CUBA'S HEGEMONIC NOVELISTS

Seymour Menton University of California, Irvine

OBRAS COMPLETAS: ENSAYOS. Volume 13. By Alejo Carpentier. (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1990. Pp. 399. Paper.)

LA RUTA DE SEVERO SARDUY. By Roberto González Echevarría. (Hanover, N.H.: Ediciones del Norte, 1987. Pp. 274. \$18.00 paper.)

JOSE LEZAMA LIMA'S JOYFUL VISION: A STUDY OF PARADISO AND OTHER PROSE WORKS. By Gustavo Pellón. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989. Pp. 151. \$22.50.)

SEVERO SARDUY AND THE RELIGION OF THE TEXT. By Rolando Pérez. (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1988. Pp. 41. \$13.75 paper.)

VOICES OF THE STORYTELLER: CUBA'S LINO NOVAS CALVO. By Lorraine Elena Roses. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1986. Pp. 155. \$27.95.)

In 1990 and 1991, the *Revista Iberoamericana* published two special issues devoted to Cuban literature. The first one, a double issue, covered all genres in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and included two panoramic articles on the novel of the Cuban Revolution as well as individual studies on writers better known within Cuba than abroad: José Soler Puig, Edmundo Desnoes, Miguel Barnet, and Antón Arrufat. The 1991 issue, entitled "Proyección internacional de las letras cubanas," is devoted exclusively to the five "superstar novelists": Alejo Carpentier, José Lezama Lima, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Severo Sarduy, and Reinaldo Arenas.

Any consideration of Cuban fiction published in the past thirty-three years that aspires to objectivity and thoroughness must take into account both the "superstars" and the multitude of other writers who have published novels in Cuba since 1959 as well as the relations between the two groups and the revolutionary government. The fact that five "superstars" should have emerged in a relatively small country devoid of a strong novelistic tradition is truly phenomenal. For purposes of this review essay, the group is being expanded to six to include Lino Novás Calvo, whose reputation depends primarily on his short stories. My discussion of the books is based mainly on aesthetic principles, but the

fact that all six authors have had problematic relationships with the revolutionary government cannot be ignored.

Lorraine Elena Roses's Voice of the Storyteller: Cuba's Lino Novás Calvo, based on several long interviews first with the author and later with his widow, features a detailed analysis of his major short stories. Recurring themes and the interconnections between narrative point of view and dialogue are emphasized. Wherever possible, Roses points out Novás's pioneering use of certain techniques and themes that were later adapted and disseminated in the works of Jorge Luis Borges, Alejo Carpentier, Miguel Angel Asturias, Severo Sarduy, and others. Although Roses holds Novás's work in high regard, she does not hesitate to make value judgments (unlike many of today's more theoretically oriented critics) on individual stories and even on particular elements within them. For example, she notes that the literary quality of Novás's exile volume Maneras de contar (1970) is "markedly uneven" (p. 118). Roses is also to be praised for demonstrating a thorough familiarity with the previous book-length study of Novás by Raymond Souza (1981), a historically oriented article by Julio Rodríguez-Luis (1975), and the thesis chapter in James Irby's early La influencia de Faulkner en cuatro narradores hispanoamericanos (1957).

Although Roses's Voice of the Storyteller does not differ markedly from Souza's monograph in terms of literary analysis, it is the most biographically complete of the three studies, tracing the key events in Novás's life from his birth in Spain to his death in New York City. Like many Latin American writers of his generation, Novás participated in the Spanish Civil War as a pro-Loyalist journalist. On returning to Cuba in 1940, he became "completely aloof from politics" (p. 25), although he supported his Communist friends Juan Marinello and Nicolás Guillén in mayoral races in Camagüey and Havana (p. 27). In the late 1940s and 1950s, Novás published in the well-known literary journal Orígenes. Although he did not agree with the ultra-baroque style and conservative Catholic views of journal editors José Lezama Lima and José Rodríguez Feo, he shared their view that art should be free of politics. After the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, it became increasingly difficult for Novás to remain in Cuba. His long-term association with the conservative Cuban magazine Bohemia led to his departure for the United States in mid-1960. It is surprising that Roses did not include in her book the earlier crucial event that caused Novás to break with the revolution. At a meeting of the Modern Language Association in New York City, Novás told me that he had refused to sign a protest circulated among Cuban authors against the U.S. bombing of Havana in late October 1959, his reason being that the U.S. plane dropped not bombs but leaflets. Although Novás succeeded in finding a secure teaching position at Syracuse University, he became embittered in his later years by his political exile and his failure to share in the great success of the writers of the Boom.

Alejo Carpentier, in contrast, did benefit from his association with the Boom. Two other helpful factors were his official loyalty to the revolution and the emergence in the past two decades of the New Historical Novel as the dominant tendency in the Latin American novel. Although his contemporaries Mexican Agustín Yáñez and Guatemalan Miguel Angel Asturias (with whom Carpentier shared many biographical and artistic traits) have both been eclipsed by the Boom writers, Carpentier's reputation has continued to grow. One reason may be the intrinsic quality of his work, but others are his essays on the still polemical subjects of the baroque and magic realism (lo real maravilloso), his obsession with history and his handling of time with a variety of experimental techniques, and his stature as the representative cultural icon of the Cuban Revolution, notwithstanding persistent but undocumented reports of his difficulties with the regime (see Menton 1975, 129, 134, 141). Carpentier's problems undoubtedly stem from the dialogic or ambiguous attitude toward revolution expressed in El reino de este mundo and El siglo de las luces as well as from the erudite and "elitist" (nonpopular) style of all his works. Volume 13 of Carpentier's fifteen-volume works, put out by pro-Cuban Mexican publisher Siglo Veintiuno, includes three previously published short collections of essays: Tientos y diferencias (1964), Razón de ser (1976), and La novela latinoamericana en vísperas de un nuevo siglo y otros ensayos (1981). The volume makes readily available Carpentier's interpretations of Latin American fiction, music, art, and architecture. The essay on Havana architecture, "La ciudad de las columnas," is enhanced by twelve excellent reproductions of Paolo Gasparini's photographs. The onomastic index is useful, but the volume cries out for an introduction or series of footnotes that would analyze the evolution of Carpentier's ideas and the circumstances in which each essay was written. It should be pointed out, however, that Venezuelan critic Álexis Márquez Rodríguez published an extensive introductory volume to the whole Siglo Veintiuno series entitled *Lo barroco y* lo real-maravilloso en la obra de Alejo Carpentier (Márquez Rodríguez 1982).

It behooved the revolutionary regime to promote Carpentier as its international cultural representative, for which Carpentier reciprocated by adapting his epic novel of the revolution, *La consagración de la primavera*, to the pro-Soviet government policy. José Lezama Lima, however, never enjoyed the same official recognition. Although publication of his novel *Paradiso* in 1966 (along with awarding of the Casa de las Américas short-story prize to Jesús Díaz Rodríguez for *Los años duros*) signaled a relaxation of official restraints on Cuban writers and a major turning point in revolutionary literature, this phase lasted a scant two years. Lezama had already been marginalized as a Catholic and a homosexual identified with the prerevolutionary literary journal *Orígenes*. Nevertheless, *Paradiso*'s publication in 1966, despite its extended and explicit treatment of homosexuality and its dense artistic prose (which certainly made

it unintelligible for the average reader), was the first significant step in implementing Fidel Castro's June 1961 formulation of the regime's policy toward the arts: "within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing." Thus Castro's implication that writers would have great freedom as long as they did not criticize the revolution was five years in becoming a reality—and a short-lived one at that, ending in August 1968 when Cuba became fully incorporated into the Soviet bloc by supporting the invasion of Czechoslovakia (see Menton 1975, 129). *Paradiso* was also the first work published in Cuba that reflected the greater sophistication of the Latin American Boom novels.

One of the most difficult of all these novels, *Paradiso* has proved to be a researcher's delight, spawning an array of scholarly books and articles. Gustavo Pellón's *José Lezama Lima's Joyful Vision: A Study of* Paradiso *and Other Prose Works* analyzes superbly "the essential and persistent contradictions in his writings: the mystical quest for illumination through obscurity, his calculated cultivation of naïveté, his cosmopolitan Americanism, his Proust-like fascination with and ultimate condemnation of homosexuality, his modernist (in some aspects even postmodernist) narrative style coupled with a mystical (and essentially medieval) worldview" (p. xi). Although Pellón's study reveals his thorough grounding in literary theory, his own style is joyfully jargon-free and lucid.

Pellón begins by questioning the three different approaches that most critics have followed in attempting to analyze *Paradiso*: the realist aesthetics approach, the Bakhtinian, and the poststructuralist. Pellón explains each approach and convincingly points out its shortcomings. Most important, he demonstrates that in Bakhtinian terms, *Paradiso* is not dialogic but monologic. More specifically, although different points of view are expressed in the lengthy dialogues among the three friends—José Cemí, Fronesis, and Foción—it is ultimately Cemí's voice (identified with the author's) that predominates.

José Lezama Lima's Joyful Vision also draws a clear distinction between Lezama Lima and his poststructuralist disciple Severo Sarduy. Although their styles have both been characterized as baroque, Lezama does not play with words in order to display his virtuosity. Lezama's quest for hermeticism is based on his belief that difficulty is stimulating and "is the midwife of enlightenment" (p. 15). He is thus not interested "in the delights of self-referential word-play but in the ability of the poetic image to discover meaning" (p. 28). Lezama and Sarduy also differ in their treatment of eroticism. Sarduy seems to revel in transvestism and sex changes in several of his novels. But Lezama's Paradiso, although notorious for its vivid descriptions of homosexual episodes, presents homosexuality as a danger faced by Cemí in growing up, along with those of madness and suicide (p. 29). The novel equates homosexuality with sterility, which in turn is equated with artistic sterility.

Pellón's second chapter analyzes the description of the large fibroma extracted from Cemí's mother (in Chapter 10 of *Paradiso*) as a marvelous example of Lezama's aesthetics based on "sustained contradiction" (p. 13). Pellón proves that the novel's descriptive elements are not ornamental but rather "primary strategies of Lezama's poetic practices" (p. 24).

Perhaps the most original part is Pellón's final chapter, in which he calls Lezama "the Henri Rousseau of the Latin American Boom" (p. 85). Julio Cortázar had likened Lezama to Rousseau in his seminal study published in *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos* (1974), but Pellón explores the likeness in greater depth with the aid of five black and white reproductions of Rousseau's most famous paintings. Convincing as the comparison may be, it is nonetheless difficult to think of Lezama as a primitivist even if he did misspell and mispronounce foreign proper names. Be that as it may, Pellón's study is an indispensable *vade mecum* for readers willing to brave the turbulent currents in order to reach the supreme elitist pleasures of *Paradiso*.

Lezama Lima's disciple Severo Sarduy is the subject of two very different books. In La ruta de Severo Sarduy, Roberto González Echevarría's close textual analyses of Sarduy's five novels is complemented by a perceptive synthesis of the pre- and post-revolutionary political-cultural milieus in Cuba. González Echevarría elucidates the intertextuality involving Fernando Ortiz, Cintio Vitier, Carpentier, and especially Lezama Lima. But by overemphasizing the relationship between Sarduy's Gestos (1963) and Carpentier's "El acoso," González Echevarría fails to perceive the significance of Sarduy's first novel as the "epic poem" of the Cuban Revolution. Yet González Echevarría perceptively analyzes De donde son los cantantes (1967), a highly experimental search for Cuba's national identity, as primarily a rereading of Cintio Vitier's Lo cubano en la poesía. The much more difficult Cobra (1972) and Maitreya (1978) are brilliantly explicated as geographical-historical fantasies or allegorical pilgrimages to Europe, Asia, Miami, and New York mediated through Lezama's highly original interpretations of the baroque. González Echevarría also illustrates Sarduy's political stance and his own in comparing the Tibetan Dalai Lama's flight to India in 1959 with a hundred thousand of his followers with the exodus of even greater numbers of Cubans to Miami.

Sarduy's most recent novel, *Colibrí* (1983), represents a significant turning point in his novelistic career, one that may herald an even more meaningful turning point in the relationship between literature and theory. The breakup of the *Tel Quel* group to which Sarduy belonged and the deaths of Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Lacan led to Sarduy's disaffection from theory and his writing of *Colibrí*. This novel constitutes a return to a relatively traditional postmodern narrative, a homosexual epic and pastoral full of allusions to *Doña Bárbara*, Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos*, and other telluric novels. According to González

Echevarría, this same recognition of the limitations of theory is gaining prevalence even with the most "tenaciously and tediously systematic Kristeva and Todorov" (p. 214). González Echevarría also recognizes one of the main shortcomings of theoretical discourse in declaring in his prologue, "he querido ser claro." The fact that he has succeeded in producing the most thorough analysis of one of Spanish America's most difficult authors proves that clarity and profundity are not incompatible.

At total odds with González Echevarría's study is Rolando Pérez's Severo Sarduy and the Religion of the Text, a scant thirty-nine-page iconoclastic tract that targets Sarduy as the representative of the "French poststructuralist religion." Pérez explains the historical reasons for the emergence of what he calls "nihilistic novelists and theorists" like Alain Robbe-Grillet, Sarduy, Jacques Derrida, and Barthes, but he rejects the idea that "this is something to be celebrated" (p. 34). Pérez also refuses to accept Sarduy as a Cuban or Latin American writer, viewing him more as a representative of French literary culture. Although most academicians are unlikely to take a tract like Pérez's seriously because of its intemperate tone, it can no longer be considered a voice crying in the wilderness. If anything, the once hegemonic theorists are now on the defensive. Yet Sarduy the novelist should not be condemned because of his French connection. His first two novels, Gestos and De donde son los cantantes, despite their indebtedness to Robbe-Grillet's nouveau roman, provide an original vision of urban revolutionary activities in 1957-58 and an overall mural of Cuba's prerevolutionary life up through Fidel Castro's triumphant entry into Havana.

Sarduy abandoned Cuba in 1960 via a scholarship to study art criticism in Paris and never returned (to my knowledge). He has nonetheless abstained from criticizing the revolution publicly. Quite the opposite has been true of the other two internationally known Cuban novelists, Guillermo Cabrera Infante and Reinaldo Arenas. Cabrera Infante, the author of the widely celebrated Tres tristes tigres, defected officially in 1965 and later became embroiled in the cause célèbre surrounding poet Heberto Padilla (1968–1971). The novelist's problems with the regime, however, actually began in 1961 when the revolutionary government closed down the avant-garde and ideologically pluralistic cultural supplement Lunes de Revolución. Reinaldo Arenas's differences began with publication of his first novel, Celestino antes del alba (1967), although he was unable to leave Cuba until the Mariel exodus in 1980. Several book-length studies have been published on Cabrera Infante and a couple on Arenas, but the only one in English is Ardis Nelson's Cabrera Infante in the Menippean Tradition (1983).

Now that four of the five "superstar" novelists and Novás Calvo are dead and Cuba has entered a severe crisis due to the collapse of the Soviet Union, it seems unlikely that the new generation of Cuban writers will keep pace artistically with their Latin American contemporaries. Yet

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artistic creativity is as unpredictable as global politics. In the meantime, now that Cuba is no longer in the political and artistic spotlight, we may look forward to the publication of new objective analyses and appraisals of more than thirty years of prose fiction of the Cuban Revolution, studies that will undoubtedly complement the monographs on the works of the superstars.

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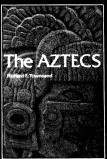
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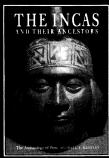
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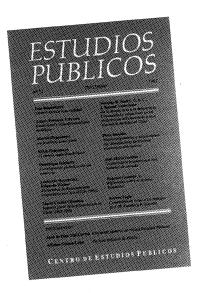


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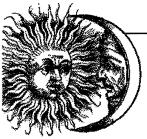
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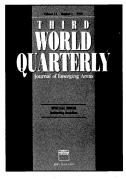
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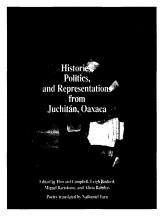


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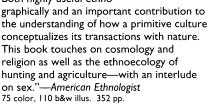
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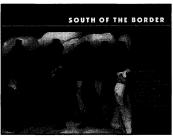
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