



Perfiles: Ensayos sobre la literatura mexicana reciente by Federico Patán

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Change, The New Spanish-American Narrative (1984). Well known to many scholars, *La contemporaneidad y la fiesta* contains essays on prominent writers such as Rulfo, Lezama Lima, Cortázar, Arguedas, García Márquez, Vargas Llosa, Fuentes, and Cabrera Infante. The final essay discusses three Venezuelan novelists, José Balza being the only one who has enhanced his reputation since the 1960s. Ortega considers the novel inferior to the short story; the most important collections of this latter genre are *Los años duros* by Jesús Díaz, *Condenados de Condado*, by Norberto Fuentes, and *El escudo de hojas secas*, by Antonio Benítez. Essays on seven additional Cuban authors are also included here.

The theme of *Una poética del cambio*, the final segment of the book, is how certain key writers (among others, Borges, Rulfo, Cortázar, Lezama Lima, and Fuentes) have led the way toward change in post World War II fiction. Of special interest is the discussion of Borges's "El Aleph," which presents the Aleph as a metaphor of literature, as opposed to Carlos Argentino's pedantic view of literary art. Other major examples of change are Morelli's literary theories in *Rayuela*, Cemi's library in *Paradiso*, Argueda's suicide threat in *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo*, the deconstruction of the dictator myth in *El otoño del patriarca*, and the narrative technique of Gustavo Sainz's *Compadre lobo*. In "Fuentes: El linaje barroco," which also appears in *El discurso de la abundancia*, Ortega correctly sees the Mexican novelist as Latin America's foremost postmodernist. And in his final essay, Ortega analyzes *Maldito amor*, by Rosario Ferré, a collection of tales marking the feminist author's rebellion against outmoded tradition in Puerto Rican society.

El discurso de la abundancia and *Una poética del cambio* demonstrate the author's sound scholarship, broad knowledge, and keen insight. Ortega, however, is a complex critic whose writings I would seldom recommend to undergraduate students. Indeed, what he writes about Lezama Lima in *El discurso de la abundancia* ("A veces nos parece un escritor imposible, que espera del lector un trabajo excesivo" 179) could on occasion be said of Ortega himself.

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Patán, Federico, editor. *Perfiles: Ensayos sobre la literatura mexicana reciente*. Boulder: Society of Spanish and Spanish-American Studies, 1992. 169 pp.

Perfiles is an outstanding collection whose scope and depth belie its rather modest title; it offers the reader much more than a mere profile of contemporary Mexican literature. Instead, the book creates a vivid portrait of recent literary production in Mexico.

Federico Patán identifies the risks involved in trying to capture a moment in literary time. The proliferation of creative books in Mexico has been accompanied by a proportional growth in criticism, and neither operates in a vacuum. Given this constant interplay, the critic can only hope to provide a sketchy map of the constantly changing landscape. In attempting to create such a map, the editor has achieved an admirable balance of authors, genres, critical approaches, and bibliographical materials.

Patán has solicited entries from both sides of the border: about half of the contributors are Mexican, while the others represent institutions in the United States. Many of the names are well known to students of Mexican literature: John Brushwood, Ignacio Trejo Fuentes, and Russell M. Cluff. Several, such as Sandro Cohen, Vicente Quirarte, and Patán himself, are authors as well as critics.

The editor is equally even-handed in the selection of genres. There are two articles on poetry, two on the short story, two on the novel, and one on literary criticism. Two studies on individual novels round out the collection.

The variety of critical approaches reflects the desire for balance in the book. Cohen's essay on poetry, for example, relates the explosion of literary production to the economic boom of the oil-rich seventies. The subsequent decline in the number of poetry magazines corresponds to the depressed economy of the eighties. The limitation on funds available to encourage such pursuits has resulted in a reassessment of goals and techniques on the part of the artist. This observation leads Cohen to consider the conflict between "tradición y ruptura" (9), which he examines in the remainder of his essay. Similarly, Evodio Escalante ponders the influence of societal factors on poetry from a politically committed instrument of social change to a more strictly artistic expression of cosmopolitan sensibilities.

Cluff's study emphasizes the historical over the sociological as he traces the antecedents of the modern Mexican short story. He relies heavily on the work of Luis Leal in this area, but brings the discussion up to date with an analysis of the most recent tendencies. The essay is meticulously documented and well organized, and the appendix of story collections is a convincing illustration of his

assertion that in Mexico the genre enjoys an important place in the artistic panorama. The second article on the short story, "Cuenta cuántos cuentistas cuentan," by Jaime Cortés trades verbal antics for incisive commentary, and thus undermines the serious tone of the volume. The only substantial observations are to be found within his quotations of other writers on the subject, which suggests that the reader should consult the articles cited for a less superficial treatment of the topic.

In contrast, the four studies of the novel are mutually complementary. Ignacio Trejo Fuentes provides the broad view, tracing the growth of the novel from the work of Yáñez to its current permutation in the hands of young practitioners. Danny J. Anderson's analysis of closure in *El luto humano* uses a specific case to illustrate the generalized preoccupation with narrative voice, distancing, and other technical aspects. His discussion of "la subjetividad en proceso" (121) ties in nicely to Brushwood's article on the supernatural, in which he discusses the relationship between unstable identity, superstitious beliefs, and a sense of national crisis in recent works. Quirarte's essay on *Noticias del imperio* shows how the choice of an insane narrator, Carlota, enables Fernando del Paso to experiment with the full range of narrative techniques.

Finally, Bertha Aceves examines the current status of Mexican literary criticism, elucidating Patán's introductory remarks. Her descriptions of the various outlets for criticism, as well as her comments on the Centro Mexicano de Escritores and the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, provide an informative look at the nuts and bolts of literary production in Mexico today.

In addition to the information presented in the articles, the book contains, of course, extensive bibliographic materials and appendices. Anyone interested in contemporary Mexican literature will find that *Perfiles* indeed provides considerably more than a peripheral view of the subject.

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■ LINGUISTICS AND PEDAGOGY

Smith, Aubrey. *Mayan Safari: A Beginning Spanish Reader*. New York: Longman. 1992. 158 pp.

Hernández, Juana Amelia, and Edenia Guillermo. *Cuentos españoles contemporáneos*. Lincolnwood, Illinois. National Textbook Company. 1993. 167 pp.

Mayan Safari is a reader which takes the format of an adventure story, prompted, it seems, by the author's own trips to the Yucatan. Consisting of twenty-seven chapters, the book recounts the experiences of an American family visiting Mexico. Each chapter contains pre-reading exercises which attempt to foster good reading strategies. The main episode concerning the Johnson family's trip is followed by comprehension, vocabulary and conversational exercises. Many chapters end with a *Sabes* section, which furnishes a variety of cultural and linguistic information. The book is oriented towards younger students, perhaps to a high school Spanish II or III class. Apart from linguistic exercises, teacher and students are offered some creative suggestions for cross-curricular work in such areas as the plastic arts.

The author is a great enthusiast of Mayan culture. While this enthusiasm for her subject is admirable, and might very well be transmitted to students, it prevents her from including at least some consideration of the darker sides of Mayan religion and culture to give students a complete picture. This might also have alleviated the rather unexciting nature of the text. The central matter of the book—the characters and adventures of the Johnson family—tends to be somewhat bland. More suspense and intrigue are needed for an adventure story.

The book as a whole suggests a low budget venture—the artwork is unsophisticated, for example, and the production would have benefited from color, though that would certainly inflate its cost.

The idea of framing a language text around particular characters and episodes has fallen out of favor in recent years. This is a pity, since what we have tended to get instead are generally uninteresting readings about supposedly "typical students" either at home or abroad. Few readings in beginning Spanish texts are intrinsically worthwhile—they fail the test of whether we would have any desire to read them were they not in a foreign language. One therefore welcomes *Mayan Safari* as a step back in the right direction, so if the author contemplates a revision in the future, she might include some complicating incident to reflect the world we live in. *Mayan Safari* for all its shortcomings has a lot to recommend it as a reader for near-beginners. Its efforts to stimulate students and foster interdisciplinary activities are especially praiseworthy.

Cuentos españoles contemporáneos is intended for a very different market, namely advanced undergraduate students of Spanish. This collection