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Books About Latin American Literature

MACHADO DE ASSIS:
THE BRAZILIAN MASTER AND HIS NOVELS
by Helen Caldwell
320 pp. University of California Press. $7.95

RONALD C. TURNER
Library Journal, April 1, 1970

Although Machado de Assis was a playwright and a prolific poet and jornalist, he is best known as one of Brazil's greatest novelists. This study answers a sorely felt need for substantial scholarship in a neglected area of Latin American letters. Caldwell has read the original works with great care and has introduced supplementary material with scholarly discretion. The central chapters dealing with the *Posthumous Memoirs of Braz Cubas* (1881) will be especially welcome, since that novel, commonly cited as deeply pessimistic, is convincingly demonstrated to be "cast in the form of a comedy, with comic personages and comic action arising out of their comic natures." Helen Caldwell's study will [be] indispensable as a companion to Brazilian literature.

(© Library Journal, 1970)

AN INTRODUCTION TO LITERATURE IN BRAZIL
by Afrânio Coutinho
Translated by Gregory Rabassa
326 pp. Columbia University Press. $10.00

ALFRED HOWER
Journal of Inter-American Studies and World Affairs, January 1970

The six chapters of this book were originally written by the distinguished Brazilian literary critic and member of the Academia Brasileira de Letras, Afrânio Coutinho, to serve as introductory essays to the various sections of the imposing four-volume history of Brazilian literature, *A Literatura no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro, 1955-1959), that he organized and edited to which more than thirty other scholars contributed. Professor Coutinho later published his essays as a separate book under the title of *Introdução à Literatura no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro, 1959; 3rd ed., 1966), which obviously provided the title for the present English translation.

There may be a play on words in the Portuguese title meaning that the book is an introduction to the work called *A Literatura no Brasil.* At any rate, the English title is misleading, for Professor Coutinho's essays presuppose considerable acquaintance with Brazilian (and Portuguese) literature and history, and it is thus quite incorrect to say, as a prefatory note says, that "this book fills the need for an introduction to and a survey of the rich literature of Brazil for the English reader." The author, or the capable translator, Gregory Rabassa, would have had to revise or annotate the work thoroughly to fill that need, which unfortunately still exists, for Samuel Putnam's enjoyable *Marvelous Journey: A Survey of Four Centuries of Brazilian Literature* is out of print and out of date, and Manuel Bandeira's *Brief History of Brazilian Literature,* ably translated an annotated by Ralph E. Dimmick, is too brief to be completely satisfactory.

The problem of the title of the present book is recognized by the translator in his preface: "The title of this study might lead one to believe that it is a history of Brazilian literature. This is not the case. It is, rather, what could be called a 'history of the history of Brazilian literature.' " Another way of describing this book would be to call it an introduction to the study of literary theory and literary history, with discussions of how the theories preferred by the author should be applied to the study of Brazilian literature.

Professor Coutinho is one of Brazil's foremost and most influential literary theorists, an advocate, as he makes clear in this book (and as he had previously made clear in earlier books and articles), of the principles of Anglo-American "new criticism," the "new stylistics" of Spitzer, Hatzfeld, and Dámaso Alonso, and the "Slavic school" of René Wellek and others. As such, he places primary importance on the close study of literary texts, with special attention to their esthetic and stylistic values, as opposed to the traditional studies that stress the historical, the biographical, or the sociological aspects of literary works. He is also deeply concerned with the problem of the periodization of literature, and rather than the traditional arbitrary divisions of literary history by centuries or decades or on the basis of political or nationalistic considerations, as in the works by Sílvio Romero and other Brazilian literary historians of the past, he argues strongly for stylistic periodization, which, unlike the others, is based strictly on literary criteria. The various literary styles that have developed in Brazil, he declares, are these: baroque, neoclassicism, Arcadianism, romanticism, realism, naturalism, Parnassianism, symbolism, impressionism, and modernism; Brazilian literary history must therefore be approached through a study of those styles.

The above are points that Professor Coutinho brings up throughout the book and particularly in his first chapter, "General Introduction," which was of course meant to be an introduction for all four volumes of *A Literatura no Brasil.* (Numerous disconcerting references to "this work" are made, when the meaning is not this book but the totality of *A Literatura no Brasil.*) The author supports his arguments with frequent references to and citations from works by Wellek and Hatzfeld among many others to show how problems of literary theory have been treated over the years in various countries. Fully half the book, in fact, deals with non-Brazilian matters, for the author's technique throughout is to discuss the problem at hand in general terms (with references mainly to Europe) and then apply the situation to the Brazilian scene. Perhaps the strongest sections of the book are those dealing with Brazilian baroque and with modernism, but it should be pointed out that the author does not discuss individual writers in depth and seldom mentions specific works of Brazilian literature, leaving those tasks for his collaborators in the remainder of the multi-volume *A Literature no Brasil.* The work is extremely well documented throughout; there are, for example, 109 notes to the last chapter, many of them quite long and containing valuable information particularly on Brazilian modernism. (To the annoyance of the serious reader, the notes are printed inconveniently in the back of the book instead of at the bottom of the page where they belong.)

The translation runs along smoothly and accurately for the most part,

but there are unfortunately several places where more care was needed in working out the often long and complicated sentences of the original Portuguese. A particularly regrettable error occurs on page 149 where, in an involved sentence discussing the influence of José de Alencar on Machado de Assis, the surprising statement appears that the figure of Alencar is "the greatest in Brazilian literature." What the author really says, however, is something much more tenable: "nêle se miraria Machado de Assis para constrir sua personalidade e sua obra, a obra máxima da literatura brasileira" (*A Literatura no Brasil,* vol. I, t. 2, p. 599). Clearly it is the work of Machado de Assis that is "the greatest in Brazilian literature." On page 169 the statement that "realism, in a state of fullness, created... the novel" misrepresents what the author wrote, namely that realism found the novel already in a state of fullness (II, 33). On pages 47-48 the statement that the sonnet in Brazil "had to wait until Parnassianism for a favorable environment" should read that the sonnet in Brazil from the seventeenth century to Parnassianism found an environment that was "almost always favorable" (I, 67). On page 68 the author should not be represented as saying that "Vieira's influence was... on the whole family of poets and prosists of the academies" for what he does say is that the latter, along with Vieira and others, are examples of baroque writers in Brazil; he does not claim any influence of Vieira on them (I, 198). In that same passage, the reference to works of *ufanismo* does not apply to Jesuit literature but to works by Botelho de Oliveira and Nuno Marques Pereira. On page 194 the statement that in Brazilian literature after 1930 "the ideology that was at the base of naturalism . . . was nothing except scientific positivism" should read that that ideology "was no longer scientific positivism" (vol. III, t. 1, p. 40). There are several other passages that show similar evidence of excessive haste in translating.

There can be no question of the tremendous impact of Professor Coutinho's influence on literary criticism in Brazil, for many of the foremost Brazilian critics have followed his lead in the last decade or so, including Eduardo Portella, Osvaldino Marques, Fausto Cunha, Lêdo Ivo, José Guilherme Merquior, and Péricles Eugênio da Silva Ramos. The impression should not be left, however, that his is the only dominant approach in contemporary Brazilian criticism, for another eminent schòlar, Antônio Cândido, in his two-volume *Formação da Literatura Brasileira* (São Paulo, 1959; 2nd, rev. ed., 1964), has produced a superb work that, as Wilson Martins has noted, "harmonizes subtly the two elements that to Afrânio Coutinho seem irreconcilable or reciprocally hostile: the historical and the esthetic" (see Martins' article in *Portugal and Brazil in Transition,* Raymond S. Sayers, ed. [Minneapolis, 1968], p. 16).

This book is announced as the first in a series of "translations from Portuguese and Spanish of important contemporary books in the social sciences and humanities." This is a most laudable enterprise, but I would suggest to the sponsors, the Institute of Latin American Studies of Columbia University, that such works often need to be annotated as well as translated if they are to be made meaningful to the general American reader. The latter, for example, does not need to be given the date of the American Revolution (p. 104) but he might appreciate being given the date of the "Inconfidência Mineira" (p. 107). And how much more helpful it would be for the English reader to be supplied with a list of some of the many Brazilian works now available in English translation instead of, for example, the pointless lists of names (and dates) of more than one hundred Brazilian romantic writers (pp. 268-270) and more than seventy Brazilian symbolist poets (pp. 274-275). Samuel Putnam rightly lameted some twenty years ago that not a single novel of Machado de Assis was available in English; one would not learn from the present book that that situation has fortunately changed tremendously. Nor is there any mention of the translation now available of works by such writers as Jorge Amado, Erico Veríssmo, José Lins do Rêgo, Guimarães Rosa, and (beautifully translated by Gregory Rabassa) Clarice Lispector.

(© Journal of Inter-American Studies and World Affairs, 1970)

SOUTH AMERICA OF THE POETS
by Selden Rodman
270 pp. Hawthorn. $8.95

Publishers' Weekly, August 10, 1970

Disappointingly, Rodman's promising book proves to be less an intimate look at the poets of South America than a too-hasty bird's-eye view of the individual countries, their leaders, politics and social problems. Commendably the author points out the regretful unfamiliarity with both the political life and the cultural richness of such countries as Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Chile and tiny Guyana. But, despite some conversations with poets (Borges in Argentina), his book amounts to a literary junket of the sketchiest sort.

(Reprinted from August 10, 1970 issue of Publishers' Weekly, published by R. R. Bowker Company, a Xerox company. Copyright © 1970 by Xerox Corporation.)

THE MYTHMAKER. A STUDY OF MOTIF AND SYMBOL IN THE SHORT STORIES OF JORGE LUIS BORGES
by Carter Wheelock
190 pp. University of Texas Press. $6.00

MARY G. BERG
Boston Herald Traveler: Book Guide, April 19 1970

The Argentine poet, essayist and short story writer, Jorge Luis Borges, is surely one of the most intelligent, most lucid and most skillful literary creators in the history of mankind. His writings have been acclaimed by an increasing number of readers in the United States during the past few years, as translations and retranslations of his work have become available. Soon a projected ten volume edition of his works will be published in English, and in the meantime new translations of recent poems and parodies have abounded in periodicals of the past year.

Such collections as *Labyrinths* (1962), *Ficciones* (1962), *Dreamtigers* (1964), *Other Inquisitions* (1964), and *A Personal Anthology* (1967) have made many of Borges' best stories, poems and essays available to readers of English. Now seventy-one years of age, and back in Buenos Aires after a stay at Harvard as Charles Eliot Norton lecturer in 1967-68, Borges continues to write prolifically.

He feels that in the last few years, his ideas about short story writing have changed. His complex, fantastic tales have fascinated readers for twenty years, but Borges says, in an interview with Richard Burgin, that "the kind of stories you get in *El Aleph* and *Ficciones* are becoming rather mechanical and...people expect that kind of thing from me. So I feel as if I were a kind of high fidelity, a kind of gadget, no? A kind of factory producing stories about mistaken identity, about mazes, about tigers, about mirrors, about people being somebody else, or about all men being the same man or one man being his own mortal foe."

The stories which interest Borges now are more realistic, simpler in language, more straightforward in presentation, perhaps with fewer levels of simultaneous meaning.

Richard Burgin's *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* provides a fine introduction to the warmth, humor and verbal brilliance of the Argentine writer. During Borges' year at Harvard, Richard Burgin, then a Brandeis undergraduate, spent many hours of conversation with him. Borges, in a gracious prologue to the book, comments of his young friend that "it seemed to me he had no particular ax to grind; there was no imposition in his questioning or even a demand for a reply. There was a sense of timelessness."

This is both the great merit and the great defect of the book: Borges' talk, as set down by Burgin, does indeed wander timelessly from topic to topic, revealing him as one of the best of conversationalists, immensely but arbitrarily learned, witty and opinionated, willing to invent answers to any qestion, pleased by the interest of the interviewer.

The conversations meander through Borges' memories of childhood, his opinions of various English and American writers (Robert Browning "as the forerunner of all modern literature, *Ulysses* as a failure, Henry James as expressing a sense of "living in a meaningless universe"), his feelings about his own blindness and how it has changed his writing, and through hundreds of delightful anecdotes and impressions. But Burgin's book lacks a center; it lacks compression and cohesion. Borges himself is troubled by this lack of ordering as they talk. "I don't know why, I seem to be rambling on," he apologizes.

Richard Burgin is not sufficiently familiar with Borges' work or biography to ask very penetrating questions. Many of the proper names

Borges mentions are misspelled, indicating Burgin's unfamiliarity with them, and most of the discussion of Borges' short stories, although fascinating, is superficial. One longs to know more, to follow up the wonderful answers with more questions, to listen longer to Borges' voice. Burgin's book is a marvelous introduction but one longs for it to be more. Borges has been interviewed many times and a number of these conversations are available in English; how splendid it would be to have several of them gathered together in a single multifaceted volume!

Although there have been numerous articles, reviews and interviews with Borges published in the United States, before this past year there was only one book length study of his work available in English, Ana Maria Barrenechea's *Borges the Labyrinth Maker* (1965), an excellent analysis of unreality in Borges' tales. Now three critical books on Borges' short stories have been published within a few months of each other, partly filling a long apparent need for a comprehensive critical analysis of Borges' fiction.

Surely Borges' are among the most difficult—and most marvelous—stories ever to achieve fairly widespread popularity; the casual reader is soon ensnarled in an intoxicating but bewildering web of complex allusions, references and multiple meanings, through which a guidebook is most welcome. It is very possible just to enjoy Borges' stories, but it is difficult not to be haunted by the underlying levels of meaning, humor and metaphysical speculation, by the greater part of the iceberg of each tale.

Carter Wheelock remarks that "A person can read and reread Borges with the enjoyment he feels in replaying his favorite music," concentrating either on esthetic enjoyment or on intellectual appreciation of the "manner of production of the esthetic occurrence." Perhaps best of all, the informed reader "can do both at once with the effect of unifying and heightening his experience," and it is for this most intense appreciation that the books by Murillo, Wheelock and Christ are very helpful indeed.

The three critics present three very different approaches to the complex structure of Borges' thought and expression. Murillo's *The Cyclical Night* presents a detailed analysis of five stories. Ronald Christ's *The Narrow Act* and Carter Wheelock's *The Mythmaker* undertake to examine all of Borges' fiction from particular points of view, and they do so with remarkable success. The two books are in a sense complementary to each other. Carter Wheelock analyzes the basic symbolism and system of tensions which underlie all of the stories, and Ronald Christ provides a more chronological discussion of Borges' development as a writer and his use of allusions to other literature.

Both Wheelock's and Christ's are ultimately highly personal interpretations of Borges' stories by intelligent, perceptive critics, and it is a pleas-

ure to reread Borges' tales with their books in mind. Their interpretations do not preclude others—both Wheelock and Christ are scrupulously careful to make this clear—but rather emphasize the remarkable richness and density of tales which every reader must interpret for himself.

It has been said that Borges' fantasies are more real than unreality, untrue in order to be more true. Carter Wheelock sees Borges as an heir of the Symbolists, but while "the Symbolists evince doubt and optimism, Borges shows despair and will. They, despite their skepticism of language, are optimistic about truth; he is pessimistic, but positively so."

Wheelock's analysis of Borges' stories attempts to demonstrate how his single tension or motif underlies all of Borges' fiction. The tension is "one between the outer, unknown cosmos and whatever scheme the consciousness may hypostatize and dogmatize as truth; a tension between pantheism and monotheism, between universal vision and perspectivism, between Aleph and Zahir....The esthetic consciousness overcomes this tension by the simple expedient of having a skeptical, fluid, shifting point of view.

It assigns only brief validity to the various perspectives of the universe, forming and dissolving them in sequence until, in memory at least, they are all present at once, building in an imperfect way the comprehensive Aleph, the Aleph which in Borges' story by that name is a marvelous device in which all the things of the universe can be seen from all points of view simultaneously.

The Zahir (again from Borges' story by that name) represents a single perspective, and for Wheelock, "the conflict between perspectivism and universal vision (Zahir and Aleph)" is Borges' central artistic concern, and he feels that Borges "depicts the transcendence of this contradiction as myth, the near-abstraction or esthetic fact."

Ronald Christ describes another aspect of the tales which manifests the unity of Borges' thought and writing: the use of allusion. Christ feels that "for Borges, allusion first of all expresses the collapse of time and the disintegration of personality. In an allusion, as in a metaphor, two distinct things are brought together so that the reader is forced to become aware of their relationship or resemblance....The perfect balance between allusion and text, making both appear the product of a single author, is precisely the goal Borges works toward....To make allusions is to demonstrate the timeless universality of the human mind. Moreover, as Borges tries to show how all time and individuality may be compressed in the brief thought of a single mind, he attempts, too, to create a sense of the very diversity he compresses."

Borges' gradual transformation of his extensive and arbitrarily diverse readings into an essential part of his own fiction is the theme of Christ's analysis; he examines the extent to which "Borges models his works on

other writings, builds these parallels into his work in relentless, recurring demonstrations of his belief in the unity of mind and meaninglessness of passing time." Borges uses allusion to demonstrate an Eternal Return, a oneness of the mind of man as it circles endlessly within the same limits of experience.

Christ begins his study with an analysis of Borges' early poetic concerns in the 1920's, his involvement with the Ultraist movement which emphasized concision, synthesis and metaphor. *The Narrow Act* demonstrates through a close examination of a number of Borges' stories how these principles, coupled with certain metaphysical and philosophical concerns, molded Borges' quest through literary expression for essential truths about the nature of human experience. Christ observes that "literature is for Borges not an activity in one's life, not even a way of life, but an acceptable metaphor for life itself."

L. A. Murillo, like Ronald Christ, presents a more or less chronological study of Borges' development as a writer of short fictions. Murillo's *The Cyclical Night* juxtaposes two quite separate studies, one of Joyce and the other of Borges. Murillo finds that "where Joyce found the horizon of his world a conciliating dis-tension between the personal and the archetypal, Borges has created a world sustained by an irresolvable conflict between the same antagonists. Borges provides a dialectical art, subjecting the primordial an esoteric into new and perplexing forms, while reducing the innovational and the concrete into hallucinatory ghosts without a resting place in either present or past. He offers the reader a form of highly stylized and intellectualized fiction which tolerates equally the categories and hypotheses of ethics, mathematics and metaphysics, the incantations of magic, and the fantastic.

Detached and noncommital, he offers an art attempting ecumenical ends by adopting the means of any expedient, attractive heresy. With particular awareness of the "conflict of antithetical forces" which he finds underlie all of Borges' fiction, Murillo examines five stories in detail: "The Garden of Forking Paths," "Death of the Compas," "Emma Zunz," "The God's Script," and "The Immortal." For readers who wish to know more about these particular tales, the analyses are of great interest, but Murillo's study lacks both the unity of vision and the clear expression which characterize the books by Wheelock and Christ, both of which are excellent critical approaches to Borges' complex and fascinating stories.

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RONALD CHRIST
Thought, Autumn, 1970

Despite Susan Sontag's injunction against interpretation, there is much to be learned by submitting works of art to predetermined schemes of meaning; providing, of course, that the critic is sufficiently tactful in selecting and applying his scheme as well as sufficiently aware of the inevitable distortions created by such a technique. Carter Wheelock is that kind of critic and his book *The Mythmaker,* the latest in a series of books in English on Borges, benefits from his scrupulous definition of purpose and scope.

For example, Wheelock explains very early in his study that he is going to treat Borges' stories from "a point of view that may appear limited and almost extra-literary" and that he is going to simplify in order to bring one aspect of Borges' work into clear relief. But, by citing a situation from Borges' story "The Aleph," Wheelock is able to argue that his is an expediency of which Borges might approve: "When [in "The Aleph"] Carlos Argentino Daneri takes Borges into his cellar to show him the magic Aleph ...Borges is told that he must lie flat on the floor and hold his head at a certain angle. I suggest to the reader of this book that the same concession will be necessary if he is to see what I hope to show..."And once we do angle our vision along with Wheelock's, it is easy to see what he is pointing out: "the pervading motif or thought-form that repeats itself in story after story" and to agree that the stories can be "reduced to a common terminology."

The thought-pattern on which Wheelock builds his interpretation is an ancient one and the common terms are equally radical: "myth" and "hypostat." Reasoning from Borges' own prefaces, Wheelock sees that for Borges literary creation reproduces a function of the mind whereby a pyramidal base of mythic thought—"original thought, lacking a conventional referent"—is attenuated to a hypostat—a mental apex in which a single facet of reality obliterates all others. In different words, myth here is a kind of positive chaos equivalent to an ideal state of comprehension (in both senses of that word) and hypostat is a contracted form corresponding to normal conceptualization; or, to borrow labels from Gestalt psychology, myth is the undifferentiated ground and hypostat is the fixed figure. Referring to Borges' mind, Wheelock describes it as idealist, the philosophical equivalent of mythic, because it is lacking "an overriding perspective or mental commitment," but referring to Borges' own works Wheelock sees the condition of both myth and hypostat represented in the eponymous Aleph and Zahir—the former "a point in space where the universe can be seen at a glance" and the latter "a *pars* taken as a *totum,* capable of being petrified as indissoluble truth"; and he further sees the

tension between the desirable universality of the Aleph and the necessary perspectivization of the Zahir as a fundamental preoccupation in Borges' fiction. But even more basic is what Wheelock calls "hypostatic rivalry": "competition among the hypostatizations of the mind." Thus Wheelock is able to argue that most of Borges' stories are only variants on this form of rivalry, stories in which "Two ideas, two aspects of reality, two attributes or 'beings' vie for the attention of the consciousness; one must be victorious over the other: so Scharlach kills Lönnrot, the Negro kills Martin Fierro, Bandeira kills Otálora, and so on."

The first part of *The Mythmaker* is devoted to an exposition of Wheelock's terms and theory—far more subtle, intricate and meaningful than the preceding summary of them—and the second part is given over to a glossary of hypostats and a story-by-story analysis of hypostatic rivalries. Taken as a whole, the book provides an inclusive guide to Borges' stories in the volumes *El Aleph* and *Ficciones,* first by discovering the pattern in the Argentine writer's thought and then by carefully documenting the strategy of his prose and the deployment of his symbols. What especially commends this study, however, is the fact that it deals with the pattern which informs Borges' stories rather than the notorious system of Time and Identity which is the theme of those stories and the subject of most studies of them. Perhaps for the first time, a critic has shown us, not the figure in Borges' carpet, but the weaver himself at his loom, giving us, at the same time, a vocabulary to describe and a philosophy to understand what we have seen.

(© Thought 1970)

DAVID WILLIAM FOSTER
Books Abroad, Summer, 1970

Based on a Ph.D. dissertation (Texas, 1966), Wheelock's monograph explores in detail theoretical premises as well as actual creative procedures related to the Borgian aesthetic. As the first chapter makes clear, Wheelock —and this is indeed salutary—is less interested in the miscellaneous baggage of comparative literature than in getting at some central aesthetic propositions. This he does by discussing Borges' unique mythmaking. It is, rather, the writer's metaliterary creation of fictions which are mythic for their sardonic formulation of thinking man's practical and rational static myths. Borges' stories titillate and frustrate our drive to dogmatic "Truth(s)" in the validation of his own speculation that: "this immi-

nence of a revelation that does not come is, perhaps, the esthetic phenomenon." But it is, in the end, an aesthetic phenomenon that bespeaks all of man's creative and fantastic intelligence: philosophy is after all a branch of fantastic literature, and the terms are interchangeable.

The chapters which follow develop this premise and dwell insistently on the short stories "as if they were primarily the artistic reflection of a few ancient ideas about the functions of the mind...." This is not as reductionist as it might seem, once we accept the validity of the critic's assertions concerning what I would call the basic "metaliterary or metacreative" nature of the stories.

Wheelock's study is important for his suggestive elaboration, not of Borges' "themes" or even his fictional technique, but of an implied aesthetic principle which is at the same time the end and the means—the content and the form—of a creative process. The result may not satisfy the psychologist or even the aesthetician, but it should strike a responsive chord in the modern reader anxious to verbalize his intuitions concerning the superior function of art. My only reservation is that Anglo-Saxon readers, at least, may be somewhat annoyed at his occasional hyperbolic flights of "critical re-creation" of the subject.

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