

BACK TO THE BOOM?  
Recent Trends in Spanish American Literary Studies

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*TEMPTATION OF THE WORD: THE NOVELS OF MARIO VARGAS LLOSA.*

By Efraín Kristal. (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 1998. Pp. 257. \$34.95 cloth.)

*CARLOS FUENTES, MEXICO, AND MODERNITY.* By Maarten van Delden.

(Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 1998. Pp 262. \$32.95 cloth.)

*JULIO CORTAZAR: NEW READINGS.* Edited by Carlos J. Alonso. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Pp. 260. \$69.95 cloth.)

*MANUEL PUIG ANTE LA CRITICA: BIBLIOGRAFIA ANALITICA Y COMENTADA.* By Guadalupe Martí-Peña. (Frankfurt and Madrid: Vervuert and Iberoamericana, 1997. Pp. 203.)

Any selection of books for a review essay can represent no more than a random snapshot of a field or discipline. This is certainly true of the current selection. But although it is doubtful that they constitute a major trend, they do mark something of a break with the pattern identified by Paul Dixon in the last similar review essay in this journal in 1996. Dixon was surely right to emphasize the decentering impulse of much recent criticism on Latin American literature, as he was to raise some reservations about its integrity. Such an impulse, although questionable, has probably come to dominate Latin American literary studies over the last decade or so. Such criticism is a kind of born-again deconstructionism rooted in the rise of theory in the U.S. university and the pseudo-politicization of the academy that it subsequently spawned. With a revisionist or rejectionist air, this body of criticism has sought to rewrite or maybe reinvent Latin American literature and literary history. Literary history in a conventional sense is abandoned in favor of the foregrounding of modes of reading. Notions of aesthetic value or literary quality are challenged as elitist or hierarchical and replaced by the idea of social or political significance. The canon of great writers is subjected to critical scrutiny and hurriedly exchanged for a new canon of marginality: previously unsung writers, women writers, gay writers, writers from less-studied regions or countries, and so forth. Literary study itself is pilloried and transmogrified into cultural studies, so that "popular phenomena" such as film,

soap opera, salsa, mass movements, or local topics can enjoy an equal status as the objects of academic investigation.

Why this change has taken place and been so comprehensively successful is a question open to debate, as is the matter of its validity. The coincidence of the theoretical revolution with a new political sensitivity to difference is the key. This development reinvigorated literary studies and opened them up to diversity and thus gave the discipline a much-needed shot in the arm. But a revolutionary change can quickly become a new norm and even be absorbed by the interests of the existing system. Many institutions of academic life (such as departments, journals, publishers, and conferences) may often seem to many to operate routinely under a policy of political post-structuralist ethics. This process of normalization also provides a “model” that may risk turning the doctoral degree into an almost industrial process in which theses can be churned out according to a reapplicable pattern. And effective political commentary may be endangered by an armchair radicalism of the academic study—the spectacle of well-paid professors complaining about marginality in major presses is not uncommon. Indeed, given that this critical shift is something of an “event,” its own logic must make it prone to a deconstructive reading that might adduce that its obfuscatory rhetoric and claims to political import are in fact a defensive reaction to the interrogation of the humanities with regard to their usefulness and thus very much part of the power game that such a critical position seeks to attack. Most extraordinary of all may be the persistent claim of newness or adventurousness in what is essentially a new political orthodoxy. It is not at all clear that the new boys’ and girls’ network is any less exclusive than the so-called old boys’ network. And if the neutrality of old-fashioned Anglo-American New Criticism has been exposed as a sham, it is often in the open-mindedness of revamped forms of traditional criticism that genuine freshness of thought is to be found today.

The four books selected here, to a greater or lesser extent, go against the grain just outlined. They share an element of a return to literary history, to the canon, and to the single author. The academic star system, the cult of the plenary, the (ironically enough) capitalization of political criticism, the emphasis on marketability in academic publishing, and the vogue of cultural studies have all contributed to a theorizing or generalizing tendency that has made monographs on individual major authors look curiously out of date.

Similarly, the unsightly rush to dig up “new” or “overlooked” authors—as a result of the genuine theoretical-political sea change referred to but also due to the demands of the Ph.D. industry and the now institutionalized pressure for papers and publications—has led to a critical neglect of, or rather embarrassment about, the major authors of the Spanish American “Boom.” A particular victim has been Mario Vargas Llosa, who has been more or less villified on political grounds, while lesser literary talents with more accept-

able political stances have been bizarrely elevated. One of the brave features of Efraín Kristal's study is that he dares to talk about literary quality, while very much taking into account a political dimension. Three of the books reviewed here resituate, albeit in rather different ways, key figures from the Spanish American Boom in terms of their wider contributions to literature, their shifting political contexts, and their changing cultural reception.

Of the authors considered here, Vargas Llosa, Carlos Fuentes, and Julio Cortázar belong to the so-called Big Four, those practitioners of the Spanish American *nueva narrativa* at the center of the literary boom of the 1960s. It marked a radical break with tradition and put Latin American fiction on the international map. (The fourth of the four was Gabriel García Márquez, although his key Boom novel, *Cien años de soledad*, is actually rather atypical of the phenomenon as a whole.) Manuel Puig meantime is usually associated with a transition to the Post-Boom, characterized in part by a diminution of technical complexity and greater engagement with popular or mass culture. It was partly the study of the Post-Boom (still a fairly nebulous concept, although recently brilliantly documented and analyzed in a 1998 book by Donald Shaw) that led to the fragmentation of the literary canon and the quest to recuperate "minor writers." The Big Four, however, have written before the Boom and well after it, with Fuentes and Vargas Llosa sometimes following the Post-Boom pathway partially mapped out by Puig in turning in varying degrees to popular culture, simpler narratives, social reality, and history. The first three works under review attempt to consider three major Boom authors in the light of this wider literary-historical trajectory, although Carlos Alonso's book follows a very different agenda leading to very different results.

Kristal's *Temptation of the Word: The Novels of Mario Vargas Llosa* is a superb piece of conventional investigative research and interpretation that covers all of the Peruvian author's work right into the 1990s. Kristal's perspective is very much the political one of recent criticism, but his research methods are much less flaky. He specifically seeks to avoid what he calls "the abuses of contemporary literary theory" (p. xiv), and his approach rectifies the contempt for literary-historical reality that characterizes much of such criticism. Kristal condemns the critical tendency to confuse the merits of Vargas Llosa's fictions with the merits of their politics. The main body of *Temptation of the Word* is an exhaustive and compelling account of how Vargas Llosa actually wrote his novels in the context of his engagement with his political, literary, and intellectual influences and environment.

A crucial point is that the Boom was, yes, a matter of literary and cultural regeneration and internationalization, but it was also driven by a socialist agenda and was granted cohesion by a shared faith in the Cuban Revolution. The collapse of that faith for Vargas Llosa and others after the imprisonment and debasement of Cuban poet Heberto Padilla in the early 1970s led to a reorientation of the political drive. Then global social and eco-

conomic changes in the 1980s, which ultimately caused Vargas Llosa to run for his country's presidency on a broadly free-market ticket in 1990, led to further literary reorientation.

Thus one finds both consistency and change in Vargas Llosa's writing. It is always politically motivated in that his theory of authorship has always involved not so much the reproduction of reality but rather its recreation, the point being that the writer's role is to express dissatisfaction with the world and to imagine and create alternate worlds. Yet that general commitment has passed through what Kristal categorizes as three or really four phases. The novels of the 1960s clearly represent a socialist period. Here social mobility is almost synonymous with moral degradation, and capitalist society is inevitably corrupt and corruptive. The more humorous works of the 1970s are characteristic of a period of transition toward neoliberalism (in the Latin American sense). They are still very anti-authoritarian and may also reflect a sense of uncertainty and withdrawal following Vargas Llosa's own loss of belief and his vicious repudiation by former allies. His novels of the 1980s embody again the evolution of his political creed. Two themes predominate: the precariousness of civilization in the face of fanaticism and misdirected idealistic zeal (probably echoing his concerns about Sendero Luminoso and, to a lesser extent, the Sandinistas); and the importance of fantasy and eroticism to salve the human instinct toward disgruntlement and violence (not altogether convincing, one has to say). But the works of the 1990s, reflecting perhaps his personal disillusionment following the failure of his presidential campaign, seem to indicate a fourth phase: one of something close to outright pessimism about the human condition. What Kristal demonstrates in his survey is the integrity of Vargas Llosa as a novelist and thinker. One may not agree with his political views, but equally one cannot accuse him of bandwagonism nor deny the rigorous honesty of his literary vision.

Carlos Fuentes may at first sight seem to play the political card for literary gain in a way that Vargas Llosa never would, but Maarten van Delden just about manages to convince readers otherwise in *Carlos Fuentes, Mexico, and Modernity*. Like Kristal's study, his work is based on rigorous research and closely thought analysis. He too looks at the broad picture, taking readers from the 1950s to the 1990s. Fuentes is closely associated with the idea of a motor for change in Mexican society and culture and in Latin American literature more generally. Yet his own literary career does not really evidence a pattern of huge diversity or evolution. Van Delden's study appears to bear this out. The 1950s in Mexico and Fuentes's first novel, *La región más transparente* (1958), are very much linked to a moment of cultural expansion and modernization. But this process proves to be a double-edged sword: there is a culture of emancipation from the controlling postrevolutionary state but also of cosmopolitanism and opening up to the outside world. This is also the spirit of the Spanish American Boom: a newfound confidence in being

Latin American writers writing about Latin American topics, but writing under a European and North American influence with a keen eye toward the international market. One key lacuna in much recent Latin American literary criticism has been a sense of denial of this strongly international aspect of the Boom, an apparently Latin American phenomenon that effectively took place in Europe and even included European writers like Spain's Juan Goytisolo.

Van Delden's meticulously crafted study, however, rightly puts the tension between Mexican nationalism and internationalism at the core of the work. He links this tension to the question of modernity and its contradictions. Fuentes's assumption of a cosmopolitan perspective presumably implied a desire to incorporate ideas and values that are more modern or up-to-date, yet the literary, cultural, and philosophical currents that he absorbed often articulated a powerful critique of the modern world. Similarly, nationalism embodies the modern ideals of autonomy and self-determination yet also represents a desire for social integration in the face of the fragmenting effects of modernity. Once more, one finds an obvious parallel with "the new novel" of the Boom. The roots of the new novel lie in an anxiety about modernity and change reflected in a fractured and elliptical narrative form. Its adoption is also paradoxically an embracing of novelty and change—it is a literature that criticizes the values of modern society but actually mimics them via a desire to be perceived as modern and full of novelty.

Van Delden, however, concentrates on Fuentes and Mexico. The main change to emerge is that Fuentes became toward the end of the 1990s, if anything, more nationalistic. This transition is well detailed by van Delden, although one might find Fuentes's views attractive but somewhat woolly next to those of Vargas Llosa. A onetime fan of former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, Fuentes accepts the benefits of economic globalization for Mexico yet worries about the threat to Mexican sovereignty. At the same time, he is concerned about the problems that motivated the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas yet sees it as a process of reminding all Mexicans of their indigenous roots and offering a model for political integration of the nation as a whole. Moreover, Fuentes feels that the old Eurocentrism is now giving way to a polycentric perspective but praises writers who are true to their own cultural specificity. Van Delden convincingly presents such tensions as defining Fuentes's work. It is nevertheless interesting that what to others might seem muddled thinking has left Fuentes less exposed than the scrupulously transparent Vargas Llosa. Yet there is no doubting Fuentes's crucial role in promoting the Latin American new novel. The heady mixture identified by van Delden was actually the engine of the Boom as a whole, and Fuentes has always been a much better cultural ambassador than he is a novelist.

Cortázar as a writer is a rather different proposition than Vargas Llosa and Fuentes, although all three are linked through a common project of breaking with tradition and forging a new type of Latin American literature

in the 1960s. Cortázar is usually viewed as operating in a surrealist or Río de la Plata tradition that engages less directly with social and political reality and more (often via the use of fantasy) with the underlying and perhaps unconscious forces that shape and drive it. Alonso's edited volume on Cortázar is also a very different kettle of fish from the studies by Kristal and van Delden. *Julio Cortázar: New Readings* represents the best of the new critical tradition outlined and problematized to some extent at the outset. Like the other works, it uses a literary-historical framework as a starting point, but here the appearance of posthumously published works are seen as destabilizing the notion of a fixed or defined narrative corpus.

In fact, Alonso's introduction offers the kind of literary-historical biography sketched in relation to the Peruvian and Mexican authors, yet it immediately appears to dismiss such an account as a "canonical image," a "critical creation," a "plot," and a "received and well-established notion" (p. 2). Instead, Alonso posits the idea of "Cortázar" as an author-function and suggests that the sort of changes in critical discourse alluded to earlier have produced a "Cortázar" different from the received model. Reading is the crucial notion here, then, particularly new ways of reading. This idea is not that new at all, of course. Kristal and van Delden might seem to go more against the trend of much current practice. Alonso's volume brings together many of the names one would expect to see, who say by and large the things one would expect them to say. In truth, there is on occasion almost a tone of neo-clubbiness in the treacly prose, playful form, and knowing winks of some of the contributions. One is also bound to ask why the postures adopted here are any less of a "critical creation" than the model they reject. Assumptions aside, however, there is nothing wrong with the sort of approach favored by Alonso. In general terms, it has done much to refresh literary and cultural criticism over the last ten or fifteen years.

While some of the broad ideas have become (often unquestioned) commonplaces, at the level of process and detailed reading, dividends continue to be paid. In this sense, *Julio Cortázar: New Readings* succeeds conspicuously. As a collection of readings of a specific author, it works extremely well, for example, in René Prieto's disciplined psychoanalytical analysis, Lucille Kerr's superb elaboration of an implied reading technique that reinserts authorial power into an apparently liberatory narrative, Gustavo Pellón's close reading of a less-known text to reinforce the sense of Cortázar's notion of irrationality and play, Doris Sommer's reading of "El perseguidor" in terms of the primacy of difference, and a stream of other good essays by Jean Franco, Neil Larsen, Alberto Moreiras, and Aníbal González. Not all the essays can be discussed, and some of the brief foregoing summaries would presumably indicate to those who know Cortázar's work that much of the "newness" must lie in their detail.

Alonso himself proposes a more unifying or overarching perspective: "Collectively, these essays alert us to the fact that the dynamics ruling Cor-

tázar's works is not built on the dissolution of opposition by effecting a movement from one pole to the other but rather on the displacement away from the dichotomy itself to a 'third' position that defines a space in which these categories are suspended or rendered ineffectual" (p. 10). Alonso concludes that "the movement encompassed by Cortázar's oeuvre is neither an epiphany nor a solution, but rather a gesture toward an uncomfortable and unsettled 'between'" (p. 14). Traditional critics will not find this conclusion difficult to accept, but they may wonder why it takes such heavy going to get to it. The fact is that the "new" critical practice works best in practice and is not therefore necessarily recuperable for conventional explanatory designs. One achievement of this collection is that it manages to combine recuperable insights with another reminder that the reading process can never be fully reducible.

There is not actually all that much critical text to read in Guadalupe Martí-Peña's *Manuel Puig ante la crítica: Bibliografía analítica y comentada*. It is, however, a useful research tool for someone starting to study or write about Puig. It seems to be a thorough and well-structured bibliography of both primary and secondary sources (including an intriguing section called "Trabajos en alemán"). The commentaries are useful, and the brief introductory essay reasonable albeit predictable. If the present selection of books to review is anything more than an arbitrary snapshot, then it is interesting that the book with the least to say is the one that deals with a writer who has moved away from the established nueva narrativa. There may not yet be a wholesale critical rush back to the Boom, but it is just that some of the great novelists who gave Latin American literature the international profile it enjoys today should now be the subjects of both illuminating detailed research and new revisionary readings.

#### REFERENCES

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