THE DISSENTING VOICE:

The New Essay of Spanish America, 1960–1985

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Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS vii

A NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS viii

ONE Introduction *1*

TWO Revolution or Rebellion? *8*

THREE The Cult of Pepsicoátl *31*

FOUR The Twilight of Ideology *55*

The Faithful *58*

The Doubters *69*

FIVE Toward a New Essay *94*

The Autonomous Text *96*

The Author's Voice 101

Genre Mixing 107

The Essay as Poetry 115

The Self-Conscious Essayist 123

SIX Conclusions *126*

NOTES *131*

BIBLIOGRAPHY *141*

INDEX *147*

Introduction

ONE

Some time ago when I first addressed the question of the development of the Spanish American essay, I focused on a seventy-year period (1890–1960) and I placed my emphasis on what I called the essay of ideas, almost to the exclusion of more formal, aesthetic aspects of the genre. In fact, some historian friends, as well as many colleagues in literature, suggested that what I really had produced was a book in the area of intellectual or cultural history.

The present study differs substantially, though not entirely, from my earlier work. In the first place I have limited myself to a shorter and to what at least appeared to be a more manageable period, 1960 to 1985. Second, I have dealt with a greater variety of texts, including a number of works that would hardly be considered essays in terms of a strict definition of the genre. This no-man's-land of "essayistic" writing—collage, testimonials, diaries, poetic prose, and other hybrid forms—cannot be ignored simply because it does not fit easily into well-established formal categories. I trust that by including some texts of this type I am not guilty of using the term "essay" as a "catch-all for [all] nonfiction prose works of limited length," to cite Robert Scholes and Carl Klaus.[1] Rather, I hope that the examination of these seemingly peripheral writings may well sharpen our understanding of the nature and limits of this notoriously ill-defined genre.

The word "dissent" in my title characterizes, I believe, the work of almost all the essayists discussed, though it clearly is more appropriate in some cases than in others. It certainly describes the position of those writers (like recent Nobel laureate Octavio Paz) who, despite earlier allegiance to—or flirtation with—the left, dissent sharply from what for many years had been ideological

orthodoxy among Latin American intellectuals. It also fits the case of others who continued to maintain a leftist orientation yet whose departure from the political canon and whose critique of Marxist regimes have set them apart from official parties and programs. But dissent has not been limited to attacks against the left. The Mexican essayists, for example, have frequently censured their nation's nominally democratic government for its reliance on single-party politics, its bureaucracy, and its thinly veiled conservatism. The term also describes a number of writers who have taken a dissenting position in the face of the pervasive, fashionable cult of "development," of bigness for bigness' sake. Finally, several of the essayists under examination—those whose work will be treated in my final chapter dealing with what I have called "the new essay"—can be thought of as dissenters in a purely literary sense. That is, they take issue with the traditional view that the essay should be an unambiguous, lineally ordered piece of expository prose, presented by a single authorial voice. In some cases this kind of aesthetic dissidence and ideological dissent are conjoined in the work of the same author, producing what one such writer, Julio Cortázar, called "Che Guevaras of language."

As before, the realities of literary activity suggest certain geographic centers—notably Mexico City and Buenos Aires—as being more important than others, and so writers from these places figure more prominently than the Cubans, Peruvians, Venezuelans, and others. I must make clear, however, that I have not sought to focus the present study on representative essayists of one nation or another. It should be remembered that during the period under examination a number of Spanish Americans were writing in exile, that professional and personal contacts between writers of different nationalities became increasingly frequent, and that publishing (witness the role of Barcelona in this regard) was becoming steadily more international. The result has been shared experience, cross-fertilization in essayistic form as well as in content, and the production of texts that are as interesting for their broad hemispheric concerns as they are for what they reveal of specific, national issues.

It should be helpful at this point to review some of these hemispheric concerns of the decades under study. In general the 1960s began on a decidedly optimistic note. From the Hispanic American viewpoint heroes—both political and cultural—were not hard to find: Fidel Castro's revolutionary regime was only a year old and enjoyed widespread support, especially among the intellectuals. Although a few traditionally vicious dictatorships persisted in such places as Paraguay, Nicaragua, or the Dominican Republic, the larger countries were, with varying degrees of success, pursuing the paths of democracy. A number of "strong men" of previous decades—Pérez Jiménez, Perón, Rojas Pinilla, Odría—were being replaced by more enlightened leaders—Betancourt,

Frondizi, Belaúnde Terry, and others. While endemic social and economic problems persisted beneath the surface in many areas, the hemisphere's material progress, especially in the rapidly growing urban zones, was impressive. A country like Mexico—with its new skyscrapers and magnificent University City complex—is perhaps the clearest example of the growing emphasis upon "development" in all its physical and social connotations. Other cities such as Caracas or Lima were not far behind.

The spirit of change and innovation suggested by democratization and development was underscored in the cultural sphere, especially among the writers. The late 1950s and especially the 1960s saw Spanish American literature emerge from its status as picturesque, peripheral, "Third World" writing—of considerable documentary value but only of minor aesthetic interest—to take its place at the very frontiers of international literary activity. Argentina's Jorge Luis Borges, a unique and solitary figure, appears to have been the first to achieve this level of recognition, but he was soon followed by a brilliant group of narrators: Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, and a number of others. These men, several of whom produced important essayistic texts as well as novels and short stories, all tended toward the left and at least in the early 1960s were enthusiastic supporters of Castro and the new Cuba. Indeed Havana, with its active literary life, its highly publicized book prizes, and its government-supported publishing enterprises, briefly became the hemispheric interface between cultural innovation and political commitment.

But the early and mid-1960s was an ambiguous period and one which still remains difficult to characterize, especially with regard to the younger generation. On the one hand, Spanish America's youth seems to have been deeply moved by the image of Cuba, the Latin David standing up to the Yankee Goliath; on the other, the insidious appeal of North American popular culture, especially in its rock and roll, blue jeans, and youth liberation manifestations, molded—some would say corrupted—the soul of Latin America's youth. There may have been some significance in the fact that during the 1960s almost every kiosk in the area seemed to be doing its best trade in two items: a bigger-than-life poster of the young Che Guevara and a similar one of the youthful John F. Kennedy. I stress this almost schizophrenic attitude toward the United States evident in the hemisphere's younger generation because the theme of the youth (or student) movement along with the question of North America as a model becomes central in the work of several essayists of the period.

As the decade moved on, however, a good deal of the earlier years' optimism began to wane. For one thing, democratic regimes in several countries, Argentina and Peru, for example, were tottering: by the second half of the 1960s

both nations would see the return of military governments. Little Uruguay, for years considered a model of political and social progress, witnessed a marked shift to the right, fueled by fears that its economy could no longer afford the luxury of a welfare state. Mexico, while retaining its image of democracy and "revolutionary institutions," was beset by political cynicism and a soon-to-surface restlessness among its youth that would manifest itself in the dramatic and bloody confrontation of 1968.

Events in Cuba show, in a slightly different way, a negative turn during the middle and late 1960s. The euphoria and unconditional support that the regime inspired worldwide among many intellectuals began to erode in the face of Castro's increasing pressures for conformity on the part of writers and artists. When the blatant Padilla affair began to develop in 1967 several of Spanish America's most celebrated authors (the "new novelists" Fuentes and Vargas Llosa, for example) became openly critical of the Cuban regime. In short, the honeymoon between Castro and Spanish America's literati was, for many of the latter, over. Essayists especially were sensitive to this turn of events and bear witness to what might be considered the loss of political innocence among intellectuals.

With only a limited number of exceptions, the close of the decade was characterized by uncertainties and increasing gloom. Events in Mexico, especially the Tlatelolco massacre alluded to above, cast doubts over that nation's political and cultural life which have persisted till the present. Democracy sputtered in Peru with the overthrow of President Belaúnde Terry and the installation of what many—including some intellectuals—hoped would be a radically different revolutionary regime. However, only a few years after its establishment it too became just another military government unable to fulfill the promises of its nationalist-Marxist rhetoric. Authoritarianism and dictatorship became increasingly entrenched in Argentina and Uruguay, while Stroessner and the Somoza clan maintained their grip on Paraguay and Nicaragua, respectively. The largest country in the hemisphere, Brazil (which, it should be noted, is not included in this study), was also being ruled by an increasingly harsh military.

The trend toward political repression gathered strength during the 1970s, especially in the Southern Cone. The Allende government of Chile—unique in that it was a democratically elected Marxist regime—remained in power less than three years: its violent overthrow in 1973 had considerable U.S. support and led to the iron-fisted dictatorship of General Pinochet. In Argentina, after a brief and absurd return of Peronism, the military tightened its bloody grip on the nation, abetted by a vicious system of quasi-official counter-guerrilla groups. Uruguay, Peru, and Brazil fared no better. In the 1970s the simple