

## 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

the maligned victim of her husband's paranoid fantasies. This is not to say, however, that *The Professor of Desire* is a more satisfactory novel than *My Life as a Man*. Though its final intentions are unclear, *My Life as a Man* retains a certain interest simply as a "case study," the vagaries of its narrative technique serving as a sharp dramatization of an utterly befuddled mind. *The Professor of Desire* can claim no such clearcut achievement. Kepesh's mental processes have been too simplified and stylized for the novel to be approached as a case study. Indeed Kepesh moves so regularly and predictably between extremes that he often resembles a metronome as much as a human being. However, despite the stylization of the hero and most of the supporting characters, and despite its close ties with the almost emblematic *The Breast*, *The Professor of Desire* is not satisfying as an allegory. The characters may be one-dimensional and the hero's basic problem well established, but their sum total is not at all clear. Thus, the larger intentions of this novel are no better defined than in *My Life as a Man*. *The Professor of Desire* bats around certain large oppositions—desire/duty; literature/life—but it never comes close to synthesizing them. And what general conclusions its hero reaches are either rejected almost immediately or seem to have only the most tenuous relationship to the action of the novel. At one point, for example, Kepesh declares that he is learning the truth of Chekhov's "overall philosophy of life" that "we are born innocent . . . we suffer terrible disillusionment before we can gain knowledge, and then we fear death—and we are granted only fragmentary happiness to offset the pain" (p. 94). This does not turn out to be a satisfactory coda, however, because one of Kepesh's final realizations is that he has suffered disillusionment without gaining knowledge. Ultimately the hero learns nothing and neither does the reader. Whatever profundity the novel achieves comes from Roth's sources, particularly Kafka and Chekhov, not from the novel itself. *The Professor of Desire* is full of hints that its truth might be revealed if the reader pursued the same course of study in these authors as Kepesh does. However, I suspect that any reader who took time off to do this would never feel the need to return to Roth.

For all that *The Professor of Desire* is frustrating and intellectually meretricious it has many incidental virtues. Those who

relish the kind of outrageous humor that characterizes *Our Gang* and *The Great American Novel* will be delighted with Roth's presentation of Herbie Bratasky whose ambition as a mimic is to "do diarrhea" (pp. 6-7) from "the rasp of the zipper" (p. 7) to "wiping" (p. 9). Moreover, inconclusive as he may be, Kepesh is nevertheless a brilliant monologist and the reader is swept along by the rapid narrative tide. The novel's finest moments come, however, when Roth breaks through the banally sentimental tone that characterizes much of his writing, particularly in those sections dealing with Kepesh's stereotyped Jewish parents, and hits a note of genuine pathos. This is more evident in Kepesh's final and truly moving reflections on his failure to make anything permanent out of his relationship with Claire: ". . . and here is the result! I know and I know and I know, I imagine and I imagine and I imagine, and when the worst happens, I might as well know nothing! You might as well know nothing!" (p. 262).

Like much of Roth's work, then, *The Professor of Desire* is extremely unsatisfying. In its parts, it is often brilliant, but, for all its promises to say something significant about the central dilemmas of modern existence, it finally lacks any coherent vision.

David Monaghan

RACHID BOUDJEDRA  
*L'Escargot entêté*.  
Paris: Denoël. 1977. Pp. 172.

"Enough is enough!" writes Jean Déjeux in a recent review of Boudjedra's *Topologie idéale pour une agression caractérisée* (1975): "Despite the talent, one would like to see more simplicity and mastery." Whatever the justification of Déjeux's comment, Boudjedra has more than answered the criticism with the publication of his fourth novel, *L'Escargot entêté*, for "simplicity and mastery" are precisely the qualities which characterize the composition and style of this latest work by the most gifted, productive, and controversial of the younger generation of Algerian novelists.