

LITERARY CRITICISM AND  
CULTURAL OBSERVATION:  
Recent Studies on Twentieth-Century  
Latin American Literature

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- TRANSCULTURACION NARRATIVA EN AMERICA LATINA. By ANGEL RAMA. (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1982. Pp. 305.)
- LA NOVELA LATINOAMERICANA, 1920–1980. By ANGEL RAMA. (Bogotá: Procultura/Colcultura, 1982. Pp. 520.)
- LA CIUDAD LETRADA. By ANGEL RAMA. (Hanover, N.H.: Ediciones del Norte, 1984. Pp. 176. \$10.00 paper.)
- ESCRITO AL MARGEN. By JOSE MIGUEL OVIEDO. (Bogotá: Procultura/Colcultura, 1982. Pp. 383.)

An absence of common agreement concerning the purposes of the critical enterprise makes the language of its discourse increasingly ambiguous. Critical reading of Latin American literature is further complicated by the considerably different academic traditions dividing Latin America and the United States. The growth of criticism following the “boom” has accentuated some of the problems: North American structuralist and poststructuralist readers are rarely aware of more than a limited number of Latin American writers; the more traditional scholars, well-versed in the entire tradition of Latin American literature, are infrequently involved with what Barthes has called the “writerly” or active reading of texts. Two exceptions to such a generalization are David William Foster and John S. Brushwood.<sup>1</sup> The latter offers a variety of critical approaches to novels previously disregarded by many analytical readers and unknown by others.<sup>2</sup>

Angel Rama (1926–1983) and José Miguel Oviedo (b. 1934) are two of the rare critics of Latin American literature who not only have possessed a profound knowledge of the cultural and literary traditions of Latin America but also have been aware of the Continental and Anglo-American critical traditions. Rama, a member of the *generación crítica* in Uruguay, claimed in the prologue to *La novela latinoamericana, 1920–1980* that “Uruguay made me.” He described the critic’s task as

“ese esfuerzo en que todavía estamos: la edificación de la literatura, tal como la ha entendido lúcidamente Antonio Cándido en sus ensayos: como un sistema que religa plurales fuentes culturales” (p. 16). As a critic who always read literature within a historical context, Rama questioned the isolation from historical context of the American New Critics and French structuralists. Rama emphasized the role of literature by concluding this prologue with a quotation from José Martí: “Cada estado social trae su expresión a la literatura, de tal modo, que por las diversas fases de que ella pudiera contarse la historia de los pueblos, con más verdad que por sus cricones y sus décadas” (p. 19). Oviedo tempers his broad literary background with a sensible and sometimes pragmatic approach to texts. He explains the development of the pieces in his book as follows: “Muchas de estas páginas comenzaron como meras anotaciones al margen de los libros que leía, como señas de mi propia lectura y de mis reacciones a los textos que enfrentaba. Esas marcas fueron el estímulo para la relectura, para la reflexión sobre lo propuesto por el texto y, finalmente, para escribir sobre ellos” (p. 11). Oviedo’s perceptive, yet often traditional, reading eschews facile reversion to the clichés about *colonialismo*, *identidad*, and *dependencia* that have characterized much recent Latin American critical discourse. His distancing himself from popular trends in criticism is evidenced by his use of Jonathan Culler’s admonition: “Both the naive traditionalist critique, which asserts the uniqueness of the work of art and the inadmissibility of general theories, and the sophisticated *semanalyse* of *Tel Quel*, which attempts to theorize a perpetual self-transcendence, fail in ambiguous ways. They both imply that the process of interpretation is random and haphazard: the former by omission (in its refusal to countenance general semiotic theories) and the latter by explicit glorification of the aleatory” (p. 373).

Three of the books under review here are collections of previously published articles. Rama’s *Transculturación narrativa* is a three-part study focusing on the relationship between traditional regional culture and modern cosmopolitan culture. The third part of this study was written for this volume, with the first two parts having appeared as articles between 1974 and 1976. His more voluminous *La novela latinoamericana, 1920–1980* treats a wide variety of cultural, historical, and ideological issues in Latin American novels of the twentieth century. Of the thirteen essays in this book, several are identified as having appeared in print between 1964 and 1980. Oviedo’s *Escrito al margen* does not intend to offer a central focus; rather, it is a set of twenty-five essays on a rich variety of topics that were originally published from 1974 to 1982. Two of the pieces, both of a theoretical nature, were previously unpublished. Unlike the other collections of essays reviewed here, Rama’s *La ciudad letrada* was prepared for publication as a book.

*Transculturación narrativa en América Latina* is the product of cultural investigation by a Marxist scholar who uses literary texts and anthropological studies to formulate a theory of Latin American culture. His major concern is transculturation—cultural change resulting from the introduction of elements of a foreign culture. More specifically, this work deals with the effect of modern urban culture on regions having traditional rural societies. The term *transculturación* was proposed for the Latin American context by the Cuban writer Fernando Ortiz in 1940: “Entendemos que el vocablo *transculturación* expresa mejor las diferentes fases del proceso transitivo de una cultura a otra, porque este no consiste solamente en adquirir una cultura, que es lo que en rigor indica la voz anglo-americana *aculturación*, sino que el proceso implica también necesariamente la pérdida o desarraigo de una cultura precedente, lo que pudiera decirse una parcial desculturación, y, además, significa la consiguiente creación de nuevos fenómenos culturales que pudieran denominarse *neoculturación*” (pp. 32–33). Focusing on a cultural process as such, Rama moved critical discourse from the act of reading and theorizing to anthropological and sociological inquiry. The writers who served as Rama’s catalysts, then, are not such cosmopolitan figures as Carlos Fuentes, Julio Cortázar, or Gustavo Sainz, but rather Juan Rulfo of the region of Jalisco, Gabriel García Márquez of the Caribbean coastal region of Colombia, and José María Arguedas of the Andean region.

The influence of the culture of the foreign metropolis on traditional regions can be seen in examples such as García Márquez’s *La hojarasca* and Miguel Angel Asturias’s *Mamita Yunai*. In both of these Caribbean settings, foreign investors installed companies for the exploitation of local crops during the first third of the twentieth century. The Colombian case was particularly notable because of the relationship between the Caribbean coastal region and the capital. The rise of the “Grupo de Barranquilla” in that port city in the late 1940s and early 1950s under the tutelage of José Felix Fuenmayor fostered a kind of literary cosmopolitanism in the region that surpassed that of the more conservative capital of Bogotá.<sup>3</sup>

The geographical area of Rama’s central focus in *Transculturación narrativa*, however, is the Andean region, one that did not experience the “bourgeois revolution” of nearby Chile and Buenos Aires. Rama’s Marxist reading of the literature from these regions that is often called *criollista* (such as works of José Eustasio Rivera, Rómulo Gallegos, and Ricardo Güiraldes) terms it a “literatura de las emergentes clases medias.” No mass production of the written word occurred in Peru until the 1950s, a development that culminated in the Feria del Libro of 1957. In Rama’s view, Arguedas was attempting to maintain a tradition faced with the domination of modernity. The transculturation of Arguedas’s work is evidenced by his attempt at preserving indigenous values not

for the potential Indian reader but for the “other” readers: “Como se ve, lo rige un enfoque transculturante: no construyó su obra para los indígenas, sino para los lectores que pertenecían al ‘otro bando’ y entre los cuales busco reinsertar, pervasivamente, un conjunto de valores tenidos por inferiores o espurios” (p. 205). The discussion of Arguedas in the third part of *Transculturación narrativa* is directed more toward the analysis of specific texts than toward providing the historical, sociological, and anthropological overview delineated in the previous two sections. In discussing *Los ríos profundos*, for example, Rama analyzed the alternation of individual characters with groups of characters, successive sequences, and the plurality of expressive forms for human voices.

The thirteen essays in *La nueva novela latinoamericana, 1920–1980* cover a narrative tradition far beyond explication of the classics. Rama assumed the position of cultural and social observer rather than analyst of individual texts. Some of these essays have already had an impact on Latin American literary scholarship. “Diez problemas para el novelista latinoamericano” and Rama’s essay on the novels on dictators, which appeared in the mid-1970s, exemplify his influential essays.

“Medio siglo de la narrativa latinoamericana (1922–1972)” is an essay in classification. Rama delineated categories of novels from the first writers of the avant-garde in the 1920s to the work of Mario Vargas Llosa. The 1922 Semana de Arte Moderno in São Paulo marked the official entrance of vanguardist art on the continent for Rama. He found the roots of the narrative avant-garde in the poets Juan José Tablada, Vicente Huidobro, and César Vallejo. Rama then proceeded to review the recognized center of the avant-garde in Latin America. Buenos Aires with its magazines *Proa* and *Martín Fierro* and Mexico City with *Contemporáneos* were not the only cities that cultivated modernity, however. José Carlos Mariátegui’s magazine *Amauta* was published in Peru, the *Revista de Avance* in Cuba, and *Antropofagia* in Brazil. A less known magazine of this type was *Voces*, published by Ramón Vinyes in Barranquilla, which gave Colombian readers access to the likes of Reverdy, Gide, and Chesterton.<sup>4</sup> Rather than viewing these writers of the avant-garde as directly opposing the criollistas, Rama delineated “two vanguards”—those who went to Europe and participated in its avant-garde literature and those regionalists who also were writing a new literature. Rama’s further consideration of the early avant-garde revealed the writers whom he characterized as “precursores, raros y outsiders.” These writers included the Brazilian José Pereira de Graça Aranha, the Mexican Julio Torri, the Venezuelan Julio Garmendia, the Ecuadorian Pablo Palacio, the Uruguayan Felisberto Hernández, and the Colombian José Félix Fuenmayor. The latter published a book of science fiction stories, *Una triste aventura de catorce sabios*, and a novel, *Cosme* (1928). The presence of Ramón Vinyes, publisher with Fuenmayor of *Voces*, contributes

substantially to our understanding the modernity of a writer like Gabriel García Márquez.

The first novels to gain public approval and popular attention were not products of this modernity, however, but of regionalists. During the 1920s and 1930s, the entire continent lived what Gilberto Freyre would call “la hora del regionalismo.” In addition to the classic criollistas Rivera and Gallegos, Rama points to the importance of Monteiro Lobato’s story collection entitled *Urapés* (1918), that of José Rafael Pocaterra entitled *Cuentos grotescos* (1922), and *El hermano asno* (1922) by Eduardo Barrios. Other indicators of the triumph of realism were *Hombres del sur* (1927) by Manuel Rojas and *Alhué* (1928) by José Santos González Vera. Other authors included in Rama’s list are Carlos Montenegro, José Antonio Osorio Lizarazo, Ramón Díaz Sánchez, Erico Verísimo, Jorge Icaza, and Ciro Alegría.

One of the intriguing propositions in this essay is the juxtaposition of three activities as examples of the three “irruptions” of modernity. These were the Semana de Arte Moderno in São Paulo in 1922 and the publication of Darío’s *Prosas profanas* (1896) and Oliverio Girondo’s *Veinte poemas para ser leídos en el tranvía* (1922). Rama then cited Walter Benjamin in his attempt to define modernity as a 180-degree reversal of art, which pulls itself from its sources and traditions—cancelling a dead past—to project itself into an unknown future.

The remainder of Rama’s presentation of the Latin American novel of the century constitutes a more standard view. He pointed to the significance of 1941 as the year of Borges’s *El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan*, the publication of numerous important novels of that period, and the beginning of the influence of U.S. writers, especially Faulkner. From here Rama moved to a broad category of “narradores fantásticos” that, according to this critic, would include such disparate writers as Manuel Mujica Láinez, José Bianco, María Luisa Bombal, Adolfo Bioy Casares, Julio Cortázar, Silvina Ocampo, Marta Traba, and Leopoldo Marechal. Under his classification of “realismo crítico urbano,” Rama included such writers as Enrique Amorim, Bernardo Verbitsky, Juan Carlos Onetti, Ernesto Sábato, Marco Denevi, Mario Benedetti, José Donoso, Carlos Fuentes, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, and others. Rama invented the term *discurso extraño* for the works of those writers who could be classified under the aegis of “realismo crítico urbano” but who focus on the more somber side of the urban scene. Examples of such writers are H. A. Murena, Alfredo Bryce Echenique, Salvador Garmendia, and José Donoso. Paralleling the previous discussion in *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina*, Rama classified a group of “aculturadores,” which includes Arguedas, Rulfo, Augusto Roa Bastos, João Guimarães Rosa, and García Márquez. Rama concluded with the observation that Vargas Llosa, as Latin America’s most

important young novelist, will inherit the task of conserving, amplifying, and enriching the literary system itself.

Rama's undertaking in these two books could be considered a step toward a "Latin American criticism" of Latin American literature. Although José Miguel Oviedo does not refer to Rama in his essays, he nevertheless questions precisely the enterprise of an exclusively Latin American criticism, in effect doubting much of the present critical enterprise. His most explicit treatment of critical issues as such appears in three essays at the end of the book: "La excepción y la regla en la literatura de América Latina," "Método de crítica y crítica de método," and "La crítica y sus riesgos, hoy." In their totality, these essays question the main trends of literary criticism as it is currently being practiced in Latin America, the United States, and Europe.

Oviedo's essay "La excepción y la regla en la literatura de América Latina" confronts a certain critical tradition in Latin America. He singles out two key words that have flowed freely through Latin American critical discourse for at least the last century and a half: *colonialismo* and *identidad*. Oviedo maintains that despite the awareness of Latin America's colonial status and the longevity of the search of identity, the project of self-definition has basically been a failure. Although Oviedo does not state the problem in such terms, it could be proposed that this failure reflects the inadequacy of critical language. Latin America's criticism has also involved other traditions, according to Oviedo: one tradition of "marginal" writers and another of "forgotten" ones. A related tendency that Oviedo considers still dangerously present is nationalism: "no sé cuáles son los efectos (malos o buenos) que pueda tener el nacionalismo como forma de gobierno, pero sí sé que sus efectos en literatura y arte son letales" (p. 363).

In the second general essay, "Método de la crítica y crítica del método," Oviedo delineates his attitude about the tendency toward structuralist and poststructuralist approaches to texts. Such "scientific" approaches, which Oviedo views as attempts at "de-ideologizing" literary criticism, are too often excessively dogmatic. Even though Latin American literary history is fraught with imprecision and little common understanding with respect to chronology and terminology, Oviedo prefers to consider the situation as part of a more general problem. With no commonly accepted definition of terms such as *Latin America* or even a precise knowledge of the different national histories of the nineteenth century, it is not surprising that virtually no uniform and appropriate critical discourse has developed. Oviedo points out that this problem of literary criticism can be generalized: "Que no haya una sólida crítica literaria en nuestro continente (lo que no quiere decir que no haya habido o que no existan notables críticos individuales, son cosas distintas) es sólo una parte y no lo más grave realmente, del problema:



tampoco tenemos una filosofía, una teoría política, una historia de ideas" (p. 366). Dependency theory is also riddled with omissions and incoherence, according to Oviedo. The characterization of the United States as the only and all-encompassing evil is one of Oviedo's main objections to the line of critical thought that takes cultural dependency as a fundamental supposition in interpreting literary texts.

Oviedo's twenty-two essays on individual writers offer commentary on both poetry and fiction. What most of these articles share is the perceptions of a knowledgeable reader. Oviedo undertakes two general kinds of tasks. One is the exegesis of the texts of several major contemporary writers: Vargas Llosa, Fuentes, Juan Goytisolo, Octavio Paz, and Manuel Puig. The other kind of study offers detailed insights into a set of writers who are generally less recognized than those named above, but perhaps just as accomplished: José Emilio Pacheco, Adolfo Bioy Casares, Alvaro Mutis, Julio Ramón Ribeyro, José Coronel Urtecho, Jorge E. Eielson, and Emilio Adolfo Westphalen, among others.

An impressive feature of these essays is Oviedo's ability to react immediately to the publication of some of Latin America's most hermetic texts and promptly analyze texts that are patently imbued with enormous difficulties. Oviedo's essays on Fuentes's *Terra Nostra*, García Márquez's *El otoño del patriarca*, and Tomás Segovia's *Trizadero* are three examples. Published soon after the appearance of these novels, his essays nevertheless contain a number of the most insightful observations to have been made on these works. Oviedo is capable of transmuting works of complex linguistic innuendoes, such as those of Puig, into texts of relative accessibility. For example, his essay on Puig offers an insider's view of film in Latin American culture: "El cine es la primera de las formas de cultura popular (la canción romántica, la novela rosa y el periodismo amarillo son las otras) que puede considerarse un lenguaje para la conciencia de esta América: todo hemos visto las mismas películas" (p. 201).

The theoretical suppositions underlying Oviedo's analyses, although he would probably reject such a classification, are those of Anglo-American New Criticism and the early structuralism of Barthes. Oviedo shares with the New Critics the approach of closely reading individual texts for the purpose of establishing systems of unities. He carries out this task particularly well in his analyses of poems by César Vallejo. The Barthesian concepts informing Oviedo's reading are not those of *S/Z* (1970) or Barthes's other work of the 1970s, but rather those of *Writing Degree Zero* (1953) and *Elements of Semiology* (1964). For example, Oviedo uses Cortázar's *Un tal Lucas* to question Barthes's assertion in *Writing Degree Zero* that a "text's variety lies not in its origin but in its destination" (p. 304). He employs Barthes's *Elements of Semiology* to describe Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña* as a "connotative system."

Rama's *La ciudad letrada* is the only book of the four considered here that appears to have been written as an organic whole, and its six chapters develop a historical and panoramic concept of the intellectual in Latin American society. Especially telling are the book's multiple prefatory remarks, which include a note from the editors, a brief essay by Mario Vargas Llosa entitled "Ángel Rama: la pasión y la crítica," a prologue written by Hugo Achúgar, and a four-page "agradecimiento" written by Rama himself. The combination of these four texts transforms Rama's homage to Latin American writers into an implied and well-deserved homage to Rama himself (he died while the book was in the process of being published). The editors characterize Rama as follows: "Nadie reemplazará a Ángel Rama, y nadie escuchará con tanta atención al joven escritor; nadie compartirá con el erudito y el hombre de la calle las revelaciones con tanta intensidad . . ." (p. 1). The editors of Ediciones del Norte, unquestionably the most worthwhile publishing venture of Latin American literature to have appeared in the past two decades, conclude their "nota" by announcing the birth of *La Serie Rama*, a collection of critical essays on the Latin American intellectual tradition. Vargas Llosa's essay, written without knowledge of this particular volume, was originally published in Lima in *El Comercio* shortly after Rama's death. In it, Vargas Llosa expresses his profound intellectual respect for Rama and his work. He views Rama as one of few critics who loved books—a voracious reader of novels, poetry, plays, and essays. This activity distinguished Rama from that growing number of critics who, according to Vargas Llosa, detest literature itself. Here Vargas Llosa shares some of Oviedo's attitudes: "La crítica literaria tiende en nuestros países a ser un pretexto para la apología o la invectiva periodística, o la llamada crítica científica, una jerga pedante e incomprensible que remeda patéticamente los lenguajes (o jergas) de moda, sin entender siquiera lo que imita: Barthes, Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Todorov" (p. iv). For Vargas Llosa, the death of Ángel Rama was a grave loss to a literary genre already in crisis and decline.

Hugo Achúgar's prologue locates Rama within a tradition of Latin American intellectuals that includes such eminent figures as Martí, Romero, Henríquez Ureña, and Quijano. Achúgar's commentary, unlike that of Vargas Llosa, is based on a reading of the text at hand. Achúgar's concluding paragraph offers a synthesis of his evaluation of Rama's work: "Lectura crítica de la realidad, lectura seminal de la cultura latinoamericana, la obra de Ángel Rama ayuda a la deconstrucción—la única que nos parece tiene interés—del estereotipo oficial y del metropolitano. Ese desafío a la verdad adocenada y estéril y su apasionado reflionar fueron formas de su magisterio; su consecuencia para con la tarea intelectual de un latinoamericano fue otro modo de ser un maestro en estos tiempos turbulentos que le tocó vivir" (p. xvi).



Rama's prefatory remarks imply far more than their reading as an "agradecimiento" would suggest because they outline his entire predicament as a leftist critic attempting to exercise his profession in the United States. The editorial he cited from *The Nation* (20 Nov. 1982) explains the situation: "All of this suggests that Rama's present predicament has to do not only with Kafkaesque bureaucracies and a Hellenesque Catch 22. There's clearly a political vendetta at work here, and it is being received favorably by a government quite happy to expel those with whom it disagrees. That brings dishonor upon instigators of this smear but even more upon those who, using the tarnished and tawdry provisions of the absurd McCarran-Walter act, seek to give it force" (p. xviii). Rama defined his situation as not only a matter of academic freedom but also as one affecting the dignity of Latin American writers. Unfortunately, Rama did not live to enjoy the "espíritu libre del país" to which he refers in the final line of his preface.

The body of *La ciudad letrada* constitutes a unique approach to intellectual history: he combines a history of Latin American urban centers with an analysis of how written culture has functioned within the context of the power structure. According to Rama's outline, cities develop in a progression in the following chronological order: "La ciudad ordenada," "La ciudad letrada," "La ciudad escrituraria," "La ciudad modernizada," "La ciudad se politiza," and "La ciudad revolucionada."

Each of these six periods is associated with a particular relationship among the organization of the city, the written word, and power. The key word in the establishment of the colonial cities, the word used obsessively by the Spanish Crown, was *order*, hence Rama's description of the city as "la ciudad ordenada." In the center of each city grew a *ciudad letrada*: "componía el anillo protector del poder y el ejecutor de sus órdenes: una pléyade de religiosos, administradores, educadores, profesionales, escritores y múltiples servidores intelectuales, todos esos que manejaban la pluma, estaban estrechamente asociados a las funciones del poder y componían lo que Georg Friederici ha visto como un país modelo de funcionariado y de burocracia" (p. 25).

One main function of the *grupo letrado* was the transculturation studied in Rama's previous essays—the conversion of the indigenous population. The distance created between the lettered minority and the illiterate majority of the population made the *ciudad letrada* a very specialized and elite *ciudad escrituraria*. One result of this small minority's control of the language was the creation of two languages: the written, public language of the official registers and the popular language spoken by Spanish and Portuguese individuals in their daily life. With the modernization that came to Latin America in the 1870s, the mass publication of newspapers and magazines signaled a new threat to the old lettered power. Given this new competition, the old *ciudad letrada*

became institutionalized with the birth of the first philological institutes and academies of the language in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In the twentieth century, the phenomenon of *la ciudad revolucionada* resulted from the foundation of the first communist parties and modern universities, the rise of autodidacticism, and the first professional writing.

Rama and Oviedo have taken basically different approaches to different kinds of issues, but they have analyzed some of the same texts. Both have offered analyses of García Márquez's *El otoño del patriarca* (1975). Rama's essay "El patriarca solo dentro de un poema cíclico" (in *La novela latinoamericana, 1920–1980*) is a general overview of this novel within the context of García Márquez's total work with some specific commentary on the novel's narrative mechanisms. He places this dictator novel within the tradition of works such as Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The novelty of *El otoño del patriarca*, according to Rama, is García Márquez's discovery of the art of transition. The maximum utilization of this technique is found in the last chapter of the novel, which consists of one sentence with a plethora of narrators. Oviedo's study is more limited to analyzing the text of *El otoño del patriarca*, in the close reading that is characteristic of this critic. His point of departure was particularly sensible at the time the essay was written in the mid-1970s, when the worst way to read *El otoño del patriarca* was to compare it to *Cien años de soledad*. Setting aside the García Márquez masterpiece, Oviedo effects a sound analysis of the "yo" as dictator, the imagery, the language, its similarities to Jorge Zalamea's *El gran Burundú Burundá ha muerto*, and the figure of the mother. Rama's essay expands and generalizes while Oviedo's penetrates and explicates.

A few other writers, such as Fuentes, Puig, and Vallejo, have provided common ground for Rama and Oviedo, but the reader gleans markedly different information from the two critics. Fuentes's name appears throughout the essays in *La novela latinoamericana, 1920–1980*, for example, but Rama's objective was not to elucidate any specific Fuentes novel. Oviedo, in contrast, dedicates one of his essays to the detailed analysis of *Terra Nostra*.

Given the totality of Rama's work in these three books, it is possible to conclude that his forte was that of cultural observer rather than literary critic. As cultural observer, his repertoire was broad, his capacity for synthesis, impressive. He incorporated the work of such social scientists and theorists as Claudio Velíz, Melville Herskovits, Fernando Ortiz, Bronislaw Malinowski, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Charles Wagley, Darcy Ribeiro, Arnold Strickon, Pierre Chaunu, and others. Vargas Llosa's identification of this labor as "crítica de actualidad" is appropriate: Rama's concern was the flow of contemporary literature and culture. In this sense, he in-

deed fits within the tradition of cultural observers like Martí and Henríquez Ureña, as Achúgar suggests.

Rama's points of entry into literary phenomena were often exceptional. His thorough investigation into transculturation is a refreshing addition to critical discourse. Similarly, analysis of the confluence of the city, written culture, and political power is the felicitous result of Rama's position vis-à-vis contemporary culture. His approach to the increasingly complex techniques of contemporary narrative is based, interestingly enough, on connections that he established between art and modern technology (see "La tecnificación narrativa" in *La novela latinoamericana, 1920–1980*).

The broadness of Rama's scope makes some of his conclusions questionable, however. The major question with respect to *La ciudad letrada* is how he could possibly justify dedicating 176 pages to what is, in effect, a study of written culture, without taking into account (or even mentioning) Walter Ong's seminal work on written and oral culture.<sup>5</sup>

Books that announce themselves with titles such as *La novela latinoamericana, 1920–1980* place enormous and perhaps impossible burdens on their authors. The problem of who is included and excluded or given maximum or minimum importance is inevitable with such a vast number of novels that could be discussed. But even accepting such inherent problems and limitations, Rama's presentation of the contemporary Latin American novel is remarkably weak. Two specific cases worthy of comment are his treatment of recent fiction in Colombia and Mexico. Rama's description of Andrés Caicedo's *¡Que viva la música!* (1977), one of the most sobering Colombian novels of the past twenty years, as a "jubilosa novela" (p. 462) can only make it doubtful that Rama ever read the book. Rama's later referring to Caicedo's magazine *Ojo al cine* as if it were one of his novels places the critic's credibility as a reader of Colombian novels further in doubt. Rama identified Luis Fayad's *Los parientes de Ester* as an "obra fundamental de la década de los setenta" (without ever explaining why), but he failed to even mention the one young novelist who had the greatest impact in Colombia after García Márquez during the decade of the 1970s, Gustavo Alvarez Gardezabal. Consequently, Rama's selection of names and book titles in this essay ("Los contestarios del poder") seems arbitrary and superficial.

Rama demonstrated a similar weakness in attempting to delineate characteristics of the contemporary novel in Mexico. He discussed some fifteen writers of the 1970s but failed to even mention such outstanding young Mexican novelists as Ignacio Solares, Juan García Ponce, Arturo Azuela, and María Luisa Puga. An overview of the Latin American novel of the 1970s that does not even take into account such

fine novels as García Ponce's *La invitación* (1972), Azuela's *El tamaño del infierno* (1973), Solares's *Anónimo* (1979), or Puga's *Cuando el aire es azul* (1980) is questionable. In dealing with urban novels, Rama mentioned Gustavo Sainz's well-known *Gazapo* (1965) but failed to include the logical choices for a discussion of urban fiction, Sainz's later *La princesa del Palacio de Hierro* (1974) and *Compadre lobo* (1978). In summary, Rama's treatment of the decade of the 1970s suggests that he knew many of the important names but was severely limited in his actual reading of the most recent fiction.

The outstanding general quality and broadness of these four books is the result, in my opinion, of an intellectual tradition that is vanishing in the United States but is still extant in Latin America: the so-called man of letters. *Escrito al margen* confirms Oviedo's reputation as one of the finest literary critics of Latin American literature. Rama's books suggest that he was a different kind of man of letters—uneven as a literary critic but a brilliant and, above all, stimulating cultural observer.

## NOTES

1. Two recent books are David William Foster's *Studies in the Contemporary Spanish-American Short Story* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1979); and John S. Brushwood, *Genteel Barbarism: New Readings of Nineteenth-Century Spanish-American Novels* (London and Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982).
2. Brushwood's *Genteel Barbarism* offers readings using as points of departure the theories of Brooks and Warren, Jakobson, Todorov, Barthes, Genette, and others. Each chapter is an experiment with a different theoretical approach.
3. Additional studies of value on the Grupo de Barranquilla are John S. Brushwood, "José Félix Fuenmayor y el regionalismo de García Márquez," *Texto crítico* 3, no. 7 (May–Aug. 1977):110–15; and Jacques Gilard, "García Márquez, le Groupe de Barranquilla et Faulkner," *Caravelle* 27 (1976):123–46.
4. *Voces* was published in Barranquilla from 1917 to 1920. A selection from *Voces* has been published in book form as *Voces* (Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Cultura, 1977).
5. Walter J. Ong's most recent work on oral and written culture appears in *Orality and Literacy* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982). Another key work in this area is Jack Goody, *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968).