POLITICS, LITERATURE, AND REVOLUTION*

INSIDE THE MONSTER: WRITINGS ON THE UNITED STATES AND AMERICAN IMPERIALISM. By JOSÉ MARTÍ. Edited with an introduction and notes by PHILIP S. FONER. (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1975. Pp. 386. $16.50.)

PROSE FICTION OF THE CUBAN REVOLUTION. By SEYMOUR MENTON. (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1975. Pp. 344. $12.50.)

Joseph Blotner searched for American "political novels" whose topic dealt with the "overt, institutionalized politics of the officeholder, the candidate, the party official, or the individual who performs political acts as they are conventionally understood" (1966, p. 8). Unfortunately, he found 138 of them (written between 1900 and 1960) that met the criterion, but which led him to lament: "Why are there so few modern American political novels of any excellence" (1966, p. 8). Gordon Milne similarly found a score, coming to the somber conclusion: "Questions as to the literary merit of the type, and as to its influence remain, however. On the first count . . . not very extravagant claims can be made. Technically, the novels . . . display decided weakness. The simplest procedural patterns . . . are employed, and the plots invariably combine politics and romance, the latter 'sop' appearing even in the most recent fiction" (1966, p. 182).

Seymour Menton has been more fortunate. Like Howe, he has tried to explore what happens to literature when it is subjected to the pressures of politics and ideology (Howe 1957, p. 11). Menton did not try to formulate criteria or definitions, but to cast himself "in the role of literary historian" (p. xvi) in order (1) to provide additional insights for an understanding of the complexities of the Cuban Revolution, recording for posterity the over two hundred novels and short stories published since 1959 in Cuba, and (2) to try to establish what kinds of patterns emerge from the prose fiction of the Cuban Revolution (p. xiv).

My only criticism of Menton's categorizing schemes results from my distrust of most chronological classifications of the stages of the Cuban Revolution. Thus, my skepticism of the four stages discussed by Menton stems from reasons expressed elsewhere (Baloyra 1973). At present, I would argue in favor of a two-stage classification of the Cuban Revolution, using a little less than ten million tons of refined sugar to separate the struggle for survival during the sixties from the politics of institutionalization of the seventies.

I will not dwell at great length on the larger issue of the artist and the state. Menton does an adequate summary of the Padilla affair, and Casal (1971) has produced the standard reference work on the subject. However, in inviting the reader to consult both, I advance the warning that neither has produced a

*Poetry excerpts are reproduced by permission of the author, Lewis Lipsitz, from *Reflections on Samson* (Santa Cruz, Calif.: Kayak Books, 1977).

convincing explanation of why the (hard line) official policy of the Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba (UNEAC), established in 1968, did not really become "official" until 1971. The "Palabras a los intelectuales" (Castro 1961) is indispensable to understand the context of the intellectual in the Cuban Revolution. But Castro's participation (it was not a "deposition") in the trial of Marcos Rodríguez (Castro and Habel 1965, pp. 73–213) and his speech to the closing session of the First National Congress of Education and Culture constitute an extraordinary stream of consciousness; a novel by the main protagonist of the Cuban Revolution.

As someone who has offered literature to besieged undergraduates for occasional relief from the "official prose" of contemporary social science, I can comment on the significance of Menton's contribution to the understanding of the Cuban Revolution. In addition, I have borrowed liberally from a score of the authors reviewed by Menton in order to illustrate the experience of the Cuban Revolution. But experience is a prisoner of the word, and official interpretations have little use for a brazen manipulation of language.

Menton did not search for political novels or political literature; he correctly understood that language is the true protagonist of the best prose of the Cuban Revolution. This led him to the discovery of excellence in the prose of the Revolution, and to Arenas, Cabrera Infante, Carpentier, Fernández, Lezama Lima, and Sarduy. He deems their works "escapist," but their escapism is not simply a matter of self-imposed censorship. In response to the "official" request for a moratorium on all "inopportune polemics" about literary style, the group takes refuge in language, joins the "boom" of the *nueva novela latinoamericana*, and effects a turning point in Cuban literature. But neither is this a group, nor is it alone in producing a "qualitative and quantitative spurt" (p. 39). Although language is not their main protagonist, Menton includes the works of Desnoes, Díaz, Fuentes, and Otero as important contributions to the spurt. This is good literature too, and the fact that some of these works were published *before* 1966 suggests that the truce between official policy and literary expression produced its best results between 1966 and 1970, due in large part to external domestic events; but it really started before that date.

To say that this was the best period of Cuban revolutionary literature raises some important additional questions. Was this not the most radical period of the Revolution? Was this not the period of profound experimentation with moral incentives and the emphasis on the new man? Did the writers take advantage of the disorganized functioning of the bureaucracy? Was there a genuine relaxation? Or were they manipulated to strengthen indispensable bonds with the European Left? And, if this was the period during which the most authentically Cuban model of the Revolution emerged, could literary expression have had any impact on such a model? On the other hand, if it is true that the definitive policy was formulated at the UNEAC congress of 1968, who formulated it? It could not have been the old Stalinists, who had just had another encounter with the Revolution in the "micro-fraction affair." Was it the more committed, and lesser known, intellectuals who were turned loose on their colleagues?

It would be unfair to criticize Menton on the grounds that he failed to

produce a convincing explanation of these matters. After all, they form part and parcel of the perennial balancing act that took place during the sixties in Cuba, in which different factions of the revolutionary coalition were "put in their place" by the leader: García Buchaca was cut short in 1961, but *Lunes* was sacrificed; Marcos Rodríguez was shot, but *Revolución* was shut off; a cultural congress took place only to give way to the definitive policy in 1968; Padilla got his award, but *Pensamiento Crítico* disappeared and *Caimán Barbudo* got a close shave. Ah, the imponderables of "in" and "out," and the inescapable choices! There is no need to search for "the political" here, everything is political in the literature of Revolution.

Perhaps the ultimate meaning of the "weird operation" performed on *Cobra* escaped Menton, but it should not escape us. If Pablo Amado Fernández had his (new) Cuban children wave good-bye to thier parents, Sarduy's gesture symbolizes the lost contact with his roots; the inevitable consequence of the decision to go "out," not at all an unfamiliar act for the last ten generations of Cubans. Which brings us to an eighteen-year-old, who left Cuba a man marked for life, never to stop writing and worrying about Cuba. Like Saco, José Martí spent most of his life "outside," refusing to undergo any "weird operation." He became one of the greatest figures of Spanish literature without ever having the opportunity to work "at home," among his people; maybe this is why he never wrote a novel. Like the rest of us:

> Samson turned up in Brooklyn
> wearing a skin-diver's
> outfit
> and looking Spanish.
> They thought he was Fidel,
> frisked him
> and then
> sent him home
> to eat and sleep.
> But he was accustomed to nothing
> in this new world
> and walked for hours
> asking advice from
> the pigeons.
> After some months he
> located a mother
> and father
> in Canarsie
> who spoke to him
> in sign language . . .

Language was Martí's most formidable weapon, and he understood its politics too. He came to know this "Other America" better than any other Latin American figure of his time; an America which had become a country dominated

by alliances of bankers and politicians, convulsed by labor unrest, beset by ethnic intolerance and the unresolved questions of the blacks, the Indian, the Chinese, and women. Foner's anthology has captured the essential tone of Martí's criticism of the United States of the eighties and nineties in a first of what has been announced as a three-volume series "that will give English-reading audiences their first opportunity to become acquainted with the wide scope of his thought" (p. 10). Given previous translations of Martí by Baralt (1966) and de Onís (1954), this is not really a first opportunity, although the volume does present the first substantial body of Martí's critical writings on the United States.

Foner supports Gray's contention that the significance of these writings should place Martí above the better-known aristocratic commentators, Bryce and de Tocqueville, a judgement shared by the reviewer. The translations are not perfect, but Elinor Randall and Rosyln Foner did not turn previously unpublished materials into "the wrong side of a tapestry." The rest of the materials were reprinted from Baralt and de Onís.

Inside the Monster's impact on North American social science is not likely to produce any new theses or interpretations, or to spark controversies of any kind. Revisionist thought is sufficiently developed so as not to have to rely on what cannot be presented as historiography. The materials of the volume will be received with curiosity. After all, *this* America is not used to being called "the other." Yet it must be understood that *Martí wrote for a foreign audience*, in a foreign language, which may make his writing obscure on occasion. Furthermore, he wrote about a country that both fascinated and deeply worried him, a country he considered an inevitable adversary, whose imperialist designs could severely affect the destiny of Cuba. His knowledge of this country was not put to the service of integrating one more ethnic group into American society, but to designing carefully the necessary agenda for the total liberation of Cuba. It is a tribute to his talent and his immense intellectual curiosity that he so deeply studied a country with which, ultimately, he could not reconcile himself.

Foner's anthology would blend easily with the agenda of a literate social science that could have a place for direct observation and experience. Martí's essays on prominent Americans (section 2), the problems of racial minorities (section 5), and the labor question (section 6) *are* social science. Martí's views on the relationship between the two Americas admit no adulteration and constitute a formidable critique of the "special relationship." These views are influenced by the tradition of "classical" political economy, yet they are offered in splendid prose, political prose, from a predominantly political man.

Martí's "circumstance" leads me to formulate my most serious criticism of the Menton volume: if it was difficult not to find excellence in the revolutionary prose, it is practically impossible to find it the "antirevolutionary prose." To be sure, most of the twenty-seven works reviewed by Menton can be called literature by only the most generous definitions. Many are diatribes of a blatantly political nature. However, I must take strong exception to Menton's treatment of these works as representative of "the Catholic point of view toward the Revolution." First, *doctores tiene la Iglesia que la sabrán defender*, and I did not find any

among the twenty-seven. Second, the obvious mediocrity of most of these works stems from their vitriolic anticommunism, as they have been patterned after *Masters of Deceit* and Ravines' *Camino del Yenán*. The titles suggest anything but religious motivations, the plots have very little to do with the *moral* choices that Cuban Catholics had to make to situate themselves in the revolutionary context, and, for the most part, most of those Catholics (and there were not very many real Catholics in Cuba) were young. It is difficult to believe that Fowler, Díaz-Versón, and Sánchez-Boudy are in that group or that they had any degree of difficulty in taking sides in the process. The minute the Revolution was confronted by the "American question," they packed their bags and went to Miami in search of a false literary vocation.

It is no accident that the best works written about the Revolution by Cubans, outside Cuba, have been written by those with previous literary experience in Cuba (Arcocha, Novás Calvo, Pereda), or those who have been able to put enough distance between themselves and their subject (Alonso, Montaner). The obvious question is (and here is where we find Menton in a situation similar to that experienced by Blotner and Milne), why are these works so bad? Is it just ideological amateurism or, perhaps, lack of contact with experience? On the other hand, there may be some untried few who have a story to tell but have not yet solved some basic existential and procedural dilemmas. Besides, for whom do you write? Some of those who have, know that they generate more interest in Madrid than in Miami. There is also the obsession with the CIA, which has reached its peak recently, and which reduces everything to a cloak-and-dagger proposition, no more epic and no more elegant than the "Watergate affair." I fancy that the most interesting aspects of "getting out" are still unexploited, and believe that they do not blend at all with the epic. Fifteen years may not be enough to put the experience in its proper tragicomic context and some who may be ready will think twice before they try. Thus, we may have to wait longer.

Literary and political choices must be made by those who live and write a Revolution; this is the difficult part. The impossible part is having someone else define what goes against the Revolution, what is permissible, and what is subversive. There are the state and the "natural enemies" of the state (like Eddy, you know), and there is the problem of what to do with/for literature when the revolution becomes the state. In Cuban literature most had to make a choice—the Padillas and the Sarduys, the Oteros and the Desnoes. They came to antagonistic positions, but the important point is that, *making their choice, they wrote the best prose of the Revolution*. Some, like Portuondo and Fowler, found it all very easy because they dealt in "official versions"; for them the choice was painless, yet they contributed very little. Still there are others, very few, who in spite of the "new direction" in Cuban politics and literature can continue to find refuge in language. Their permanence may be a measure of their unparalleled power or excellence. Of these there are only two left in Cuba, Fidel Castro and Alejo Carpentier. Those who stayed "in" have a tough act to follow; the new direction may lead them to a political prose à la Blotner. Those who went "out" might find refuge in social science, but they run the ominous risk described by the astute poet:

One day they bought him a hat
and a suit
and insisted
he get his hair cut.
After that he was
never the same.
He woke up tied to a desk
writing articles
for obscure social science
journals.

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