

Raymond D. Souza

*THE POETIC FICTION OF JOSÉ LEZAMA LIMA*

Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1983. Pp. 149.

\$20.00

Reviewed by David William Foster

Although their reputations may be the product of a cumulative oeuvre, the simple literary fact is that the majority of the Latin-American writers who have attracted international attention in the past twenty years have done so on the basis of one key work that was widely received in Latin America, (where publications tend to be confined to the country of origin of their author except in the case of precisely a key work) and subsequently enthusiastically endorsed in a skillful English translation (or, with a shift of emphasis, a skillful French or German translation). In the case of Cuba's José Lezama Lima, despite his solid reputation up to that time as a poet of impressive accomplishments, that key work is the novel *Paradiso*. Its publication in Cuba in 1966, its reissue in Buenos Aires in 1968 (it is more often than not the Argentine, Mexican, or Spanish edition of a Latin-American work that ensures its international stature), and its English translation by Gregory Rabassa, the dean of Latin-American literary translators in the U.S., in 1974, were the essential steps in its consecration as one of the major texts of the so-called "boom" of the contemporary Latin American novel.

That *Paradiso* figures in the same inventory as Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad*, Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela*, Carlos Fuentes's *Cambio de piel*, Mario Vargas Llosa's *La ciudad y los perros* and *La casa verde*, Manuel Puig's *La traición de Rita Hayworth*, among others, is rather a literary exception. For, while all of the latter works are to varying degrees examples of antimodernist or disruptive fiction, *Paradiso* is in many ways the modernist novel par excellence in Spanish. This is more so, since, although Brazilian literature can point to a classic high modernist novel like Mário de Andrade's *Macunaíma* (1928), no work of equal stature exists in Spanish America. It is as though *Paradiso*, the work of a vanguard poet who hithertofore had never published any fiction, were filling such a void (which is, of course, neither to the discredit of Spanish-American literature nor to the necessary credit of *Paradiso*: there is little reason to expect Latin-American literature to match, model for model, the outlines of European or American literature, a point about which literary history and criticism in revolutionary Cuba have been at great pains to argue eloquently.

Souza's monograph sidesteps both the issue of *Paradiso* as a modernist novel in the framework of one of the continent's most aggressively antimodernist cultures and the question of how the novel has been accounted for both in Cuba (where an official agency published it—Ediciones Unión, the arm of the country's Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba) and in the overall context of Latin-American contemporary fiction. What Souza does undertake to do is to provide a careful analysis of the constituent elements of the novel within the context of Lezama Lima's seamless literary project. Picking up on the oft-repeated proposition that *Paradiso* is a poet's novel and assuming implicitly that it exemplifies the scriptural ideology of high modernism, Souza discusses in detail, and with the competence that characterizes his many fine contributions to Cuban literary criticism, major structural features of the novel. Thus, after a characterization of Lezama Lima's complex poetry, Souza focuses on how the master tropes of metaphor and metonymy account for the textual configurations of *Paradiso*. Subscribing to contemporary theories that provide postulates for grasping how a novelistic text is based on abstract patterns that can be held to account for the expanding ecphrasis of the narrative, Souza demonstrates how Lezama Lima's novel is based on a controlling network of categories of character. Belying the hypothesis of some models for narrative analysis that are based on predicate logic, whereby a central action implies a specific cast of characters, Souza argues for the dominance of character and of a series of relationships based on a controlling schema of complex types.

Other chapters concern the intersections of story and plot and how this theoretical concept can also account for the texture of the novel. Also of interest is the issue of the extent to which *Paradiso* is autobiographical, a question that has less to do with the author's biography than it has with the reading conventions the novel evokes and with the image of (auto)biography

as a narrative convention. A final chapter deals with *Oppiano Licario* (1977), a reprise of some of the motifs of *Paradiso* and a work that Lezama Lima left unfinished at his death in 1976.

*The Poetic Fiction of José Lezama Lima* is an excellent example of a critical approach to a complex work of fiction that falls into neither the sort of reductionist interpretation—plot summaries and thematic paraphrasings—that are often the lot of contemporary narratives nor into the deconstructionist “paratextualizing” that are often intriguing intellectual constructs but leave one with a (sinful) nostalgia for the text under scrutiny. As a consequence, Souza has made a valuable contribution to the criticism on *Paradiso* that will satisfy the demands of both major critics of Lezama Lima’s work and the nonspecialist reader.

Sherrill E. Grace

*THE VOYAGE THAT NEVER ENDS: MALCOLM LOWRY’S FICTION*

University of British Columbia Press, 1982. Pp. 152. \$24.

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Reviewed by Keith Harrison

Although *Under the Volcano* is repeatedly compared to such huge achievements of literary modernism as *Ulysses* and *Nostromo*, and by loose critical consensus it is the *only* post-World War II British novel that is of artistic stature comparable to these earlier works, Malcolm Lowry’s reputation as an author seems dwarfed next to that of James Joyce or Joseph Conrad. There are two main reasons for this paradox. The first centers on what Stephen Spender in his “Introduction” to *Under the Volcano* sees as Lowry’s pervasive autobiographical mode: “The author is creating a character who is his own predicament: and this is scarcely distinguishable from projecting an image of himself.” The second cause for the relatively low evaluation of Lowry as an author is that he wrote merely a single masterpiece. Implicitly, both of these critical reservations are challenged by *The Voyage That Never Ends* because Sherrill Grace envisions all of Lowry’s fiction as one carefully designed whole: if she were able to demonstrate effectively that a rich, continuous, and overarching pattern unified his writing, then would follow necessarily a greatly revised, much higher evaluation of Lowry as an artist.

Lowry’s early idea of writing a trilogy entitled *The Voyage That Never Ends* “with the *Volcano* as the first infernal part” (*Sel. Letters*) ultimately expanded to a projected sequence of eight novels, an ambitious plan specified in 1951 through “Work in Progress” (an extended letter to his literary agent). Quoting extensively from this interesting document, Grace offers evidence of Lowry’s artistic intentions to make each of these novels “a stage in Sigbjørn Wilderness’ journey through life—the initiation, repeated ordeals with failure and retreat, followed by success and development, that in turn give way to fresh defeat” (p. 19). However, since most of these eight novels were unfinished at Lowry’s death (some left in “very raw draft”), any discussion of a grand interrelated design can only sound wistful. When Grace turns to the completed (and edited) works to pursue her thesis, she adapts patterns previously detailed in Lowry criticism, such as the circle imagery in *Under the Volcano*, as evidence of a recurring voyage motif. At times her argument seems persuasive: “. . . in *Dark as the Grave*, as in *Under the Volcano* and *October Ferry*, the reader finds himself on another Lowry bus ride with ‘weary circling’ to signify Sigbjørn’s passivity” (p. 71). But the persuasiveness is limited, in part, because nowhere in the book does Grace make a needed distinction between the recurrence of image, voice, and theme that normally typify a body of fiction (say, the novels of D. H. Lawrence) and the repetition through which Lowry intended to unify his unrealized *Voyage*.

Another difficulty with the study is its uneven prose style, with lapses into writing that is imprecise (“a devoted, if tempestuous marriage” [p. xiii]), trite (“inextricably bound up with” [p. xv]), and awkward (“The other aspect of the Lowry legend, his alcoholism, began well before his death, just before his forty-eighth birthday, in 1957, and it is rather more