Voices of Solitude: The Modern Latin American Novel

In 1973, a young Argentinian woman published a book of interviews called Seven Voices (Seven Latin American Writers Talk to Rita Guibert) and in it Guillermo Cabrera Infante, the Cuban novelist, had this to say about the modern novel (and I take it deliberately out of context): "it’s all voice and no text." Whether or not it accurately describes all modern novels, the phrase certainly applies to the Latin American novel of the last decade or so. Indeed, the enormous importance of this literature to writers and critics everywhere derives in part from the curious voice heard coming from it. But as we shall see, it is not the voice of the storyteller, of the wandering jangleur, rich in tradition and human contact; rather, it is disembodied and most temporary, fragile and seemingly unreal.

If I were to choose an image from the real world which corresponds to the voices of these novels, it would be the voice on the telephone. Why? Because that thin wire of sound we hear through the telephone displaces us both temporally and spatially. It can be such technically and thematically disparate works as Mario Vargas Llosa’s Conversation in the Cathedral (1975), Carlos Fuentes’ A Change of Skin (1968), Manuel Puig’s Betrayed by Rita Hayworth (1971), José Donoso’s The Obscene Bird of Night (1973), Gabriel García Márquez’ One Hundred Years of Solitude (1971), and The Autumn of the Patriarch (1976), José Lelxma Lima’s Paradiso (1974), Severo Sarduy’s Cobra (1975), and Cabrera Infante’s Three Trapped Tigers (1971). What is more, it often makes for a rather demanding, and at times unrewarding, reading experience.

No longer can we categorize literature from down yonder in mere geographical terms, i.e., as the Argentinean, Mexican, or Chilean novel; for regionalism, though not dead as a school of writers and critics everywhere derives in part from the curious voice heard coming from it. But as we shall see, it is not the voice of the storyteller, of the wandering jangleur, rich in tradition and human contact; rather, it is disembodied and most temporary, fragile and seemingly unreal.

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No longer can we categorize literature from down yonder in mere geographical terms, i.e., as the Argentinean, Mexican, or Chilean novel; for regionalism, though not dead as a school of writing, has become anathema to modern Latin American novelists. They are, more than anything else, very self-conscious artists, acutely aware of themselves as sons of William Faulkner, John Dos Passos, James Joyce, Jorge Luis Borges, Tristan Tsara and the surrealists, and the French New Novelists, as much as sons of their native soil. By declaring them to be derivative, I do not deny their influence on the world, including humankind’s perennial proclivity for brutality and barbarism. In the novel, Franz Jelinek, once an architecl of Nazi crematoria and concentration camps, now a salesman, is obsessed with guilt and haunted by memories of a Jewish girl, Hanna, whom he once loved and later saw caught in the fires of the Holocaust. These parts of the novel, which cannot fail to remind one of other literary treatments of the theme of guilt and complicity, such as Steiner’s Treblinka and Shaw’s Man in the Glass Booth, are nevertheless filled with compassion and anguish.

But Fuentes manages to trivialize the pain of existence by interspersing his narrative with long passages of squabbling and bickering between the other couple, Javier and his wife Elizabeth. Just as the world is coming apart around them (Fuentes also intercalates scenes of conquest and carnage in Hernán Cortés’ time to show that these global movements are repetitive), so the personal universe of the man and his wife is atomized into useless accusations and worn-out emotions. Unfortunately, the dialogue between Javier and Elizabeth is often tedious and melodramatic, of the soap-opera variety. It irritates and finally benumbs the reader, who, after a while just wishes the two of them would end it all (and soon). The world’s anguish is further diluted by the culminating mock-trial scene between a hip group called the Monks and a house of prostitutes. Here we have a chorus of jarring voices, a scene of mocking theatricality which, in the Brechtian mode, merely underlines the alienation, not only of the characters, but probably of the reader as well.

Characters in Fuentes’ book have a variety of names, masks, and roles: The Jewish girl, Elizabeth, for instance, is also called, among other identifiers, Ligeia, Beth, Betele, and Liz, and is probably a surrogate for Hanna, Franz’ lost Jewish maiden. The 23-year-old Isabel is, apparently, a counterpart to the middle-aged Elizabeth since both her name (the Spanish equivalent of Elizabeth) and her role in the novel indicate she is another Ligeia, a younger lover of Javier. Roles are interchangeable; personality is continually metamorphosing, breaking into pieces of one’s past and another’s present.

This shredding of a character’s individuality is also evident in the other contemporary Latin American novels. There is, for instance, the image of the peeling onion which Manuel Puig uses in Betrayed by Rita Hayworth to describe the main character’s personality growth: Under each layer is another chronological...
piece of Toto's character until there are no more layers, "because he's just born, only a bud is left, a sprout, the heart of the little Colombian dynasty, and of Macondo, the town they established."

From the opening conversation of Puig's novel, in which various unidentified characters talk at cross-purposes in only semi-connected fashion, to the chapter-long monologues which comprise most of the book, we are given mere voices, each of which makes his or her individual comment on the state of the universe. Puig presents the language of these disembodied voices, most often the vernacular of popular and even street culture, in series of phrases and thoughts connected by repetition of the conjunction "and"; he simply allows his characters' thoughts to run on without connectives, pauses, or transitions. Puig clearly intends to present the complexity of personality, the multiplicity of reality, and yet, after a while, both his technique and the characters seem all too mechanical. In short, language as technique overwhelms the vision of the human: The voices of Puig's mostly unsophisticated, insensitive characters are converted into literary mannerism. As a result, the characters lack substance, they seem mere shadows or, more accurately, mere voices to be manipulated by the author. They are not whole men and women, people of flesh and blood, carne y hueso. Just as characters are delineated through the unsubstantiality of a voice or a series of voices, so time and space are controlled by the same instrument. José Donoso's Obscene Bird of Night, in my view probably the best of these novels along with García Márquez' One Hundred Years of Solitude, is a good example of this. The determining voice of Donoso's novel belongs to Mudito, an apparent mute of indefinite age (shades of Faulkner) who travels back and forth between the past and present, perceiving reality through the unsubstantiality of characters themselves, as in Fuentes' Change of Skin, or repetitions, recur- rentes of other characters. (There are at least sixteen Aurelianos in One Hundred Years of Solitude.) Despite their oddly funny and frequently charming idiosyncrasies, Márquez' characters, who sometimes seem like endearing eccentrics, are not real individuals, for each new character is a variation of a previous one. And all are marked by an irridicable air of solitude, hence the title and the major theme of the book. The original Aureliano Buendia, founder of Macondo, dies alone and unnoticed, leaning against the tree where he has passed the last few years of his life in voluntary mute confinement.

In another of Márquez' novels, The Autumn of the Patriarch, solitariness is stressed by the very fact that only one voice is of any consequence, the single and ultimately monotonous voice of the grotesque dictator, Zacarias, who wallows in self-pity and worries over the perennial problem of all tyrants: the insecurity of power. All other voices are swallowed up inside the extraordinarily long inner monologue of the Biblically-named patriarch who, in characteristic García Márquez style, dies somewhere between the age of 107 and 232 years (and who continues to die or appears to die at a number of points throughout the novel). Time as history, once again, is negated: The only temporal events of significance are the long and very imprecise lives of the dictator, who fluctu- ously wanders back and forth through time, and his recurring death, which both opens and closes the novel.

This sense of solitude, of the solipsistic, of the solitary voice hearing only itself and entrapped within its thin, disembodied, metamorphosing personality, is characteristic of nearly all of these modern Latin American novels. At times it is carried to the extreme: to the disintegration of identity and the ultimate de-humanization of the individual. Donoso's Obscene Bird of Night offers the most horrifying and grotesquely poignant example of this reduction of man to less-than-human status when Mudito, in
his ceaseless transformations of personality (which merely prove to him over and over again that he does not know who he is), finally is converted into an object, a jute sack covered by layers and layers of shove sacking. "Being deaf, blind, dumb, a small sexless package," he is reduced to a thing; a wall of silence is constructed between him/it and the rest of humanity. Need I point out the acute similarity between this monstrous dehumanization and the garbage-cane existence of Beckett's characters in *End Game*?

Just as the voices of Donoso's Muniro, Puig's Toto, and Vargas Llosa's Ambrosio and Santiago are isolated, sealed-up pieces of insubstantiality, so the novelists' language becomes, logically, increasingly insubstantial and secretive as it conveys the meaning (or meaninglessness) of the novelists' universe. The hermetic and arcane language in books such as Lezama Lima's *Paradiso*, Sarduy's *Cobra*, and even Cabrera Infante's *Three Trapped Tigers* often obscures meaning, and thus requires "deciphering." But here the reader runs into considerable difficulty. Both *Paradiso* and *Cobra* are governed by poetic images whose ultimate secret can only be decoded by the novelists themselves. The reader understands that the questions of homosexuality and of the writer's creativity provide the mainspring to *Paradiso*, and that transvestism (an image for the metamorphosis of personality?) and, again, writing itself inform the world of *Cobra*, but what of it? The many neo-baroque metaphors in *Paradiso* require still more keys after the first key.

Language in these novels prevents us from gathering a coherent vision of the universe because it is language itself which creates the disorder. *Cobra's* deliberately disordered structure is made no clearer by knowing that Sarduy is obsessed with language itself as the ultimate (?) reality. *Three Trapped Tigers* is a better book and is rather fun to read, composed as it is of theatrical puns, jokes, and hundreds of word plays. But for all his virtuosity with language, Cabrera Infante's language is no less obscure; for all the mastery and glorification of technique, language as a game finally becomes boring.

It is obvious that the reader will find himself in terrible difficulties with books of this sort precisely because there is no coherence of content. It is not surprising that he might suspect the old shell game. But even if he does find out where the pea is, it is still only a dried-up, little pea. The Latin American novelist, like his modern predecessors, has changed the rules, has thrown out the idea that the universe possesses meaning. For the reader working under the old set of rules, the traditional cultural context of Western society, the piecemeal voices of dialogue, inner- and outer-directed monologues, theater, singing, and just plain talk, talk, talk, do not cohere because there is no ordering principle to the universe. More importantly, by removing man from his sense of history and chronological time, by fragmenting his personality so that it loses wholeness and individuality, by sewing him up in a sack of solitariness, the Latin American novelist has destroyed the sense of community so critical to literature in general and fiction in particular. Unlike Solzhenitsyn, who has passed through the crucible of isolation, brutality, and chaos and recovered the whole man in his writing, these artists cannot see beyond man's dehumanization and irremediable sense of isolation in a meaningless, absurd universe. If only man exists and he is miniaturized, like the white-dwarf version of *Cobra* in Sarduy's novel, if his deeds are mocked and his world shorn of significance, then what is left? Only words? A voice?

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**Christmas Book Recommendations**

*We offer here gift suggestions from some of the writers and statesmen whose books and collected utterances would top our own list of recommendations. In doing so, we hope to provide not only useful advice, but also some insight into the workings and frolics of fourteen extraordinary minds.*

**E. DIGBY BALTZELL**

Professor of sociology at the University of Pennsylvania; author of *Philadelphia Gentlemen* and *The Protestant Establishment*.

Unfortunately, I am rushing to finish a book and have not been doing much reading this year. However, I was tremendously impressed with a short little paperback, *Adams and Jefferson*, a *Revolutionary Dialogue* (Merrill D. Peterson, Oxford University Press, 1976). It is a delightful analysis of the greatest friendship in American history. I love both men but the beauty of the book is that it gives one great insight into the optimistic and pessimistic aspects of our heritage: The popular Jefferson, as Macaulay would have put it, was "all sail" when it came to equality and democracy with a capital "D," while the unpopular Adams saw that even Democrats were subject to sin and needed an "anchor." From my view, Adams in the long run had the greater half-truth than his dear friend Jefferson did, and it is my guess that he will come into his own in the next decade.

**JACQUES BARZUN**

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1. It has been said that nothing ages so fast into dullness as religious quarrels. The generality is disproved every time a historian has the talent to recreate the milieu, the emotions, and the men who fought. This is what Marvin R. O'Connell does superbly in *The Oxford Conspirators—The History of the Oxford Movement: 1833-1843* (Macmillan, 1969). The story of those twelve years is full of lessons in party and personal politics; in character, statism, and university life; in literature and the art of wriggling. John Henry Newman dominates the scene less than one would suppose, true history being always a return to the original perspective at the expense of hindsight. And here the historian brings us unpublished material that modifies still further the conventional image one so readily takes for reality.

2. The opposite movement, away from the contemporary, is also valuable: Greatness in men may paradoxically increase with distance. This is surely true of Yeats, the last of the large-scale poets. His ideas, his myth-making, his politics, and his love affairs have been well reported on for some time, but not until the appearance of his *Uncollected Prose* in two volumes (ed. John P. Frayne, Columbia University Press, 1978) has it been possible to gauge the amount of thought Yeats put into the battle for Irish culture—a battle fought on two fronts, Irish and English, for in such matters compatriots are not automatically friends.