

## ON MEXICAN LETTERS

- THE MEXICAN CULT OF DEATH IN MYTH AND LITERATURE.* By BARBARA L. C. BRODMAN. (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1976. Pp. 89. \$4.00.)
- EL GATO.* By JUAN GARCÍA PONCE. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1974. Pp. 161.)
- CINCO ESTUDIOS SOBRE LITERATURA MEXICANA MODERNA.* By ALLEN W. PHILLIPS. (México: SepSetentas, 1974. Pp. 184. \$10.00.)

The fervor with which Latin American literature has been greeted in recent years has been a mixed blessing of sorts. The considerable critical attention that it customarily receives in New York, London, and Paris, the efflorescence of journals, scholarly and sometimes otherwise, devoted to the study, and often the propagandizing of the field, and similar phenomena, have undoubtedly created a larger interest, a more extensive public, at least in translation, than existed previously. But too much of all this activity seems devoted to too little in the way of serious evaluation and broadening of horizons. The eagerness with which so many of us leaped aboard the "boom" bandwagon a few years ago undoubtedly helped create necessary and even desirable publicity, but it also created a vogue of the new, a taste for novelty, which often has obscured important links with the past. Outside those professional circles dealing directly with the field—and even, alas, sometimes within them—one has the impression that Borges, Cortázar, and all the others sprang full-blown and exotic from a great void, lacking a discernible relationship with whatever it is that other writers are doing in Latin America.

The unfortunate result is that a literature both creative and critical of real distinction is in many cases ignored. Much of the fiction is treated either as some sort of social panacea or as an exotic bloom. The very tangible relationships of many of these writers with the American literary past and present and their complex links with writers of Europe and North America are obscured. The three texts commented on here exemplify the general problem, since they are all important books which are likely to go unnoticed outside the review columns of specialized professional journals.

Juan García Ponce is hardly a household name, although he is well known to students of Mexican literature as critic and as creative writer. *El gato*, his most recent novel, demonstrates to what a considerable extent the novel in Mexico, for example, has become sophisticated. There is not really any plot; the novel consists of erotic games—if anything quite this serious can be called a game—of the two principal and practically only characters, Andrés and Alma. As nearly as the reader can determine from this series of fragments, their relationship is almost exclusively erotic, virtually silent. The novel is conceived much like a film, like a series of visual scenes—*Hiroshima mon amour* comes to mind immediately. There are also clear affinities with some of the most interesting of recent Mexican novels: Fuentes' *Cumpleaños*, Elizondo's *Farabeuf*, and Tovar's *La mucha-*

*cha en el balcón o la presencia del coronel retirado*. Although less daring and dazzling than they, in the fragmentation and recombination of time and space, and more cinematographic, it gives the same feeling of brilliant permutations of a rather simple motif. Much of the novel's interest lies in this combination and recombination of the basic verbal and physical elements. The reader is left with a haunting glimpse of another reality, and with a series of puzzling echoes: who and what is this strange cat? He seems to represent the couple's obsessive relationship, as well as their seemingly unavoidable guilt. García Ponce, like most of his generation, presents shifting relationships that are never quite within our grasp; the answers are not here, because there may well be no answers.

Clearly, the day is long gone when the novel in Mexico could be classified safely and thematically: the novel of the Revolution, the Indianist novel, etc. (Whether such classifications were ever more than superficially valid is another, albeit debatable, matter.) But just how long gone are those days is often lost from sight. The radical shift signalled by such works as Agustín Yáñez' *Al filo del agua* or José Revueltas' *El luto humano* took place over thirty years ago. Mexican fiction today is sophisticated and conversant with the literature of the world; its technical characteristics are not different from those of the novel in France, England, the United States, or Argentina, where *El gato* was published. If anything, the novels regularly published by such houses as Joaquín Mortiz are more experimental than any North American counterpart. The Mexican novel has not merely come of age; that happened a long time ago. It has become a flourishing art form that may safely be compared with the novel in Buenos Aires, Madrid, or any other city.

The same passion for the new that so often obscures what the Mexican novel is really about has a muddying effect on criticism. The phenomenon of the boom generated interest and made clear to readers throughout Europe and North America that Latin America indeed was producing a considerable body of prose fiction that was aware of modern techniques and perhaps more imaginative than more "established" literatures. The boom is gone, but the melody lingers on. All too often new novels are touted because they are daring, because they could have been written by a French structuralist, as indeed many of them could. But Mexico is not Paris, however much Porfirio Díaz or anyone else might wish it, and the Mexican circumstance is not the French. The act of creation is an act of volition—as García Ponce is well aware in his introduction—but it is an act of volition colored and in many ways controlled, at least in part, by personal, social, and cultural factors that are not volitional at all.

It is a rare author indeed who does not reflect in some way, direct or indirect, the world circumstance in which he lives. If that circumstance is an exotic or unusual one, it is legitimate to expect that the end product will be colored by it. Barbara Brodman has examined such a coloration in her *The Mexican Cult of Death in Myth and Literature*, an example of the sophisticated tracking down of cultural influences. She sets out to find in the Mexican short story, and concretely, in some stories of Carlos Fuentes, Juan Rulfo, José Revueltas, Rosario Castellanos, and Eraclio Zepeda, traces of the peculiarly Mexican attitude toward death. The study is a fascinating one; when she states that

“death was a constant in the life of every Mexican during the Aztec era,” one recognizes immediately the modern corollary in a Mexico whose bloody Revolution of 1910 found expression in such songs as “Si me han de matar mañana, que me maten de una vez.” Obviously, and Brodman points it out, there is another strand: the strain of Spanish Catholicism that, when blended with its pre-Hispanic counterpart, produced the fascinating popular attitudes that are visible throughout Mexican literature and life.

If one can quibble with Brodman’s study, it is that she has attempted too little, she has only whetted the appetite. Perhaps the limitation was of space, perhaps she is most at home with the short story. But clearly the engravings of Posada are part of the same phenomenon. And what are we to make of a poet such as Xavier Villaurrutia, often criticized for his alleged European bias, author of a dramatic adaptation of *Hamlet* entitled *Invitación a la muerte*, and of a volume of poetry called *Nostalgia de la muerte*? And what of that other poet, José Gorostiza, long-time functionary in the Mexican government and author of the remarkable poetic speculation on the nature of life and death, *Muerte sin fin*? And if these attitudes are visible in Fuentes’ short stories, are they not also visible in his novels? They most certainly are. Something complicated is at work here, and it would be fascinating and rewarding—as well as terribly demanding—to study the interrelationships of all these phenomena.

The practice of literary criticism is no longer a belletristic pastime. Although not an exact science—which may be just as well—it is a demanding art which requires a broad grounding in the theory of literature and in the hard work of practical criticism. Allen Phillips’ essays cover a broad range of areas related to Mexican poetry: the relationship of the Cuban Modernist Julián del Casal with Gutiérrez Nájera, Icaza, and Urbina; Mexican attitudes toward Lugones; the poetry of López Velarde, a poet for whose work Phillips has almost singlehandedly created the critical canon in previous publications; and Octavio Paz as critic of Mexican poetry, along with an essay on the prose of a neglected Modernist, Efrén Rebolledo. These essays all reflect an extremely high level of critical sophistication, as well as a considerable quantity of scholarly legwork in tracking down allusions, references, influences and all the other seeming minutiae that are often so important in achieving a real understanding of what the artist has done. There are also a number of gems here, rescued from semimythical journals, such as Borges’ startling comment that two of the Mexican’s poems were perhaps superior to their model, Lugones’ *Lunario sentimental*.

These three texts have, apparently, little in common: a new avant garde novel, a study of apparent persistence of pre-Hispanic attitudes in the contemporary short story, a series of essays dealing with twentieth-century poets. Yet they have much in common: a high degree of consciousness of what they are about, of professionalism in the most positive sense. There is nothing improvised or offhand about these texts, and they are not atypical. Instead, they reflect the quality of the writing coming out of Mexico and of the efforts to understand and elucidate it.

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