

MANUEL SCORZA

Drums for Rancas

Translated from the Spanish by
Edith Grossman
New York: Harper & Row, 1977.
Pp. 214.

"Requiem for Rancas" would have been a closer English translation of the original Spanish title *Redoble for Rancas*. It is a Peruvian indigenist novel that purports to defend the Indians from oppressors bent on dispossessing them of their ancestral lands. The villagers of Rancas are forced to wage a desperate and fruitless war against the almighty Cerro de Pasco Corporation, which in the 1950's set out to build an immense empire in the Andes by fencing Kechua communities out of their grazing lands. The outcome is inevitable and typical of most Spanish-American novels of social protest: the oppressed serfs are massacred by the national army, always at the service of foreign interests. The novel ends with the souls of the dead Indians in their graves, talking about the fate they always have to suffer when facing the rich and the powerful. The insatiable company, "for whose benefit three new cemeteries were opened" (p. ix), is now free to send its "wire worm" to conquer the whole world with fences.

This novel conforms with the rest of the Spanish-American *indigenista* novels in theme, but not so in style. The love that Scorza feels for his tattered Indians is conveyed by means of a tenderness coupled to a soft irony. His ragged, dirty heroes are the only characters in the novel endowed with a sense of dignity. There is in the plot an ever present atmosphere of impending doom, with "the Company" always in the background as a faceless, sinister force. This translation by Edith Grossman reproduces Scorza's lively and gracious style. With the indigenist novel now in the decline in Spanish America after the deaths of Miguel Angel Asturias and José María Arguedas, Scorza has undertaken to revive it with a cycle of five novels, of which the epic of Rancas is a worthy first.

Evelio Echevarría

PHILIP ROTH

The Professor of Desire

New York: Farrar, Strauss and
Girouse, 1977. Pp. 263. \$9.95.

At one point in Philip Roth's *The Professor of Desire*, a psychiatrist asks the hero, David Kepesh, whether he would rather be a pimp than an associate professor (p. 102). And it is in terms of such extreme, and mutually exclusive choices that the life of this man, who accurately describes himself as an "absolutist" (p. 12), is played out. In his childhood Kepesh is torn between admiration for "the flamboyant, the bizarre" (p. 8) in the shape of Herbie Bratasky, a shameless exhibitionist, and an impulse towards conformity so strong that he suspects it is a federal offence to carry around the letter in which Herbie describes the progress of his lavatory impressions. At college, Kepesh begins as a show-off and ends up a recluse; in his adult life, he oscillates wildly between different kinds of sexual relationships. With Birgitta, David Kepesh is the complete hedonist, striving to satisfy his every urge; with Helen, he is a timid conformist obsessed about garbage, the toast, and bills; with Claire Ovington he begins by achieving sexual-emotional equilibrium, but ends up (as we know from Roth's earlier novella, *The Breast*) as a giant breast interested in his mistress only as a source of nipple stimulation.

The central concern of *The Professor of Desire* is with Kepesh's attempts to assume control over a life thrown into chaos by the many roles that he plays. It thus bears a close resemblance to its immediate predecessor, *My Life as a Man*, another novel which deals with a man's attempt to make sense out of his existence and so to become "a human being" (p. 251). Kepesh's situation is much clearer than Tarnapol's. Confused as he is about how his problems might be resolved, Kepesh is nevertheless clear-sighted about what they are, and so serves as a fairly reliable narrator. Tarnapol's narrative on the other hand succeeds only in creating a complex web of uncertainties. So untrustworthy is his point of view that the reader cannot be sure how he should interpret the two fictions that preface his narrative, what weight to give the psychiatrist's interpretation of Tarnapol, nor even whether Maureen is indeed a monster or simply