

RECENT CRITICISM OF
NINETEENTH-CENTURY
LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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GENTEEL BARBARISM: EXPERIMENTS IN ANALYSIS OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY SPANISH-AMERICAN NOVELS. By JOHN BRUSHWOOD. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981. Pp. 241. \$18.50.)

EL NATURALISMO EN MEXICO. By MARIA GUADALUPE GARCIA BARRAGAN. (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1979. Pp. 110.)

LITERATURA HISPANOAMERICANA E IDEOLOGIA LIBERAL: SURGIMIENTO Y CRISIS. By HERNAN VIDAL. (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Hispamérica, 1976. Pp. 118.)

The rigorous and abundant critical commentary that contemporary Latin American literature is presently eliciting raises crucial questions concerning Latin American letters prior to the "boom." Has literature worthy of serious attention arisen in Spanish America only in the last four decades? How may poetry and prose from the last century in Latin America be regarded in light of the strong emphasis on its current literary production? A survey of criticism on nineteenth-century Spanish American literature published in the United States and the Southern republics in the past ten years reveals that interest in earlier works abounds and is now leading to fresh and expanded critical approaches. The worldwide focus on contemporary Latin American letters has brought forth not only reevaluations of individual works but also attempts to theorize on the whole of Latin American literature. Studies published since 1974 are helping to create the *espacio intelectual* whose absence Octavio Paz lamented in his essay "Sobre la crítica,"¹ and they are bringing Latin American literary criticism to a new maturity. Viewing the past in terms of an expansive and vigorous present invests Latin American literature with a tradition that is not so much created as discerned.

The obvious difficulties in spotlighting new and important critical works on nineteenth-century Spanish American literature concern period and provenance. Many critical studies of recent publication fo-

cus on Latin American literature from the colonial period to the present or deal with peninsular as well as American authors. Genre studies, studies focusing on women and minorities in literature, and bibliographies link all literary epochs and in some cases all areas of the Hispanic world. Prevalent as well are efforts to elaborate a critical theory for Latin American literature in general, notably exemplified by Roberto Fernández Retamar's *Para una teoría de la literatura hispano-americana y otras aproximaciones* (La Habana: Casa de las Américas, 1975) and Renato Prada Oropeza's *La autonomía literaria* (Veracruz: Cuadernos de *Texto crítico*, 1977). Anna Wayne Ashhurst's 1980 study, *La literatura hispanoamericana en la crítica española* (Madrid: Gredos), deserves mention for its attempt to stress the linguistic bond that exists between Spain and her former colonies and to detail the role of Spanish publishing firms in promoting Latin American works. Oscar Hahn's *El cuento fantástico hispanoamericano en el siglo XIX* (Mexico: Premia Editora de Libros, 1978) signals an expected direction in recent critical studies in bringing depth and specialization to nineteenth-century works, now that critics are seeking to understand the entire body of literary production in Latin America not only in terms of present greatness but also with a focus on seminal works of the past and how they relate to contemporary letters.

Recent critical interest in Latin American literature prior to 1900 has taken, then, the form of comparative studies or specialized examinations of nineteenth-century works and schools. Three recent studies best exemplify this diverse critical activity of the past ten years, and they invigorate the study of Latin American literature by their attention to intrinsic worth, historical circumstance, and authorial creativity respectively. John Brushwood's *Genteel Barbarism: Experiments in Analysis of Nineteenth-Century Spanish-American Novels*, Hernán Vidal's *Literatura hispanoamericana e ideología liberal: surgimiento y crisis*, and María Guadalupe García's *El naturalismo en México* each elaborate a paradigm of the critical emphasis that current studies are choosing to develop. In Brushwood's case, the stress is plainly on reinterpreting representative texts from the previous century with a contemporary critical apparatus. *Genteel Barbarism* is striking principally for its rejection of past analyses of the novels as "semi-anthropological portrayals of customs" (p. ix). Brushwood shares with Hernán Vidal a certain impatience with previous studies of nineteenth-century Latin American literature. Rejecting the attitude of standard critical examinations that view any nineteenth-century study as "trabajo tedioso que se debe sufrir para afirmar que se tiene una visión panorámica de esta literatura" (p. 10), Vidal links romanticism and "boom" literature in a wholly original way, using the dependency theory as his basis. These two works represent a kind of maturity in criticism in that Latin American literature is put forward as provocative and multifaceted in its own right. Crucial for an under-

standing of the importance of these studies is the recognition of their innovative bent, their insistence on seeing more than has been seen before, their refusal to settle for restatement. Although much recent criticism of nineteenth-century topics aspires to this singularity, Brushwood and Vidal succeed persuasively. García Barragán's *El naturalismo en México* reminds the reader of the ways in which thorough and well-documented scholarship can bring authority to the study of a literary period, illuminate its practical functioning, and certify its worth by demonstrating influences, interrelationships, causes, and historical structure. Her book excels in its detailed examination of specific works, their reflection of contemporaneous social thought, and their place within a chronologically refocused span of naturalism's existence in Mexico. If contemporary criticism of nineteenth-century literature seeks to define and honor its subject, then studies such as this one by García Barragán compel readers to reconsider Latin America's own view of the role of literature in society, leading once more to the conclusion that recent criticism sees beyond mere justification to principle and tradition.

Genteel Barbarism brings together rereadings of eight Latin American novels from the nineteenth century, a brief summary of Latin America's literary schools in that century, and speculation on the efficacy of applying to the novels the other critical approaches not selected for the chapters devoted to each work. Brushwood relies strongly on new and structuralist critics to study the novels, including Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, Arnold Kettle, Floyd Merrell, Roman Jakobson, Todorov, Roland Barthes, Wayne Booth, and Gérard Genette. The result is an aligning of Latin American literature with the concept of fiction as transcendent reality. While he pays attention to traditional critical approaches, Brushwood consistently reminds the reader that contemporary criticism relies on its own vocabulary and methodology, valuing the autonomous text as a privileged communication between author and reader. Brushwood's preface does much to resolve the seeming enigma of why certain critics and novelists were chosen for the study, given that not all the novels chosen are canonical and that different critics are called upon for virtually every analysis. Brushwood says of his selections, "I can offer no satisfactory explanation of why I chose these eight novels beyond saying that each one interests me for a particular reason" (p. x). In the choice of critics, Brushwood comments, "In the very early stages of the study, I thought it might be possible to use the ideas of one particular theorist in each chapter, but it soon became apparent that such exclusiveness would not work. Emphasis on one or another theorist, however, will be quite apparent. . . . Wayne Booth and Gérard Genette are especially apparent in the chapter on *Guatimozín*, but they are really present throughout the book" (p. x). Brushwood

then proceeds to a short survey of nineteenth-century Latin American prose, which is valuable for noting landmarks and pivotal works but almost a kind of tease when one considers the "experiments" that lie ahead.

What most pleases and excites one in *Genteel Barbarism* is its witnessing of critical genesis from standard beliefs about the novels. For each novel, Brushwood presents a review of previous scholarship and certain details about the author, then he applies the new critical approach chosen for each work. His laying of a traditional groundwork yields interpretation that dignifies the novelist's art. No longer is the nineteenth-century novel seen as imitative or merely expressive of social concerns. Structure and style occupy Brushwood, and his reader clearly beholds a new regard for Latin American literature in the making. With each critical analysis, long-held critical views are overturned or reexamined to such a degree that the novels regain an originality and merit lost through years of pounding by sociological or biographical criticism.

Brushwood includes analyses of three lesser-known nineteenth-century novels, Ramón Meza's *Mi tío empleado*, Gonzalo Picón-Febre's *El sargento Felipe*, and Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's *Guatimozín*. These selections represent an admirable attempt to cultivate critical interest where little existed before, but the book's worth lies in Brushwood's reinterpretation of classic texts of the period. Mármol's *Amalia*, Blest Gana's *Martín Rivas*, Isaac's *María*, Matto de Turner's *Aves sin nido*, and Gamboa's *Suprema ley* are subjected to critical analysis primarily in line with contemporary structuralist theory. The study of *Aves sin nido* is an exception in that Brushwood chooses to base his interpretation on sociological criticism, but his conclusions diverge from the standard ones. He notes that "in the history of Spanish American literature, *Aves sin nido* accords more comfortably with the theme of civilization versus barbarism than with the theme of 'indigenismo'" (p. 157). By means of such unexpected discoveries, *Genteel Barbarism* asserts its significant place in contemporary criticism precisely for its willingness to go beyond accepted notions and treat the nineteenth-century novel as a multifaceted text. Each of the novelists Brushwood studies is seen as a conscious, skilled artist striving to satisfy the demands of structural integrity and not merely to evoke colorful scenes, issue strident protests, or create Latin American examples from European models.

The analyses of *María* and *Amalia* are especially therapeutic, chiefly because the sacred esteem in which these novels have been held had neglected any consideration that might rise above historicity. Brushwood confidently corrects these omissions by concentrating on narrative structure and character development in the two novels. Relying on Gérard Genette's definition of "récit" and Roland Barthes's un-

derstanding of codes and lexias, Brushwood examines Efraín's sensitivity as "the most important factor in the novel's meaning" (p. 87). Again Brushwood's point of departure is a recognizable element of traditional criticism, the effusive pathos of a romantic hero in this case, but the critic locates each manifestation of Efraín's tenderness in a coded communication, thus emphasizing the "process rather than the product" (p. 88). Defining the place of the "text act reader" throughout the analysis, Brushwood views the creation of *María* as an experience that transcends Latin American romanticism, and he confers upon it a universality based on narrative codes that involve readers regardless of their time or place. *Amalia* is similarly subjected to a scrutiny that gives only a passing nod to the novel's reflection of the Unitarian-Federalist conflict in Rosas's Argentina. Brushwood chooses again to concentrate on form, highlighting among other details the fact that the episodic nature of the work results from its being a "novela por entregas." He approaches the novel in terms of Brooks and Warren's narrative elements, including beginning and exposition, description and setting, atmosphere, pattern, conflict, and so forth. But in doing so, Brushwood shifts the emphasis away from the documentary nature of the novel, again the customary approach, to the development of Daniel as the center of a conflict that is artistically elaborated through his actions. Brushwood's change of focus from the traditional to the innovative and from the historical to the artistic allows the student of nineteenth-century Latin American literature to appreciate the complex artistry of the text, energizes a literature thought to be anticipatory or dormant, and links past works to present literary production in terms of skill, professionalism, and mastery of technique.

This even comparison between literature of the previous century in Latin America and the celebrated works of today is fundamental for achieving a true appreciation of literary tradition in the Spanish American republics. "Boom" novelists did not suddenly find themselves invested with immense talent that exploded in a wilderness, and one of contemporary criticism's most encouraging traits is the desire to discover the forerunners of greatness in the nineteenth century. Brushwood certifies the literary enterprise of the previous century by choosing to deal with the standard works of that time as serious artistic creations that clearly offer up as many brilliant structural displays as the modern Latin American novel. In his 1976 work *Literatura hispanoamericana e ideología liberal: surgimiento y crisis*, Hernán Vidal goes a step beyond Brushwood by perceiving in both nineteenth-century literature and the contemporary novel a dependency on foreign economic and cultural models. His chief aim could be said to be to deny the modern novel its universality and autonomy by demonstrating its place within a scheme of nineteenth-century liberalism. But the work will interest the

student of nineteenth-century literature because of its contention that the conditions that brought forth Latin American literature in the national period continue to determine its production today. Again, current criticism stresses continuity, not rupture. Vidal's study employs economic and sociological factors to understand literary activity in Latin America since independence.

Vidal strikes a polemical note from the outset: "La literatura colonial, el romanticismo, el naturalismo y el modernismo parecen estar alejados de preocupaciones inmediatas y de la 'sensibilidad moderna'. . . no hay noción ni convencimiento de una interpretación raigal de todos ellos de modo tal que el presente ilumine el pasado y vice-versa" (p. 10). Vidal continues with a definition of free-market liberalism in the nineteenth century and asserts that this system led to Latin America's dependency on England in the previous century, on the United States in the present. He theorizes from this economic model that both the "boom" and romanticism "son manifestaciones culturales de la dependencia" (p. 15.) He further perceives in all of Latin American literature a complex working out, at various times and with alternating emphasis, of utopian, Adamic, and demonic myths based on a dichotomy of Europe as spirit and Latin America as flesh. Vidal affirms that Latin American authors have always been at odds with their cultural milieu in attempting to impose foreign models on a society that finds them antithetical. Typical of his viewpoint, which strives to unify the motives for Latin American literature of the past and present century, is this statement: "pensamos que los inicios del romanticismo decimonónico y la narrativa del boom son extremos simétricos que se reflejan entre sí como espejos cóncavos. Creemos que las premisas discutidas pueden generalizarse hipotéticamente a otros períodos" (p. 26). His comparison of the two centuries is also based on "uno de los valores básicos del liberalismo, la lealtad a la individualidad absoluta" (p. 77), an individuality that has led to Latin American writers becoming isolated as they strive to impose the European spirit on the Latin American flesh. Vidal's work capably demonstrates a tradition, a mark of maturity for scholarship, and a landmark in critical coherence.

Alongside original and comparative works such as those by Brushwood and Vidal stand studies in traditional criticism that focus expanded attention on a particular period of the nineteenth century. María Guadalupe García Barragán's 1979 book *El naturalismo en México* represents the kind of ongoing investigation that has kept nineteenth-century studies alive. García Barragán asserts no provocative new theories, nor does she apply new criticism to sacred texts of the past. Her book excels instead as a detailed examination of a period, and she succeeds in unearthing new facts that demonstrate the independence of Mexican naturalism. One result of her persistent research is her dis-

covery that *Cuentos mineros* (1881) by Pedro Castrera is a literary landmark: "Los *Cuentos mineros* tienen una importancia capital en la historia del naturalismo de Iberoamérica, no sólo por ser las primeras narraciones naturalistas, sino también porque su temática precede con diez años a *Germinal* de Zola" (p. 16). Valuable as well is her definition of naturalism, which she utilizes in dealing with the several authors of the study. *El naturalismo en México* promotes further research on the period by including a lengthy bio-bibliographic section that locates many naturalistic short stories in their original sources in magazines and newspapers of the time as well as a chronology of all the naturalistic works studied. Indicating her desire to make a unique contribution to the study of nineteenth-century letters, García Barragán says in her preface, "Se ha dicho que el auténtico naturalismo literario no existió en México; empero, en el presente estudio reseñamos un número nada despreciable de obras naturalistas, que lo son en su totalidad o en parte, ya sea con certeza, o sólo presumiblemente. Incluimos asimismo otras que por algunos rasgos anticipan el naturalismo, cuando este movimiento literario aún no aparecía" (p. 7). She then studies the naturalist production of thirty-four authors, noting plots of their works, similarities to other writers of the time, and the reception of these works by the Mexican public. *El naturalismo en México* is divided into precursors, general conditions of naturalism in Mexico, and naturalism in the theater, the novel, and the short story. García Barragán's study specifies an era, analyzes the social conditions that led to the cultivation of naturalism, and presents a picture of an active and sensitive literary community. While Brushwood and Vidal expand criticism of nineteenth-century topics, García Barragán deepens it.

Criticism on nineteenth-century Latin American literature can only profit from the widespread interest in contemporary Spanish American letters. What preceded this glistening watershed beyond which the new novel in Latin America has flourished? Studies that re-examine the literature of the past in Latin America are no longer content to repeat the standard platitudes. As Latin America enters an age of influence and decisive participation in the world arena, its culture will undergo extensive analysis. Theory, universalist interpretation, and confident penetration into previously neglected areas of inquiry mark current criticism on nineteenth-century Latin American literature, and the best minds that revere the art of Spanish America will continue to illuminate valuable and unheard-of treasures.

NOTE

1. *Corriente alterna* (México: Siglo Veintiuno, 1972), 39.