

Romano and Newsom found their respective studies on the close, very perceptive analysis of the phenomenology of a single novel: for Romano, *Our Mutual Friend*; for Newsom, *Bleak House*. But where Romano extends his discoveries helpfully to include other Dickens novels whose "reality" requires similar reassessment, Newsom expands his phenomenology of *Bleak House* to include its biographical and cultural significances and to hazard an hypothesis about the novel as a genre. Such expansions lie well within a great novel's legitimate phenomenological identity. Biographically "one encounters the same sort of insistent and ferocious, even if quite delicately veiled, resonances and reverberations between the life and the book that we have seen operating in the book itself and that, to my mind, are essential to the experience of reading the book" (p. 97). Culturally *Bleak House* is both "a typically Victorian statement about the loss of faith" (p. 113) and, less typically, "one of the first examples we have of the late Victorian doctrine of the will to believe" (p. 116). Finally, and of importance to readers of any prose fiction, not just Dickens's, "to characterize the novel as an unstable, synthesizing genre" (p. 141), as Newsom's final chapter convincingly does, "very much changes the traditional shape of the history of the novel" (p. 142). Thus "the tension that is suggested by Dickens's phrase, 'the romantic side of familiar things,' and that, as we have seen, is embodied in a host of ways by his novel, is I believe the same tension—or family of tensions, perhaps—that is centrally organizing generally in the novel as a form" (p. 149), a tension that in *Bleak House* "is discovered to be deeply problematic" (p. 150). To conclude, "as long as novels maintain their capacity to amuse us with their play between the empirical and the fictional, they will retain the capacity deeply to unsettle us, for as long as reality is something that *can* be played with, it will remain, like all toys—no matter of how highly serious or educational a kind—something that can be broken" (p. 151).⁷

Lauriat Lane, Jr.
University of New Brunswick

⁷Or, as Gerald Graff even more skeptically puts it, "the view of literature as the sovereign orderer of reality and our most valuable means of making sense of the world is strangely licensed by our view that reality is not susceptible to comprehension and management" (*Literature Against Itself* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979], p. 7).

The Triumph of Parody and Pun over San-Antonio's Literary Aspirations

For over thirty years the novels of San-Antonio have entertained French men and women and have made him France's most popular writer of detective stories. The most conspicuous qualities of San-Antonio's novels are plot and language; plots distinguished by their imaginative, often inspired, complications, coincidences and melodramatic surprises, and a virtuosity of language which has few rivals in all of French literature. The basic linguistic technique employed by San-Antonio is the pun, but he also exploits other verbal manipulations such as the mixture of classic French, popular language and slang, the use of foreign words, malapropisms, unexpected similes, and the creation of colorful new expressions.

Debate over the literary merits of San-Antonio's novels has become a plot element and framework of one of his most recent novels, *Mon Culte sur la Commode* (Paris: Fleuve Noir, 1979). The novel distinguishes itself from the 102 other San-Antonio novels not only by this self-conscious debate, instigated by Detective San-Antonio's boss, but also by the failure of Detective San-Antonio to surmount the obstacles invented for him by author San-Antonio. Throughout the novel the detective never understands what is going on, is manipulated by other agents, and is saved from death by the thin pretext of his ignorance. In this novel it is San-Antonio's boss, Achille, "le Vieux," who has the final word and the final laugh. He personally intervenes to save San-Antonio's life and to prevent the disaster that San-Antonio's bungling interference might have brought about.

The accelerated pace of action in San-Antonio's novels and the exaggerated incidents (and incidence) of sex and violence parody the traditional detective novel. In *Mon Culte sur la Commode*, as in other San-Antonio novels, the exploitation of sex and violence takes on absurd proportions. On the second page of the novel, for example, 143 persons are murdered in one cute sentence: "Et ce fut la dernière voix humaine qui retentit jamais dans la salle de "L'Éclat-Lux" vu qu'il se produisit une déflagration effroyable qui anéantit ce cinchoche ainsi que ses cent quarante-trois spectateurs du moment" (p. 12).

A quick summary of the plot will demonstrate the extent of its excesses. Following several terrorist explosions, San-Antonio attempts to draw a confession and a list of terrorist targets from a suspect, Bézamé Mouch, by luring him into an airplane whose other passengers are all secret agents. But the plane has been sabotaged and it explodes; only nine passengers escape including San-Antonio and Mouch. These episodes merely serve as a prelude to the main plot, San-Antonio's trip to Leningrad, inspired by the discovery in Mouch's pocket of hotel reservations and bus tickets for that city. He sets off, disguised as Mouch. His girl friend traveling companion is assassinated in a Finnish hotel. He replaces her with Valérie Lecoq, the real Mouch's intended traveling companion. On the bus they are accompanied by two dirty old men whom San-Antonio identifies with Statler and Waldorf of the Muppet Show, and who make sport of looking up women's skirts and cataloguing their observations. Before they arrive at their Leningrad hotel, San-Antonio's partner, Bérurier, mysteriously disappears, and someone slips a hotel room key into San-Antonio's pocket. Upon arrival he goes to the room (not his) to which he has been given the key and discovers—not a body—but twenty recently machine-gunned victims. A great deal of evidence and one false witness accuse San-Antonio of the crime. Arrested and interrogated by the Soviet police, he is allowed to escape. Wandering through the countryside outside of Leningrad, he is picked up by a female taxi driver, whom he seduces in her dilapidated cab, and who takes him home to her apartment where they spend thirty hours making love. The police intervene, and return San-Antonio to his hotel, where everyone treats him as if nothing had happened.

San-Antonio and his readers learn the explanation of almost all of this when the tourist bus returns to Finland: Bézamé Mouch and Valérie Lecoq had been sent to Leningrad to assassinate Leonid Brejnev (there for a meeting). The two dirty old men are secret agents sent to stop the assassination plot. They are responsible for the hotel room liquidation of the twenty conspirators. They had thought to incriminate San-Antonio until they discovered that he was an agent of the French police. San-Antonio was interrogated by the Soviet police and later by the female taxi driver, an undercover agent, to determine that he was unaware of the identities of the conspirators and that he could therefore be released. It is

le Vieux who explains all this to San-Antonio, exulting in the bungling failure of San-Antonio to understand what had been going on. (Moutch, interrogated by the French police, had eventually confessed the plot.)

As mentioned before, the frame of the novel is a debate over San-Antonio's literary reputation. Actually, it is a condemnation by le Vieux of the apparent respectability gained by San-Antonio's "junk novels" because of a Poirot-Delpech article in *Le Monde* (July 7, 1978), and an article in *Le Figaro*. Le Vieux characterizes San-Antonio's novels as trash bin literature, "excréments de plume," and calls upon the imaginary judgments of François Mauriac, Jean-François Revel, and Alain Robbe-Grillet who, along with le Vieux, form a club of elitist anti-San-Antonians. San-Antonio's failure in the novel, while not really justifying le Vieux's condemnation of San-Antonio's literary respectability, does satisfy his need to humiliate and triumph over the author/detective.

Paradoxically, it is this failure which seems to add a new dimension to the novel. In his 1972 novel, *Emballage Cadeau*, San-Antonio makes an explicit comparison between his adventure and television's "Mission Impossible." And, in fact, in most San-Antonio novels, the mechanism is precisely the same as that of the TV series: we know that the mission will succeed, but we are entertained by the clever manipulation of a false but artful suspense. In most of the novels, Detective San-Antonio, as a literary character, is barely distinguishable from the elements of plot and language which constitute his narrative. He does express emotions, but the reader rarely reacts to them. The usual reader reaction to San-Antonio is to try to catch his puns and to try to figure out in advance how it will all come out. But in *Mon Culte sur la Commode*, perhaps more so than in any other San-Antonio novel, one senses the presence of a real character. The reader shares San-Antonio's bewilderment, despair, and confusion as he finds himself unable to defend himself from the accusation that he has murdered twenty people. And we are also moved by his naïvely literary reaction to the discovery of the twenty hotel room victims: "Alors, somnambulique, je m'approche du tas. Un gus est là, la poire à demi éclatée. Je glisse ma main à l'intérieur de son veston. Sa poitrine est de pierre. Si dense, si lourde. La mort nous minéralise avant de nous liquéfier. Elle nous fait formidable quelques heures durant. Nous statufie, gloire dérisoire de notre dérisoire existence, pour montrer aux autres que nous n'étions pas cela; ces statues de chair congelée par le trépas, pas cela qui va s'engloutir, mais autre chose que nous ignorions, et qui n'est plus dans la statue de notre absence" (p. 148).

One of the most consistent literary qualities of San-Antonio's works is his obsession with death and decay and his pessimistic vision of man's nothingness. Man is created to suffer and die: "L'homme est en forme de croix. Il est crucifié sur lui-même, et il va ainsi, viande clouée sur le fatidique montant. Charpente golgothienne. L'homme croix . . . tous les chemins de croix mènent à l'homme" (p. 170). But San-Antonio by no means glorifies man's ability to suffer or his courage in the face of death. San-Antonio's vision of humanity is as unmerciful as it is pessimistic (see p. 177). Despite the novel's pessimistic vision of mankind it is still funny. In fact this vision serves as a basis for the often cruel humor. A consideration of San-Antonio's comic devices must begin with a look at his puns; here is a sample, some good and some terrible: "Mon culte sur la commode." "Ça va dépendre d'un tas de facteurs, comme on dit dans les pétetés." "Je suis trop rétif (de la Bretonne)." ". . . par dessus Jean Moulin." "Je m'incline civilement (et le moyen de faire autrement puisque je ne suis pas en uniforme)." "Elle voile sa face et s'affaisse. Elle dévoile sa fesse et s'affale." "Un petit nuage de fourmis ailées, de fourmis zelées . . ." "Ça ne lui porterait (de famille) pas bonheur." "La Chappelle sixteen, la seventeen . . ." "Ces filles

ne sont pas à vendre, mais à louer. Louons donc, non seulement leurs corps, pour une heure ou deux, mais aussi leur charité et leur esprit de sacrifice.” “Je me plais à le répéter sur plusieurs thons.” “Nous serons très peu nombreux, me dit-il en plusieurs épisodes, donné en bégaïement (de bégue aimant qui bégaïement).” “Le convoyeur de plus en plus con et de plus en plus voyeur.” “Quand le cent est tiré (en général on dit que c’est le vingt) il faut le boire.”

San-Antonio’s often cruel wit seeks out subjects of humor which are traditionally taboo such as death, religion, and disease. *Mon Culte sur la Commode* undoubtedly holds the distinction of being the only published work to contain two comic allusions to the death of Pope John Paul I: “Tu connais la nouvelle? Quelle nouvelle, le pape est encore mort?” (p. 68). “Bon pape Jean-Paul Polak Deux, qui si vite avez succédé à Belmondo Premier, le pauvre qui riait Colgate si charitablement qu’on gardera éternellement au coeur l’éclat miséricordieux (premier de cordieu) de son dentier” (p. 125). In a further demonstration of questionable taste, San-Antonio explains why he qualifies a portrait of Brejnev. “du temps qu’il vivait”: “Je dis ça par précaution au cas où le cher homme viendrait à disparaître pendant l’impression de ce chef-d’oeuvre. Déjà de Gaulle m’a fait le coup une fois, je sais de quoi je cause” (p. 163). The principal victim of San-Antonio’s cruel humor in *Mon Culte* is the tour guide, to whose stammer he refers in one of the sentences quoted above and who is unmercifully persecuted by San-Antonio’s wit: “De temps à autre il s’interrompt pour toussoter, histoire de montrer qu’il est réellement tubar et que ce n’est pas simplement un air qu’il se donne pour faire pitié” (p. 108). “On sent que ça n’est pas un mariage d’amour, l’oxygène et lui” (p. 113).

San Antonio’s novels follow the plot patterns of traditional detective novels of the Mickey Spillane variety. They rely heavily on dramatic reversals, miraculous escapes, last minute rescues, bold gambles, concealed identities, unexpected conversions, and extraordinary coincidences. I have suggested that the exaggeration of these elements approaches and often goes beyond parody. Plot complications are undermined both by their exaggerations and by the playfulness of language which describes them. The manipulation of verbal humor often defuses suspenseful situations and mocks tragedy. One often has the impression that a tense, potentially tragic situation has been created to serve as the basis of a pun. In *Emballage Cadeau*, for example, a gangster breaks into the bedroom of the heroine, Pearl, and is greeted not by Pearl, but by “Pearl à rebours” (Pearl Harbour), a barrage of machine gun bullets which apparently kills him. The pun obviously distracts from the seriousness of the situation and forces our admiration by its unexpected comic aptness. The murdered gangster and the abducted heroine are forgotten. The pun stops the action, interrupts the flow of reality, and interferes with our concern for the fate of the victim.

Similarly, in *Mon Culte sur la Commode*, hundreds of people are brutally murdered, but we are not allowed to take most of the murders seriously. Terrorist bombings in the movie theater, a supermarket, a subway station, and outside a lecture hall borrow much of their reality from the horror of contemporary terrorism. But San-Antonio’s language as well as the accelerated pace of action and the grotesque absurdity of the number of victims throw up a barrier between reality and the reader. San-Antonio exploits the sensational quality of terrorist bombings and the fascination that murder and death exert upon us, and at the same time permits us to conceal our fascination, to excuse our morbid curiosity by assuaging our consciences with the assurance, guaranteed by the excesses of plot and the frivolity of language, that we are not expected to feel grief, sorrow or pity for the murdered human beings; for they are not real human beings, at least not within the medium of the San-Antonio

novel as opposed to the medium of the news magazine or TV news, but rather puppets created and destroyed to provide substance for the exercise of the author's imagination and wit. Terrorists are not usually objects of humor. But it is sufficient that a terrorist, whom we have seen bomb and murder, be given the name Bézamé Moutch, and the horror of terrorism and murder fades. The terrorist reduced to a pun, and a very silly pun at that, no longer inspires terror. Moutch is captured and subdued by the strong-arm tactics and clever strategy of the police, but his acts are nullified, rendered harmless, by the ridiculous name which the author has given him.

San-Antonio novels are carefully set within time and space. Popes John Paul I and II as well as the theme of international terrorism set *Mon Culte sur la Commode* within the year 1978. Geographic descriptions of Finland and Russia ring true. San-Antonio frequently interrupts his narrative for short cultural essays; in *Mon Culte*, for example, he lectures on the relationship between a people and its currency, the effects of perfumes, the rubber stamp as symbol of bureaucratic enslavement, and the stupidity of organized tours and camera-toting tourists. San-Antonio is a keen observer of physical and moral truth. But between all of his observed reality and the reader he constantly superimposes the distorting lens of his verbal manipulations. I will conclude now by adding some reflections to the question which constitutes the novel's frame: San-Antonio's literary value. Is this cocktail composed mainly of plot and pun but with strong doses of sex, violence, slang, and black humor really a work of art? It is certainly successful entertainment. San-Antonio novels are bought and read by people of all intellectual and social levels. They are perfectly adapted to a reading public such as the Parisian lower and middle classes who spend an hour or more a day in public transportation systems. But, is there more to San-Antonio than entertainment; is his universe more than a slick commercial gadget destined to fade from the literary scene? In his July, 1978, article, Poirot-Delpech defines language and vision as the two major qualities of San-Antonio's universe. He mocks those who disdain San-Antonio's fondness for puns and who are offended or threatened by his "bad taste." He makes a strong case for San-Antonio's literary merit by citing his consistent vision of a world where death, disease, and decay are normal conditions of existence (and therefore acceptable objects of wit); and he specifically compares San-Antonio's vision to Céline's.

San-Antonio's fertile imagination actually works against him. He has written too many novels too fast. He has told more stories than Balzac and has not paid even the token debt to craftsmanship which one finds in the novels of Balzac. He leaves threads hanging and actions unexplained. As he admits himself, comparing his work to Robbe-Grillet's, his novels are inspired, but not crafted: "Moi, mon inconvénient, c'est que j'ai jamais le temps de faire court. Alors je tartine, je vais au rebondissement, au point d'exclamation, tout ça. J'ai la pensée fleuve, quoi. La déconnance aussi, la baisance. Tout fleuve! Fleuve en cru, fleuve noir, fleuve impassible, fleuve de sang; Styx vous l'offre" (p.176).

The two characteristics of *Mon Culte sur la Commode* which distinguish it from other San-Antonio novels—the detective's failure and the debate over his literary value—do not, in the final analysis, constitute a serious claim to immortality. The failure is finally nothing more than another melodramatic surprise which conveniently unwinds the plot and completes le Vieux's triumph over San-Antonio. Actually, the reality of the San-Antonio cult might well be one which San-Antonio is eager to dismiss. For it is the nature of a cult to immortalize and therefore to contain and freeze its object, to create statues just as surely as death. The failure of Detective San-Antonio might represent the author's reaction against the danger of the cult, the conscious desire to refuse

the monument which the public erects in his honor. As for the literary debate, the author never really takes it seriously. The terms of the debate are too caricatural to be genuine. San-Antonio refers to the debate more out of self-mockery than self-defense. It can be classified with other elements which situate the novel in contemporary reality, and once again it is a reality which is annihilated by the pun which it was evoked to inspire, the novel's title, *Mon Culte sur la Commode*. The novel presents the themes and poses the problems of major literary works; but the self-destructive quality of San-Antonio's plot excesses and verbal humor leaves nothing in its wake. Questions of life and death, love and honor, politics and power all surface and then disappear, swept away by the all-powerful combination of parody and pun. In *Mon Culte sur la Commode* San-Antonio presents and discusses the issue of his literary value, but he refuses to make any concessions to it.

Paul J. Schwartz
University of North Dakota

