally condemning individuals or groups who preach "revolution"—a word he does not bother to define. On the basis of the information presented in *One Earth*, it is difficult to assess the current status of postmodern ideas in the totality of Paz's thought. Perhaps we are witness to a case of mental apartheid, in which postmodern ideas are permitted in the inconsequential "erotic play" of arts and letters but cannot be tolerated in the business of politics and society.

The examples of Borges and the recent Paz demonstrate that merely embracing the ideology of postmodernism hardly guarantees holding progressive views on society. A decade ago, Jean Franco expressed the opinion that such writing exemplified a "dangerous kind of modernity" because although revolutionary in the aesthetic sense, it nevertheless demonstrated an antipathy to praxis in reproducing the current bourgeois culture in pursuit of pleasure.²⁷ She has apparently revised that opinion in response to recent grass-roots movements (how-

ever tenuous) in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay in her theorizing about the possibilities of reconciling revolutionary transformation and democratic practices.²⁸ Thus Franco approaches the position of González Echevarría that links literary postmodernism with the critique of authoritarian practices, whether at the hands of a bourgeois oligarch or the absolute leader of a leftist revolutionary movement. Both imply that the time is ripe for a popular, decentralized, grass-roots insurrection seeking to establish alternate, not alternative, focuses on authority. The prospect is idealistic and inviting. But on taking into account what Albert Hirschman calls the “special asset of trust and hope” in Argentina and Brazil that has made possible the recent and limited democratic successes,²⁹ informed observers would do well to question the relevance of such discussions for other countries. It remains to be seen whether nonauthoritarian revolutionary democrats, in Southern Cone countries or elsewhere, can succeed in mobilizing the popular masses to the degree necessary for supporting significant and lasting transformations. Meanwhile, the argument continues to be made in many other circles for the need to invest temporary authority in the hands of a reincarnated José Dolores or a “re-membered” Inkarrí (the legendary Quechua leader who was dismembered and decapitated by the Spanish colonial overlords). These observers still accept the axiom that before a society can experience a cultural revolution, or a revolution within the revolution, it must first experience revolution.

The difficulty and perhaps impossibility of comprehending or generalizing about the totality of Latin America’s social and narrative texts is undoubtedly one of many factors leading the postmodern academic critic to assert that there is “no real world, no . . . truth against which to measure the validity” of a given statement. Here deconstructive critics proclaim the death of reality, but why should anyone believe them? They can be compared with the Nietzsche immortalized in the graffiti witticism: God’s reply to Nietzsche’s “God is dead” is, “Nietzsche is dead.” Readers with at least one foot in “reality” will view skeptically such rarified theories emanating from high academic centers, and they might be justified in accepting literature’s new commentary with the same “momentary suspension of disbelief” that they have traditionally applied to literature itself.

But as it turns out, the number of individuals exercising the power of discourse in the fluid social reality of Latin America is steadily increasing, and a more popular variant of postmodernism—or deconstruction, or “reading,” or liberation—is thriving. The realization is growing that decentralization of authoritarian institutional structures can only be brought about by concurrent growth in influence of previously powerless voices whose interpretations of texts and lived reality can be accepted as a legitimate part of the cultural totality. Glossing

Cortázar, one could say that by finishing, adapting, internalizing, and rejecting those narrative and social texts, a whole generation of readers stop being “female” and begin to act.³⁰

The paradox of the new deconstructive criticism treating Latin American literature and culture is that while it accepts the postmodern theoretical field as it has been defined primarily by the academic world, it also touches base in its erudite way with Latin America’s lived reality. Indeed, the influence of postmodern ideas is evident in the programs of some of Latin America’s foremost leaders in their respective struggles on behalf of marginalized people. A few examples will suffice: liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez observes that thousands of base Christian community participants are discovering how the Bible “reads us” in their active search for answers to their challenges; noted educator Paulo Freire explains how peasants acquire literary skills by integrating themselves into the domains of history and culture; and Guatemalan Indian leader Rigoberta Menchú insists that her community’s reading and interpreting of texts “in terms of our own reality” serves to heighten self-awareness and further the struggle for improving their lives.³¹

The words and practice of Gutiérrez, Freire, and Menchú demonstrate the link existing between the region’s high literary experience and the unruly, impure reality of suffering and struggle.³² It is not for scholars to say whether the serious literature of the region has functioned as a cause or a derivative result or simply as a barometer for measuring ideological change and perhaps social practice. Meanwhile, although José Dolores may have to keep waiting anxiously in his grave for years to come, the process of liberation seems to be proceeding at a slow, steady pace. The triumph of Latin American literature might yet announce, perhaps within our lifetime, the triumph of a culture and a people.

NOTES

1. *Burn*, released in 1969 under the original Spanish title of *Quemada*, is based on a story written by the film’s director, Gillo Pontecorvo. In the film, the British colonial oppressor is played by Marlon Brando.
2. Angel Rama, “El ‘boom’ en perspectiva,” *Escritura* 7 (1979):3–45; and José Guilherme Merquior, “Situación del escritor,” in *América Latina en su literatura*, edited by César Fernández Moreno (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno; Paris: UNESCO, 1972), 372–91.
3. I am fully aware of the tendency of contemporary critical theory to deconstruct, and of literary writing to overcome in practice, the traditional differentiations between “high” or “serious” and “sub-” or “popular” or “pulp” modes of writing. I am also aware of the tendency of recent writers to blur the distinction between “historical” or “documentary” or “journalistic” writing and “literary” writing. The application of such terms to Latin American culture is appraised critically by several contributors to the González Casanova anthology reviewed here (see Stavenhagen and Monsiváis particularly).

4. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, foreword by Fredric Jameson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984; first edition published in French in 1979); Vincent B. Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); and Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).
5. Adolfo Prieto states that works by national authors rarely sold out a single small edition of one to three thousand copies, or an infrequent printing of five thousand, whereas works by Ernest Hemingway and Henri Maurois frequently exhausted five to twenty-five larger printings. Prieto does not mention that novels by at least two national writers (Hugo Wast and Manuel Gálvez) enjoyed a significantly broader reading public a decade earlier. See Prieto, *Sociología del público argentino* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veinte, n.d. [ca. 1955]), 82. Francine Masiello mentions that Wast's *La casa de los cuervos* sold eighty-thousand copies and Gálvez's *Nacha Regules* sold one hundred thousand. See Masiello, *Lenguaje e ideología: las escuelas argentinas de vanguardia* (Buenos Aires: Hachette, 1986), p. 48, n. 37. Merquior states that in the early 1970s, a printing of five thousand books was a generous standard for serious reading markets in Mexico and Brazil. See Merquior, "Situación del escritor," 382.
6. Rama reproduces figures provided by Sudamericana in Buenos Aires demonstrating the significant growth in sales that began in the mid-1960s for Cortázar's writings: the initial printing of twenty-five hundred to three thousand volumes of three works published before 1960 had not sold out by 1964. But after that year, the reprintings of these three books, now joined by two new ones, averaged fifteen to twenty thousand per year. After 1970 the reprintings for all five averaged around ten thousand volumes per year. See Rama, "El 'boom,'" 29.
7. Sara Castro-Klarén and Héctor Campos offer valuable data and insights on the recent diffusion and translation of narrative works by Latin America's superstar 'boom' writers, but they offer no sales statistics that would place the recent popularity for boom and national writers into a larger perspective. See Castro-Klarén and Campos, "Traducciones, tirajes, ventas y estrellas: el 'boom,'" *Ideologies and Literature* n.s. 4, no. 17 (1983):319–38.
8. This dire view was the early argument of Luis Alberto Sánchez and Manuel Pedro González (see Rama, "El 'boom,'" 18–23). It was more recently defended by Hernán Vidal in *Literatura hispanoamericana e ideología liberal: surgimiento y crisis (una problemática sobre la dependencia en torno a la narrativa del boom)* (Buenos Aires: Hispamérica, 1976).
9. Benito Milla, "La nueva promoción de lectores," interview with Emir Rodríguez Monegal in *Mundo nuevo* 19 (1968):91–92.
10. Penetrating studies on the role of the mass media within Latin American culture can be found in several works: Rama, "El 'boom,'" and Carlos Monsiváis, "Cultura urbana y creación intelectual en América Latina: el caso mexicano," in the Mushakoji et al. collection edited by González Casanova, 25–41. See also Monsiváis, "Landscape, I've Got the Drop on You!" *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 4 (1985):236–46.
11. Prieto estimated in *Sociología del público argentino* that in 1955 Argentina's total population of ten million included perhaps one hundred thousand serious readers, some 1 percent.
12. Roberto Escarpit explains that in France in 1952, only 3.5 percent of all literary books sold fell into the serious category. See Escarpit, *Sociología de la literatura* (Barcelona: Edima, 1968). Prieto's *Sociología del público argentino* quotes a survey by Gino Germani stating that a quarter of those in the "cultured" category read fifty to sixty books per year, but the group average was less than fifteen.
13. Rama, "El 'boom,'" 7–8.
14. José Donoso, *The Boom in Spanish American Literature: A Personal History*, translated by Gregory Kolovakos (New York: Columbia University Press and Center for Inter-American Relations, 1977), 56–57.
15. Ariel Dorfman, "Bread and Burnt Rice: Culture and Economic Survival in Latin America," *Grassroots Development* 8, no. 2 (1984):20–21.

16. Rubén Darío, "Palabras liminares," *Prosas profanas* (1986 reprint).
17. Gabriel García Márquez discusses his literary relationship with Fidel Castro in the February 1983 issue of *Playboy*.
18. Noé Jitrik cites Carlos Fuentes's article in *Mundo nuevo* 1 (Paris, 1966) in "Destruction and Forms in Fiction," his contribution to the Fernández Moreno collection (p. 179, n. 4).
19. Adolfo Prieto makes this association in *La literatura autobiográfica argentina* (Santa Fe: Universidad Nacional del Litoral, n.d.), 158.
20. Donoso makes this assertion in *The Boom*, 68.
21. Five essays appearing in the first edition of the Fernández Moreno anthology, *América Latina en su literatura* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno and UNESCO, 1972) that were subsequently omitted from the English-language edition treat the relationship between Latin America's serious literature and the lived reality of its different population groups: see Rubén Bareiro Saguier, "Encuentro de culturas"; António Houaiss, "La pluralidad lingüística"; Juan José Saer, "La literatura y los nuevos lenguajes"; Mario Benedetti, "Temas y problemas"; and Augusto Tamayo Vargas, "Interpretaciones de América Latina." The authors of other essays omitted from the English-language edition are Estuardo Núñez, Jorge Enrique Adoum, José Guilherme Merquior, and Adolfo Prieto.
22. Julio Ortega deals more explicitly with the relationship between aesthetic practice and lived reality in *Relato de la utopía: notas sobre narrativa cubana de la revolución* (Barcelona: Gaya Ciencia, 1973).
23. See also Julio Ortega, "Borges y la cultura hispanoamericana," *Revista Iberoamericana* 43 (1977):257–68.
24. Masiello discusses this kind of discursive power in relation to Argentina's vanguardist writers of the 1920s in *Lenguaje e ideología*, 80 and 13.
25. See my review of *One Earth, Four or Five Worlds* in *Chasqui* 15, nos. 2–3 (1986): 91–94.
26. David William Foster, *Para una lectura semiótica del ensayo latinoamericano: textos y representaciones* (Madrid: Porrúa, 1983).
27. Jean Franco made this statement in relation to the literature of Fuentes, Cortázar, and Sarduy. See Franco, "The Crisis of the Liberal Imagination and the Utopia of Writing," *Ideologies and Literature* 1, no. 1 (1977):6–24.
28. This "new sense in the value of democracy" is pointed out by Jean Franco in "Death Camp Confessions and Resistance to Violence in Latin America," *Socialism and Democracy* (Spring–Summer 1986):5–17. She calls attention to the new work by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985), translated by Winston Moore and Paul Cammack.
29. Albert O. Hirschman, "Out of Phase Again," *New York Review of Books*, 18 Dec. 1986, 53–57; see also his "Notes on Consolidating Democracy in Latin America," in his *Rival Views of Market Society and Other Recent Essays* (New York: Viking, 1986).
30. Jitrik proposes the reading theory of Cortázar as a link between postmodern or deconstructive literary ideology and social change: "Late, perhaps, for Latin America . . . , the fragmentariness of [novels like Cortázar's] *Hopscotch* makes a similar attempt at the destruction of 'technique' as supreme power: . . . new planes are established: the principal one is that of the organization in the form of 'model' which is arrived at, a model which does not impose itself nor conclude since its intelligibility is not presented 'in itself,' but instead projected into the deciphering ability of the recipient who finishes it, adapts it, connotes it, internalizes it, rejects it. As Cortázar says, the reader stops being 'female' and acts." See Jitrik, "Destruction and Forms," *Latin America in Its Literature*, 173.
31. See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*, foreword by Henri Nouwen, translated by Matthew J. O'Connor (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984), 34; Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Seabury, 1973), 4; and Rigoberta Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, edited by Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, translated by Ann Wright (London: Verso, 1984), 135.
32. My own observations of working-class women commenting on the Scriptures in base

ecclesial community meetings (near Cuernavaca, Mexico, during the summer of 1985) largely coincide with the conclusions expressed by Ariel Dorfman in "Culture and Economic Survival," 20–21. Dorfman reviewed experiments in presenting new Latin American fiction to working-class participants in the neighborhood of Quilmes, outside of Buenos Aires. First, participants are afforded a valuable exercise in literacy skills. Second, they lose their timidity and learn to express themselves publicly with clarity and coherence. Third, the text invites them to use their own experience as a vehicle for interpretation but also frees them mentally from that experience, thereby creating a distance from which they can interrogate and explore their lives. All these operations help the participants break up frozen mental categories that have blurred their problems and encourage them to develop their creative potential as human beings.