

## THE LITERARY BOOM IN SPANISH AMERICA

*THE SPANISH AMERICAN NOVEL: A TWENTIETH-CENTURY SURVEY.* By JOHN S. BRUSHWOOD. (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1975. Pp. 390. \$15.95.)

*THE BOOM IN SPANISH AMERICAN LITERATURE: A PERSONAL HISTORY.* By JOSÉ DONOSO. Translated by GREGORY KOLOVAKOS. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977. Pp. 122. \$9.00; \$4.95 paper.)

Since about 1960 Spanish America has been producing novels of outstanding quality and interest. The works of the more popular writers (Vargas Llosa, Fuentes, García Márquez, Cortázar, Cabrera Infante and Sábato) are sometimes said to constitute a "boom." While a lot of ink has been spent trying to define the boom, what it represents, and just who its "real" members are, one question stands out: How did these novels get to be so good? What happened? Both critics and readers want to know not only how a good novel is written, but what personal and social conditions foster a superior literature.

John Brushwood has read some 478 odd novels and collections of short stories for his survey. Though his book tries to look at the novel over the course of this century, one would have hoped that his argument would lead or build up to the present. His purpose is to "study the novel as a cultural organism," and to "point out the factors that transform incident into art." He does neither. Instead, Brushwood gives us lists and plot summaries, and tells us if a book is written in the third person, the first person, the *lo que sea*. Once in a while he mentions "vanguardism," which is not clearly defined, and "New Worldism," also not clearly defined.

Brushwood was overwhelmed by his material: he bit off too much and it chewed him up. To achieve his purpose, he should have stuck with four or five writers, each one representative of a different time. Then he might have examined the impact of special books on writers and other thinkers, and shown how the incidents swirling around particular writers were transformed into their respective books. I have in mind the kind of work Henri Troyat did for Pushkin.

Admittedly, the task would not have been easy, given the shameful state of literary biography, correspondence, and memoirs in Latin America (as well as Spain). How many first-rate biographies of first-rate writers are there? How many first-rate collections of letters? How many first-rate memoirs by people who were on the fringes of literary life and whose recollections and reminiscences are often their only claim to fame? Where is Mabel Dodge? Where is Tolstoy's daughter? Joyce's brother? Richard Ellmann? A writer does not live in a vacuum. It is the *medio ambiente* of friends, relatives, and lovers that helps us see the writer, through others' eyes; and it is the biographical detail that gives us a sense of the full individual. Until we have this sense, we have no decent criticism.

If Brushwood disappoints, Donoso does not. José Donoso is a Chilean novelist and in 1972 he set out to refute what he felt was a *leyenda negra* about the novelists of the boom. We have here the English translation of that 1972 essay. Writers he feels are central to the group are Carlos Fuentes (Mexico), Mario Vargas Llosa (Peru), Gabriel García Márquez (Colombia), and Julio Cortázar (Argentina). Donoso himself is perhaps on the fringe of the group.

One had heard "boom" spoken once or twice, with distaste, at universities where a writer has to be twenty-five years dead before professors will teach his work. But the bitterness of the polemic came as a surprise. Donoso begins by saying that the boom is a "creation of hysteria, envy, and paranoia." He implies a vague "they" who are saying terrible things about Fuentes et al.; the malefactors remain nameless. But near the end, he mentions a work by Luis Guillermo Piazza of Mexico called *La Mafia*. *La Mafia* is an amusing little book that describes some of the people swirling around Carlos Fuentes in the middle 1960s, à la Tom Wolfe. The only problem with the book seems to be that Donoso himself is treated rather unkindly at the beginning.

Be that as it may, Donoso tries to answer a series of supposed allegations about the writers of the boom. He tells us that these writers do not live in luxury; do not have fat, assured royalties; do not carouse at impossibly fine parties; and do not have a plot going to rule the literary world south of the border. All this is rather a let-down, because one would like to think that Fuentes and Co. lived in some sybaritic splendor, with no worries about money. Ever.

Donoso tells us how each writer gets along, what other work he has to do to make ends meet. Cortázar, for example, works as a translator for UNESCO in Paris (which may account for the edge of hysteria in his work). Now this is somewhat akin to hearing from Hugh Selby, Jr. that he works at a gas station. Of course there are precedents. As there always are for the grand romantic notion of the starving artist: Henry Miller at the Cosmodemonic Telegraph Company. Or, later, bumming meals and money from his friends in Paris. *Plus ça change*.

Interwoven with a sort of revindication of the lives of the other writers is a personal narrative of Donoso himself, detailing his growth as a writer. Fuentes' *Where the Air Is Clear* seems to have been a great revelation for Donoso. Of special value is Donoso's comment that *through* Fuentes, he, Donoso, was finally able to absorb and appreciate the works of non-Latin writers such as Faulkner. Somehow, Fuentes seemed to make other modern writers accessible. I suspect that Fuentes opened the eyes of more than one fellow Latin author.

The process of change had been gradual. Think back to the end of the last century when Spanish American writers, imitating the Europeans and taking exotic subjects (e.g., those foreign to their experience), developed an unbeatable style for talking about swans and nymphs. Then, at the turn of the century, and well into the 1940s in some cases (Ciro Alegria, Manuel Gálvez), the trend shifted to social and regional concerns. And bad style. Because somehow good style would have been decadent, given the new moral seriousness. Now seriousness is always hard to take, and one imagined that the works of the surrealists, Joyce, Lowry et al., would have been welcomed.

With open arms, according to Donoso. And not only the surrealists, but

Camus, Sartre, Faulkner and the Italians. The writers whose works now constitute a boom—those men who finally joined good style to local content—were young in the 1940s and 1950s and felt, according to Donoso, “asphyxiated” by the writings of their immediate predecessors. As well they might have. A sort of double trap held them: a stifling need for “good taste,” allied to an overdependence on obscure regional vocabulary. So that a Mexican could not easily read a book by an Argentine, or vice versa. One goal, then, of the younger writers, was to make their work more accessible to other readers in the southern continent. What Donoso seems to imply is that in their desire to reach other Latin readers these writers raised their level of discourse to a truly universal level. The irony of it is that when the writers deliberately left their regionalism, they put the region on the map. Fuentes’ Mexico is more alive than Azuela’s ever could be; Sábato’s Argentina more memorable than Galvez’.

The publishing houses, Donoso says, were reluctant to try anything new. Not a specifically Latin problem, when one thinks of Malcolm Lowry and Joyce Cary. Still, it would have made it harder for young writers to begin to publish. The false simplicity that publishers and critics preferred not only dampened the writing, but also circumscribed the complexity of the world view any writer might choose to present.

According to Donoso, there is some disagreement as to which writers should correctly be included when one thinks of the boom. The back and forth, and what he says of the arguments that apparently exist, make one think of the question of just who constituted Bloomsbury. And here we are in good territory. Because this boom business seems to be a Bloomsbury writ large. I draw the parallel not only for the sharing of friendship, ideas, and style, but for purposes of literary history. Donoso has done us a service with this book, simply speaking about himself, the other writers, their lives and interrelationships. We need more of it, and would that someday we had the same kind of documentation for the writers of the boom that we are now having for Bloomsbury. Donoso’s book is an intelligent first step.

One applauds the fact that the Center for Inter-American Relations in New York has sponsored the publication of this book. One cannot, however, condone the English translation. The translator, his feet full of lead, has obviously “followed the Spanish,” something to be done only at international conferences where the prose will be bad in any event. Still, the book survives the translation. Rather an accomplishment.

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