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An English-Language View of the History of Latin American Fiction

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There was a time in the literary history of works written in Spanish when interpretation was basically split in two: the mainly philological tradition of Spanish scholars, and the American scholars trained by other Anglo-Saxons in similar traditions. Within that world the few British interpreters were considered serious purveyors of other ingrained traditions. Latin Americans were known if and only when they studied Spanish literature. Subsequently the New Criticism came into prominence, different types of Latin American exiles came to the United States and populated the rest of the world, and Spanish and Portuguese departments grew. Then Theory arrived, as did pressures to publish, the onslaught of presses (vanity or otherwise), and an abundance of English-only criticism in the purportedly democratic and pluralistic sphere that grew from those developments. Ideally, Spanish-language criticism would have had some parity with English-language interpretations. It does not, and one wonders what would have happened if critics like Angel Rama and Antonio Cornejo Polar had given in to pressures, however subtle, to write their seminal works in English. Within that context a set of patterns characterizes many recent English-language books about the

history of contemporary Latin American fiction. Those paradigms point to a clear disregard of the literary history of the Americas that takes place south of an ever-porous border, and a catering to the United States market. It is counterproductive to ask “Why not?” Further, apprehension about retribution, cowardice about writing what you really want to say, and no small doses of cynicism all come together, and may also be uppermost in the minds of younger scholars afraid of losing a recommendation or invitations.

Philip Swanson, author of *Latin American Fiction: A Short Introduction* does not have to be concerned about those types of United States academic comeuppances. Yet, the subtitle of his most recent book could not be more accurate, and among other virtues it is invigorating that he does not do theory (121-2) for theory’s sake, get lost in jargon, or latch on to “hot topics,” all part of the pressures to conform of the last fifteen years. As an interlocutor, Swanson is very effective. He is also aware (118-24) of disputable issues, even though one of his conclusions –“But perhaps the most striking feature of the critical trends outlined above is their meta-critical quality. They often involve little literary criticism as such, but, in so far as they do deal with literature, tend to dwell instead on the relationship of literature to culture, institutions, theory and professional debates” (124)— makes one wonder why he ultimately adds to that state of affairs. It is precisely dealing with those debates (rethinking the boom and its politics, theory and post-structuralism, “Latin Americanist” criticism, history, women and sexuality) that would have allowed Swanson to come up with better analyses, no matter how short or introductory, and to go beyond updating views he has expressed in earlier publications.

Latin American Fiction is actually a gloss of familiar terrain in the history of Latin American narrative, with some illustrative interpretative moments, such as the sixth chapter on “Hispanic American Fiction of the United States.” That next-to-last chapter (104-116) is not definitive, due to the contaminated nature of the fiction with which it deals, and mainly because of the epistemic conundrum implicit in defining “Hispanic” as strictly Mexican American, “Puerto Rican Americans” [sic], and “Cuban and Dominican Americans.” The fact is that many writers of Central and South American background who publish in English have added much to the unambiguous fusion Swanson posits. He states as much when speaking about Allende and Valenzuela (97-98), and later mentioning “Yet Valenzuela and

Allende are not really considered anything other than Latin American writers, writing for a wider Spanish-speaking audience and not specifically for a North American market” (105). He exacerbates the issue when, discussing “Some Writers of the 1980s and 1990s” (111-17), he clusters Rosario Ferré (“a Puerto Rican who is usually thought of as a Latin American writer, sometimes associated with the Post-Boom”[111]) with non-bilingual writers. The latter, Hijuelos, Cisneros, Castillo, García, Alvarez, the late Anzaldúa and others among them, have not written, cannot, or do not want to write directly in Spanish. Beyond his associating Ferré with those writers, a conceptually uneven collection like *Se habla español. Voces latinas en USA* (2000) could have provided ample room for Swanson to parse the selling of purportedly subaltern “Latinicity.”

The cast that Swanson has chosen is canonical in many ways, and not new. After all it has been more than 35 years since “Latino” literature grew out of political urgency, when the earliest examples were aesthetically raw. Yet, perhaps Swanson is right in seeing Anzaldúa’s writing as “fiction,” for as he says: “Whether this sort of thing [sic] is to the taste of those who enjoy reading the likes of Hijuelos, Cisneros, Alvarez or Ferré is a matter of opinion” (116-17). That type of noncommittal (“ambiguity” is a privileged term for Swanson) yet dismissive discernment is common in this book, and not a measured examination of Anzaldúa’s true worth and historical role for the continental Latin American public who, it must be said, are not at all familiar with her work. More gravely, the uninitiated, purportedly the virtual public for this book, will not come out with more than a precursory examination of texts and the worthy polemics they have engendered.

The previous (fifth) chapter and the seventh on “Culture Wars: Ways of Reading Latin American Fiction” are preceded by fairly conventional overviews that will not disappoint the authors included in the extensive and generally helpful chapter notes (127-37) and in the reference bibliography entitled “Further Reading” (138-41). Truth be said, this is also the impression projected by the three articles on Spanish American narrative that cover the periods 1810-1920, 1920-1970, and since 1970, collected in the *Cambridge Companion to Modern Latin American Culture*, ed. John King (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). The articles in that collection show scant awareness of revisionist reading, or, for the most recent period, new authors or works, and one can only attribute those conditions to the “reader”

genre. It should be pointed out that, like most handbooks of this type, *Latin American Fiction* centers on Spanish American texts.

Yet, Swanson is authoritative when speaking about Brazilian fiction, and decidedly strong on Machado de Assis (17-19). But it is this early in the book that its greatest problem begins: the complacency that can result from limiting references to one's formation and the authorities one has always used. In the Machado discussion, Swanson privileges British views, a recourse that can be fine in and of itself, as work by John King, Gerald Martin, and the early Jean Franco shows. When that preference, to which Swanson has every right, is seen in the light of statements like "... but never helped create a really strong trend for urban or provincial Realism or Naturalism in the European tradition" (15), the interpretive conclusion is an enigma at best. Further, stating that regionalism "(though underdeveloped in comparison to, say, north-western Europe" (24), not analyzing any solid Brazilian study on Machado (128, n7), and merely declaring that "concern has been expressed about the imposition of European patterns of literary history on an entirely different cultural context in a way that has promoted limited, questionable or even false literary histories" (118), make the quandary evident: Swanson's attempt at objectivity and catholicity reveals a sense of obligation to a reduced set of European authorities, making the sources predictable and insufficient for understanding how native interpreters think.

Nevertheless "Beginnings: Narrative and the Challenge of New Nations," is a fair first chapter that begins by noticing that "Many developments in Latin American writing are a function of an essentially *literary* history" (3, his emphasis). Swanson appreciates, knows, and possibly prefers the *literary*, but seems to force himself to express those views obliquely. His judgments are thus encumbered by a specific critical context and a selectivity of interpretation and national literatures (mainly Argentine in this chapter) that beget an ultimately conformist approach, too respectful of by now questionable siftings, such as the value of rigid nineteenth-century foundational fictions. In this chapter there are no intuitive, unconscious, seat-of-the-pants judgments, nor the opposite: better-informed choices. Thus, after speaking about the conjunction of *costumbrista* and realist narratives Swanson concludes that they were not "great novels and they have received scant critical attention so far" (15). The overflow of Spanish-language critical writings on nineteenth-century narrative and non-

fiction disproves that assumption. The second chapter, “National Narratives: Regional and Continental Identities” centers on the conceptual ambiguities of the “novels of the land,” and correctly centers on Quiroga as the key transitional figure that provides what Swanson calls “glimpses of the modern.” This is a fine chapter, and the only missing piece in the puzzle the critic is trying to decipher is the relevance to the present canon of what literary historian Juan Marinello called *tres novelas ejemplares* (*La vorágine*, *Don Segundo Sombra*, and *Doña Bárbara*), all published in the twenties, against the grain of incipient vanguards. As Swanson avers, narrational ambiguity toward the modern “may suggest that the realist model is more subtle than later generations would appreciate” (29).

Because Swanson is progressing chronologically the third chapter, “The Rise of the New Narrative” is disquieting. By referring to “the so-called New Novel or New Narrative” (37) he replicates a generic view that is still an ambiguous template for many literary historians: the fact is that clustering the new novel and narrative actually does not allow for persuasive distinctions among practices that are similar, but have totally different roots. By relegating those roots to a footnote (41, n6), and immediately and too briefly analyzing “Avant-garde tendencies” in well-known precursors, Swanson does not offer anything new. He slights or ignores, for example, a considerable number of “total novels” from the twenties and thirties, the development of the short novel during those decades, or, say, the relationship that Felisberto Hernández’s fixation with dolls may have with Darío, Arreola, Piñera, and Ferré. When Swanson, speaking about Macedonio Fernández, states that “[This] is remarkably similar (in tone at least) to the most radical territory of the *nueva narrativa*” (42) the comparison and chronology puts the cart before the horse.

He is right in agreeing with the view (Donald Shaw’s) that *La vida breve* may be the first novel of the boom, and that Arlt, Onetti, Bombal, and others honed the representation of the urban and the existential. But considering the Ecuadorian Humberto Salvador’s *En la ciudad he perdido una novela...* (1929), or his compatriot Pablo Palacio’s short novels and stories from the early twenties would have allowed Swanson to go a long way toward revising the history of the boom’s precursors. One does not have to deny the sheer force of the new narrative in order to put its founding tenets in perspective. Predictably, in the rest of the chapter Borges and magical realism vis-à-vis *lo real maravilloso* are put forth as examples of the

questioning of literariness. Unpredictably, and accurately, Asturias and Arguedas' novels are employed to explain a successful coupling of literature and politics. Finally, *El Señor Presidente* and Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* exemplify for Swanson the new narrative's fragmentary representation of the crisis of modernity, although there will be wide disagreement with his binary view that "the New Narrative is inescapably characterized by a tension between Europe and Latin America, North and South, the universal and the specific, the existential and the political" (54).

The fourth chapter, devoted to "The Boom," is the most unsettled, and not necessarily because of any inherent fault in Swanson's reasoning. As bandied about as it is, the Boom is still a major literary sport, and too much action goes on in the interpreters' minds. Naturally, Swanson did not have access to Marco and Gracia's massive and seminal *La llegada de los bárbaros. La recepción de la literatura hispanoamericana en España, 1960-1981* or to Burgos's *Los escritores y la creación en Hispanoamérica*, compilations from 2004 and subsequent critical collections that provide ample evidence of all the work to be done on the Boom. Yet, this chapter includes some of Swanson's best pages (66-76, on Fuentes, Vargas Llosa, and García Márquez), and if he starts his discussion of "The Big Four" with an insufficient evaluation of the late Cabrera Infante and Cortázar (62-66), he is tough on the Argentine. His view that "*Rayuela*, now seems trapped in a semi-hippy, jazz-fuelled, sixties time warp. Its main import was probably that it managed to encapsulate the literary aesthetic of the Boom" (66) actually coincides with readings of that novel forty years later by some new Argentine novelists and critics.

But the Boom writers did not intend to speak to their countrymen, flatter those in authority or match their novelistic lexicon to the background of anyone in particular, so all disagreements with them or their works are going to sound like catechisms or incantations. The section of this chapter devoted to "Other Writers of the Boom" makes some good points about Onetti, Sabato, Carpentier, Arguedas, and particularly about the recently deceased Roa Bastos. But even within the reduced scope of this introduction that section does not jell with the last one, devoted to Donoso's *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* as "The Last Novel of the Boom?" That Swanson actually makes a better case for *Yo el Supremo* (79) as the last Boom novel is a contradiction that shows how trying to be too careful with politics

is detrimental to an all-encompassing argumentation. This chapter, read in conjunction with the one that follows it, could leave the impression that the most canonical boom writers simply stopped publishing anything worth reading, and although Swanson is particularly sharp in assessing the lasting value of Vargas Llosa and the withering excellence of Fuentes, the concentration on major figures is simply too restricting.

“After the Boom” is the topic covered in the fifth chapter, and is excellent in its corrective stance rather than on any predictions or categorical views of a period that is still in flux. Swanson is sure and succinct in stating that “Defining the Post-Boom thus becomes a matter of political choice as much as one of literary history, and its perception and use of manipulation as a term become as important as any sense of its underlying literary-historical validity” (83). His belief that the Boom was “a finite burst of commercial activity” (84) is tempered by the fact that Seix Barral is once again at the forefront of the new narrative. Although it is not competing fully with publishing houses like Anagrama or Alfaguara, Seix Barral’s publication of *Palabra de América* (2004) —an incomplete manifesto centered on the new narrative and its authors— has thrown a wrench into the already creaking market machine built for the latest narrative, one that is not very different from the one constructed for the previous boom.

The subsection “Change and established writers” is rather weak because of its incompleteness, when Swanson insists on presenting Donoso as “a perfect illustration of the Post-Boom as being not simply a rejection of the Boom” (91). To many readers Swanson will overestimate the value of Donoso’s novels and of their interpreters (122), especially in terms of the relation he establishes between the Chilean’s work and theory. It is precisely at such times that one misses the attention to works like Donoso’s *Artículos de incierta necesidad* (1998!), to the revealing Afterword included in the Chilean (1997) edition of *El obscuro pájaro de la noche*, and to next-to-last novels like *Donde van a morir los elefantes* (1995) and *Conjeturas sobre la memoria de mi tribu* (1996). These texts are certainly part of what Swanson presents as the transitional work of established boom writers (90), and their connection to *El jardín de al lado* (1981, rev.1996) could not be keener. In fact, much would have been revealed about many novelists’ mind set by recurring to their extensive essayistic works. By the same token,

out of Donoso's relationship with the novel alone, a more consistent and thus ultimately more powerful interpretation could profitably have been produced.

Still within the fifth chapter, Swanson is elegant when dealing with the academic politicization of *testimonio*, the "new historical novel" and anything allied to them (95-97). His argumentation is clear when he writes, most correctly, about the "tortuous and sometimes barely penetrable style" of windbag writers like Piglia, Eltit, and others. He is also exact and perhaps too careful when he asserts "Indeed entry to the international market (be that the literary market or the peculiar economy of the modern university) in some sense depended on a critical muddying of the waters between political referentiality and experimental play" (97). What he does not discuss fully is that, in fact, platitude-dependent writers have some significance only among a few self-anointed "progressive" critics living in the United States, many of whom have established a parasitic self-fashioning with those writers. Related to that development, when Swanson mentions that Abel Posse was born in 1936 (the same year as Vargas Llosa) as one aspect that makes the linking of the new historical novel to the Post-Boom problematic, one is also reminded of an Argentine author born in 1937 he never mentions, the late Juan José Saer. Saer's *El entenado* (1984) is a masterly novel of language, the post-colonial, new historical, parodic, and intertextual in nature, yet understudied.

Saer was also, at least since the early seventies, a novelist whose penetrating, popular, and lucid essays bear comparison with those of Vargas Llosa. Toward the end of this chapter Swanson tries to make a case for Isabel Allende's narrative and her "readability." If that connection works one wonders why progressive women critics have not embraced the Chilean. The very last section of this fifth chapter, "Recent directions: McOndo and Crack" is the least strong, in terms of the author's expressed desire to provide "an account of mainstream tendencies" (2). Even if this 2005 book was sent to the publishers one or two years before, it is surprising not to see any discussion or even mention of the late Roberto Bolaño, whose *Los detectives salvajes* (1998) and subsequent novels and short stories (some posthumous) have surely made him and his work the true inheritors and inquisitors of the new narrative. Bolaño is conceptually and in achievement far superior to any writers of the

“McOndo” and “Crack” self-anointed generations Swanson peruses (exception made of Volpi, whose work he treats well).

The problem with literary history and the discussion of various canons (the larger contextual areas covered by *Latin American Fiction*), is not a matter of being more perceptive than others but of staying with problems longer. Swanson observes intricacies only infrequently. But given that there are plenty of similar books in the market, and that many written in Spanish may be equally reductionist, the option of a fuller treatment is obvious and preferable. It may seem provocative that a clearly written study like *Latin American Fiction*, which draws attention to its brevity, can elicit lengthy discussions. Well, one has to think about the problems pointed out, and about the crucial question that Swanson’s book does not press home: are the texts he discusses merely representative or worth reading in terms of what he leaves out? Related to this possibility are the issues of what books such as this contribute to our field, and whether it is better to just let them proliferate and not say anything that would upset academic “decorum,” editorial boards, or expose beginning professors to low-stake power plays.

Such silence would relegate constructive criticism to individualistic conversations that add little to furthering knowledge, or become damaging gossip. Countering such eventualities must be a goal of *Latin American Fiction* or books similar to it. Frank Kermode has expressed that interpretative quandary thus: “Of course it isn’t easy to be aware of one’s own bias, but the reward promised is great: newness. Again, the fact is that it is our job to create that newness” (37-38). We must make any canon we build answer our prejudices and others’ criteria, and in not responding to those challenges *Latin American Fiction* actually becomes an exemplary volume, or a warning, and thus deserves all the attention one can give it. The pressure to quote the right scholars, to touch the right buttons and not ruffle any feathers have ways of exposing us to self-consciousness rather than criticism, an imposition that has become offensive itself. Further, too-careful approaches come across more as pre-emptive strikes against possible criticism from purported authorities than as a carefully considered analysis.

In that regard *Latin American Fiction* is to be commended for its lack of sycophancy and for not hosting a partisan version of literary history. It may seem somewhat counterintuitive, and often uncomfortable, but having a truly critical and direct Latin Americanist culture that encourages scholars to unload all their ideas without feeling threatened is vital to everything our field shares and must do. This is one way to make our subject lucid and urgent for students or a larger audience and preferable to presenting different facts or interpretive possibilities in a cursory manner. There is no personal animus in my view, or a sentimental conviction of what Latin Americanism was or should be. In that regard, and to his great credit, Swanson is careful to not overwhelm his readers by quoting or acknowledging just about anyone who has written about a particular topic; a prevalent practice among some Latin Americanists, who thereby have avoided truly critical reviews of their work.

One should also recognize that Swanson provides a narrative arc without a grand thesis, despite the fact that a larger plan would have helped him avoid some of the flaws that have been mentioned. He is also not pretentious, avoids piffle, and does relay some dependable knowledge of specific authors and the novel genre. As an introduction to fiction the marrow of his discussions is literature, and he rightly does not feel the need to “negotiate” at length with other fields. His partiality is refreshing, and it certainly separates *Latin American Fiction* from the pseudo-political, cultural and subaltern studies purveyors who never really knew the literature that now allows them to fictionalize its technocracies for their charges. This last approach is also a way to avoid the now too common problem of presenting Latin Americanism as an agglomeration of indiscipline in various semi-disciplines. Ultimately, Swanson has written his own kind of book, and he cannot be asked to do otherwise. He deserves to be judged by the goals he has set for himself and his own methods for achieving them.

Since the Dominican Pedro Henríquez Ureña’s seminal *Literary Currents in Hispanic America* (1945), or Enrique Anderson Imbert’s ambitious but flawed *Historia de la literatura hispanoamericana* (1954, 1974), no single author has produced similarly comprehensive works in terms of conceptualization, and English-language Latin Americanism is not exclusively responsible for that deficiency. Some native critics have assembled forgotten instances of Latin American literary history, but once those instances have been discovered and respect

bestowed we cannot excuse ourselves from further reappraisal. The purpose of reading *Latin American Fiction* so closely is to communicate profitably with a view that is not mine, and, by criticizing it, put in perspective opinions that would otherwise be given support and legitimacy by the critical silence and attendant conjectures I have described above. In sum, Swanson's book is an emblem of negotiations that have yet to be addressed fully for literary Latin Americanism, and I hope this reading will contribute to any truly revisionist history of Spanish American literature that may be written during this century.

Works Cited

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