

SALVADOR BACARISSE, ED.
*Contemporary Latin American
Fiction: Seven Essays*
Edinburgh: Scottish Academic
Press, 1980. Pp. 109. £4.95

The British school of Latin Americanists has produced some excellent literary scholarship over the last decade, and the names of Jean Franco, Gordon Brotherston, James Higgins, Arthur Terry, Peter Beardsell, Gerald Martin, David Gallagher, and Donald Shaw are well known in North America. Indeed, in the last few years David Gallagher's *Modern Latin American Literature*, and Gordon Brotherston's two important works, *The Emergence of the Latin American Novel* and *Latin American Poetry: Origins and Presence*, represent notable milestones in critical appreciation of contemporary Latin-American literature.

This critical anthology (apparently reprinted from an earlier volume of *Forum for Modern Language Studies*), does little to further this impressive reputation. It consists of seven essays of uneven quality: Ian R. Macdonald, "Magical eclecticism: *Los pasos perdidos* and Jean-Paul Sartre"; Pamela Bacarisse, "*El obsceno pájaro de la noche*: a willed process of evasion"; Donald L. Shaw, "Narrative arrangement in *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*"; Gordon Brotherston, "García Márquez and the secrets of Saturno Santos"; Arthur Terry, "Onetti and the meaning of fiction: Notes on *La muerte y la niña*"; Gerald Martin, "*Yo el supremo*: The dictator and his script"; and Salvador Bacarisse, "*Abaddón, el exterminador*: Sábato's gnostic eschatology."

The basic problem with this collection is its lack of cohesion: there is simply too much disparate material, dealing with diverse thematic concerns, literary approaches, philosophical sources and techniques. Moreover, the essays themselves are varied in quality, and the spectrum ranges from perceptive comments from Brotherston (who emphasizes the importance of the Indian influence in García Márquez's work) to Salvador Bacarisse's imaginative—and rather unclear—interpretation of Sábato's "gnostic eschatology."

On the positive side of the balance, there are also solid contributions from Donald L. Shaw, whose thorough analysis of the temporal structure of the masterpiece by

Fuentes illustrates the "triumph of a conscious artistic intention over a conventional arrangement of episodes" (p. 47), and also by Pamela Bacarisse, who studies well the ambiguities of Donoso's novel. She argues—and argues well—that the narrator of *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* tells the story "so that he will not be understood. It is a process of evasion, not self-revelation" (p. 29).

Perhaps the liveliest, and certainly the most controversial, essay is that of Gerald Martin. He claims that *Yo el supremo* closes a cycle (initiated by *Facundo*, and then passing through *La vorágine*, *Huacapistungo*, *Hombres de maíz*, *Pedro Páramo*, and *La Casa Verde*) that "subjects the idealist values of European 'civilisation' to a materialist critique" (p. 74). Unfortunately he falls onto a tangent, comparing the work of Roa Bastos with the novels of Carpentier and García Márquez that deal with the "dictator phenomenon." Subsequently he raises a series of charges against the latter which, apart from being questionable, detract from his perceptive observations on *Yo el supremo* (e.g. he claims that *El recurso del método* and *El otoño del patriarca* "fall well below the previous high standards of their authors" (p. 77), and that "neither writer has very seriously raised the problems of writing as such" (p. 78).

Had this slim (109 pp.) volume restricted its scope to examine, for example, the work of a particular writer, to a series of basic themes, or literary innovations, the result would undoubtedly have been worthy of note. Unfortunately, the (considerable) talents of these Latin Americanists are not really put to the test, and the result is a mediocre, rather lacklustre effort which, with a few exceptions, adds little to scholarship in this field.

John M. Kirk