

CRITIC AND PUBLIC: DIRECTIONS IN LITERARY CRITICISM

"*EL CONFLICTO GENERACIONAL EN DOS NOVELISTAS HISPANOAMERICANOS: ADOLFO BIOY CASARES Y ELENA PORTOCARRERO.*" By ANA MARIA BARRENECHEA. (New York: New York University Ibero American Language and Area Center, Occasional Paper No. 18, 1975. Pp. 17.)

TRADITION AND RENEWAL: ESSAYS ON TWENTIETH-CENTURY LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE. Edited by MERLIN H. FORSTER. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975. Pp. 240. \$8.95.)

"*CRITICISM AND LITERATURE WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF A DEPENDENT CULTURE.*" By JEAN FRANCO. (New York: New York University Ibero American Language and Area Center, Occasional Paper No. 16, 1975. Pp. 17.)

MODERN LATIN AMERICAN NARRATIVES: THE DREAMS OF REASON. By ALFRED J. MACADAM. (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1977. Pp. 150. \$10.95.)

ARTISTS AND WRITERS IN THE EVOLUTION OF LATIN AMERICA. Edited by EDWARD D. TERRY. (University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1969. Pp. 191. \$6.00.)

GRANDES ESCRITORAS HISPANOAMERICANAS, POETISAS Y NOVELISTAS. By VICTOR M. VALENZUELA. (Bethlehem, Pa.: Lehigh University Press, 1974. Pp. 133.)

Throughout the history of Latin American literature the relationship of writer to public has been paramount. In general, those who wanted to sell what they wrote faced a reading public who valued the imported more highly than the locally produced, perhaps "inferior," or less fashionable goods. In our day, literacy has increased and it is slightly less necessary to "propinarse una dosis de cultura imperialista," in the words of David Viñas, to reach a national or international public. Yet the development of a reading public willing and ready to complete the sender-receiver equation necessary to any act of communication remains a problem in Latin American letters. This should be examined in the light of the role played by two intermediate factors: criticism and the sale and promotion of books, both of which ultimately refer to a system of values. It is not surprising that a similar question of values and public also should affect the kind of criticism that accompanies the production of literature in the Iberian New World. For the specific purposes of this essay, I will assume "public" to mean primarily the scholarly North American public and only secondarily the scholarly Latin American reader.

A number of histories and anthologies have already established in the United States a corpus of works regarded as Brazilian or Spanish American literature; whether they are truly representative of this literature is questionable. To judge from the books under review, it would seem that some critics are attempting to convince a public of the very existence of writing that is worthy of acceptance in the literary pantheon (e.g., Terry). Other critics assume a reading

public that is only willing to extend its notion of values to include works that can be read within the European literary canon. The first critic aims at a basically uninformed (scholarly?) and disdainful public; the second has in mind a public equally ignorant of the problematic of Latin American culture, but highly sophisticated in literary matters; in between, one finds several combinations of these two extremes. This diversity of publics reveals the many stages of scholarship and notions of criticism that coexist under the umbrella of Latin American literature.

The books under discussion here actually include over thirty essays. With the exception of MacAdam's book, in which one can see a coherent set of principles and a single intelligent mind at work, the rest of the essays packaged between two covers really have little in common topically or methodologically. However, taken as a random sample of the scholarly production in the field they are not unrepresentative.

At the end of the sixties it seemed that we had oversupplied the market with anthologies and other groupings of texts of questionable similarity or contiguity. *Grandes escritoras hispanoamericanas*, responding, I suppose, to a new vogue/market and giving no thought to the complex question of female—not feminine—literature, simply lumps together a large, but not new, number of female names, lives, and works. Aurora Ocampo's *Antología de poetisas mexicanas y antología de cuentistas mexicanas* (México: UNAM, 1977), on the other hand, includes a good number of previously ignored female writers, and her prologue addresses keenly the sociology of female writing.

Growth of the corpus can be achieved by renovation as well as expansion. To this extent, Forster's *Tradition and Renewal*, which introduces young writers or reintroduces forgotten ones, performs a basic function for the field. A significant contribution is made by Pretro-Rodas' two essays on black Brazilian literature. These studies on Lins do Rego and Jorge de Lima carefully reexamine some of the hastily assembled but firmly held judgments surrounding this aspect of Brazilian Modernismo. The aesthetic contributions made by each "well wrought urn" are placed in a dialectic relationship to the question of negritude in colonial societies. Pretro-Rodas concludes that if indeed Modernismo did much to establish black lore as a worthy subject in Brazilian letters, the creative point of departure that informed this literature was "a nostalgic recollection of the Negro as part of a paternalistic world of a vanishing plantation culture" (p. 10).

I have singled out Rodas' essays not only because they are sound and intelligent pieces of scholarship but also because they address one of the pressing needs in the development of the field. With the early establishment of the corpus, the conceptual parameters were set down in the very organization entailed in laying out periods, genre, and schools. Much of the nomenclature was borrowed hastily from the existing European canon (Romantic, Symbolist, Naturalist, Surrealist, novel, etc.), and subsequent problems were brought about by miscasting the New World's reality in the molds of the Old. For a while, formalist "explication de texte" nourished the growing body until the gastronomic feast of the "new novel" and French Structuralism changed the taste and vision of critics and writers as critics.

After the intellectual *aggiornamento* required by French Structuralism, the many insights made possible by the introduction of the linguistic metaphor and its accompanying fresh but often confusing vocabulary, it now seems that a thorough refocusing and reevaluation of past assumptions and categories is greatly needed. What this requires is a critic and a public capable of working with tools and theories well outside the confines of the corpus as earlier established. The essays of both Alfred MacAdam and Jean Franco encompass theoretical materials developed in English, Classical, or French letters, as well as psychology, sociolinguistics, and, of course, the queen of our day—anthropology. Thus, criticism of Latin American literature has become a comparative discipline; however, the terms of the comparison are very much in dispute. The purely aesthetic and vertical analysis of the well wrought urn is still considered a necessary step (see Barrenechea); the disagreement centers on the kind of intellectual space in which its ultimate meaning is to be articulated. One school reads Latin American works as variants of European preoccupations and experiments, let us say “écriture.” The other expects to place the text back into the stream of history and to connect the form/content of each work to the society whence it originated.

It is curious to see that both MacAdam and Franco agree, for example, on the idea that the category of novel is insufficient as a descriptor of many Latin American narratives, especially the so-called “new novels.” They propose to discard it. Franco would like to see a study of these narratives as parodical texts, while MacAdam has written a series of essays to show that texts like *Dom Casmurro* (1902), *De donde son los cantantes* (1965), and *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* (1974) would be better understood if we read them as satires or romances. Granted, they are not novels, certainly not *the novels* that Updike expects and chastises Cabrera Infante for not writing and is in turn rebuffed by MacAdam for using as an evaluative criteria (pp. 63–65). But if “novel” is a problematic category, proposing satire or romance as more appropriate would be profitable only if our theory of these two narrative variants was better developed than our theory of the novel. The sad fact is that our current theory of the novel is really in its infancy. Even books that make a clear contribution to the theory of poetry (for instance, Jonathan Culler’s *Structuralist Poetics* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975]) fail to make equally useful cases for a theory of the novel. Furthermore, in proposing satire as a genre category, no matter how metaphorically we are asked to see the structure of the narrative in question or how sophisticated the textual analysis at hand, the critic introduces the unspoken question: satire of what?

Stressing the “modernity” of such diverse narratives as *Grande Sertão, Veredas* (1956) and *Tres Tristes Tigres* (1965), MacAdam shows how these texts take up the critique of language as a central metaphor of their discourse. By playing games of irony with the position of the writer as creator in his dependent relation to language as a system, MacAdam relates these works to the rest of the European dreams of reason and the exhaustion of author-ized *écriture*. However, one cannot resist the idea that perhaps these works satirize something other than the exhaustion of decayed European structures, and that what

they satirize is the gap between the experiential thrust of the writer and the form available to him. In any event, MacAdam is right in stating that the “misuse of critical terms leads to misreading” (p. 2).

The need to develop a theory of literature complex enough to account for the peculiarities of Latin American writing constitutes the main challenge in the field today. Jean Franco believes that the “reductionism and the categorization which follows from myth criticism proves as damaging to Latin American literature as new criticism” (p. 1). An example of this criticism is to assert that *Pedro Páramo* corresponds to the “low mimetic mode” (Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957]), to feel that with this categorization the work has been assimilated into a “recognizable system,” and to proceed to gloss over its differences. Franco points out the inadequacy of this kind of assimilative criticism that dismisses in *Pedro Páramo* the “dissolution of relationships when money mediates social structures . . . and the loss of a sense of immediate experience which characterizes the change from oral culture and tribal and family relationships” (p. 1).

Instead, Franco proposes a reading theory capable of dealing with both terms of the dialectic of dependency (metropolis/colony). This might eventually provide us with the kind of *critical* readings necessary to a coherent understanding of the processes of cultural assimilation, resistance, destruction, commodity worship. One of the advantages Franco sees in the theory of dependency is the possibility of considering the “very aberrations of that culture as devices which lay bare the hidden ideological assumptions which are seen as natural and normative in the metropolis” (p. 3).

In demonstrating the feasibility and validity of the dependency theory, Franco chooses her examples from a wide range of periods, genres, and disciplines, showing how illuminating such holistic analysis can be. Yet some of the points she makes remain open to question. I am not convinced, for instance, that “the process by which topic, myth and character are torn out of the European novel and subtly perverted often borders into parody” (p. 10), because the examples she gives (Robinson Crusoe > Fushia of *La Casa Verde*, *The Buddenbrooks* > *The Shipyard* by Onetti) imply a direct filiation that no intertextual analyses could prove. On the other hand, her brief characterization of the European “realistic” novel as a unique and unrepeatable historical form (character’s subtlety of motive/freedom of choice possible) does more to show—in societies in which the characters’ relations with others are mediated by oppressive class relations, master-slave roles—why the “novel” cannot really be a corresponding form than the unrepeatable nature of the novel itself. Franco goes on to add that “it is quite conceivable that for a dependent country the very notion of a ‘well rounded’ character which was the incarnation of some ‘concrete universal’ should seem a ‘mockery’” (p. 20).

Perhaps the best way to illustrate the points of coincidence and difference between what could be loosely called the Structuralist and Marxist schools is to compare what both MacAdam and Franco have to say in their rejection of the novel category. Using Machado de Assis’ *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* (1881) as an example, MacAdam explains that:

When we say that a text is metaphoric, that it has in Jacobson's sense, drifted away from the metonymic scene linking, we are admitting that the text is a discourse a propos of something else. It is the nature of satire and romance to be accumulations of metaphors: the great problem of interpreting metaphoric texts involves locating the referent, the meaning which would "close" the open gap of metaphor. This clearly is impossible. . . . Brás Cubas . . . from his first words knows what he is doing. . . . He hopes to gain immortality after death by writing a text, and in doing so render ironic a traditional apology for writing. (P. 13)

Speculating on the very same problem of the linearity or metonymic nature of the novel and Machado's enterprise as a "novelist," Jean Franco argues that:

It took the genius of Machado to realize that the very linearity of the European novel [as a metaphor of development, evolution, or progress] needed to be turned upside down. . . . The very fact that the author sees fit to make the protagonist's memories posthumous, so that the reader can only follow the protagonist's life from the vantage-point of his death, closes off the notion of destiny or future. (P. 10)

One school sees Machado ironizing an aspect of writing, of the linearity of time if you will; the other sees Machado aware of the incompatibility between the metropolitan form/content and choosing to subvert that form to make it speak for a new content.

Although the theoretical problem is the most pressing in the field, only a handful of scholars are at present devoting their efforts to its solution. The great bulk of critical writing continues to focus on the internal structure of specific works or oeuvres. It is to be hoped that, in the long run, such limited but comprehensive studies will provide the building blocks necessary for a theoretical approach capable of establishing an intellectual space in which writer, critic, and public share some fundamental concepts about Latin American literature.

SARA CASTRO-KLARÉN
Dartmouth College