

**JANET PEREZ AND STEPHEN MILLER,
Editors**

**CRITICAL STUDIES ON
GONZALO TORRENTE
BALLESTER**



SOCIETY OF SPANISH AND SPANISH-AMERICAN STUDIES

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INTRODUCTION

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Torrente's long and varied literary career reached its zenith to date when, in January of 1986, he received the "Premio de Literatura en Lengua Castellana Miguel de Cervantes," awarded not for a single work but the lifetime achievement of a writer who, in the words of the prize announcement, "de forma sobresaliente, ha contribuido a enriquecer el legado cultural hispánico." The Cervantes Prize capped a half century of endeavor, nearly four decades of it in relative obscurity. After a promising start when Torrente's modern *auto sacramental*, *El casamiento engañoso* won the Premio Nacional de Literatura in 1939, his several plays and novels of the 1940s and 1950s were ignored both by the pro-Franco literary establishment and more liberal writers and critics. The only encouragement came in the form of a grant from the Fundación March in 1959 for completion of the trilogy, *Los gozos y las sombras*. Torrente moved more into professional criticism as an economic necessity, with such success that in 1961 he won the Premio de la Crítica Teatral, but his participation in an intellectual manifesto at that time resulted in his loss of positions as critic with government-controlled newspapers and Radio Nacional, as well as his chair of history at the Escuela Naval, and prohibition of critical notices of his trilogy which was completed in 1962. When *Off-side* (1969) likewise passed unnoticed by Spanish readers and critics, Torrente renounced all future attempts either to follow literary fashion or to please the public: half a dozen plays and nine novels to date had brought very little in the way of profit or recognition. He determined to write in the future solely for his own amusement, with the ironic result that *La saga/fuga de J.B.* (1973) was his first great critical and popular success, receiving both the City of Barcelona Prize and the Premio de la Crítica, placing its author at the forefront of Spain's novelistic vanguard and propelling him, although belatedly, into the Real Academia Española de la Lengua. *Fragmentos de apocalipsis* (1977) reaffirmed his success with an unprecedented second Premio de la Crítica, and was followed by a second Premio Nacional de Literatura in 1981 for Torrente's next novel, *La Isla de los Jacintos Cortados*. In 1982, Torrente shared the Premio Príncipe de Asturias de las Letras with Miguel Delibes, making him unquestionably Spain's most honored novelist of the past ten years.

Given the near-total lack of critical notice of Torrente's early career, it comes as no surprise that few studies exist of works prior to *La saga/fuga*. Indeed, the total corpus of critical writings on Torrente continues to be relatively small in proportion to his obvious significance. The present volume of commemorative essays has been gathered as part of his official recognition by the Twentieth

Century Spanish Society of America's award of its Angel María de Lera Prize in 1985-86. It was the hope of the editors that more of the submissions would deal with the neglected early works, but many Hispanists seem to concur with the Spanish reading public and professional critics in a preference for the recent novels, especially the fantastic trilogy comprising *La saga/fuga*, *Fragmentos de apocalipsis* and *La Isla*. Even so, a better vision of the novelist's complete career emerges from the reading of the collection in its entirety, and several essays do treat aspects of Torrente's work which have received little or no attention heretofore.

Despite a general sense of enormous differences between Torrente's works prior to *La saga/fuga* and those after it, there are important similarities of theme and technique which should not be overlooked. These include the nearly constant element of parody, the long-standing interest in myth and Torrente's procedure of "descripar el mito," and the several literary investigations of the question of the relationship between man and myth, or history and literature. Torrente's theoretical interest in the literary character *per se* is another unifying thread which runs through many works, as is his persistent use of Cervantine techniques and motifs. Almost equally persistent is the influence of Unamuno, and the presence of themes and motifs drawn from that writer, especially his interest in personality, in the relationship between author and character and author and reader, and the autonomy of character or narrator. The concept of *literatura como juego* might also profitably be traced through Torrente's works from at least the 1940s to the present. What has varied most perceptibly has been rhetoric and form, although there are also important differences of degree in the use of intertextuality and self-referential elements. Similarly significant variations in Torrente's approach to the psychology of the literary character may also be traced, from early irony through considerable seriousness of analytic treatment in *Los gozos y las sombras* to insistence on the unreality or strictly literary nature of characters in the experimental novels. Perhaps the most profound change is in Torrente's concept of literature, from early striving for transcendence to the present view of fiction as a game (expressed through the conception of most novels from *La saga/fuga* onward). Differences should not be stressed at the expense of continuity, however, for often the change is more apparent than real. As the reader of all of Torrente's works knows, what is unavoidable in all of them is the presence of a powerful intellectual personality and sceptical vision of life, the ironic humor which is the best defense of the disillusioned idealist. At the late 1987 writing of this introduction, many aspects of Torrente's writing—including those found in the one or two new titles he still publishes each year—remain unexamined. The questions of evolution versus more radical change and the matter of progressive ludification in his work are good examples. For many purposes, the

best sources continue to be Torrente's own theoretical writings, his work diaries and published criticism. A broad range of general and specific issues are elucidated, however, in the series of essays to follow.

El viaje del joven Tobias is one of Torrente's least noticed and least understood works. As a miracle play it has a close relationship to the writer's *auto* on Man and Technology, *El casamiento engañoso*, unstudied (together with most of his writing for the theater). What is particularly significant is the relationship between Torrente's dramatic and narrative works. It is clear that, as did Unamuno, Torrente considered genre barriers and distinctions to be less than fixed or essential. This is obvious in as early a novel as *Ifigenia*, in which the writer not only updates the classical myth but switches genres from play to novel. *Tobias* introduces the theme of diabolic possession, which reappears in *Don Juan* and constitutes a bridge between the early exploration of problems of personality and identity and later concerns with the multiplicity of personality and the narrative identity. At the same time, it constitutes a significant early statement on male-female relationships (another insufficiently explored aspect of Torrente's work), on the nature of spiritual or intellectual versus carnal love, and the duty of the individual artist or intellectual to others, to transcendent ideals, and to self. Robert Nugent in "El viaje del joven Tobias and the Quest for Purity" gives particular attention to the relationships between Torrente's early play and French Symbolist poetry of the late nineteenth century, drawing especial parallels between *Tobias* and Mallarmé's three-part Hérodiade poem. Nugent notes that Torrente was residing in Paris and reading Mallarmé at the time the play was written in the winter of 1936-37, and that there are many points of coincidence in the portrait of the isolated individual appearing in both works. The conflict between the forces of good and evil, a central concern of *Tobias*, is a significant component of apocalyptic literature, and reappears in that context in the fantastic trilogy, *La saga/fuga*, *Fragmentos de apocalipsis* and *La Isla de los Jacintos Cortados*. The diabolic psychiatrist of *Tobias*, present in *La princesa durmiente va a la escuela*, and the motif of (apparently) incestuous attraction which is reiterated with variation in *La rosa de los vientos* are other links to Torrente's later narratives. Nugent stresses the vision of each character as an aspect of purity: Sara as the virgin who remains untouched, her father Raghel as a man of wealth and position involving compromise of purity, Asmodeo as purity of evil, Tobias as the man of pure intellect, who attempts a solitary withdrawal into self for further purification or perfection, leading to death (or becoming pure spirit).

In "Floutings of the Consistency Maxim in *La princesa durmiente va a la escuela*," Leo Hickey explains and adapts pragmatic principles from the theory of speech acts, including Grice's Cooperative principle and Sperber and Wilson's Relevance principle.