

Norman Lavers

*POP CULTURE INTO ART: THE NOVELS OF MANUEL PUIG*

Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1988. Pp. 70.

Reviewed by De Villo Sloan

Norman Lavers's *Pop Culture into Art*, although a surprisingly slim volume, is an important contribution to the international fiction community. Lavers acknowledges early in the book that most of Manuel Puig's North American admirers know him through the popular film version of one novel: *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. Six other novels that have been translated into English (and a wealth of Spanish language criticism) wait to be discovered. Lavers book is a necessary first step. He synthesizes a mass of biographical material, mostly drawn from interviews in periodicals, and summarizes all seven novels. Incorporating major trends in the Spanish criticism, he also provides his own idiosyncratic explications of Puig's worldview.

The fact that an international audience knows Puig as a writer through the film version of one book is an irony. It is, however, an appropriate irony for Puig who claims that he was unable to finish reading Joyce's *Ulysses* and whose entire life has been centered on an obsession with American films of the 1930s and '40s. Although Lavers's discussion of Puig vacillates between biographical criticism and deconstruction, what centers his discussion is the analysis of the cinematic popular culture theme. Lavers says, "It will be my theme in this book to see how Puig as novelist, and his characters as creators of their own lives, take the degraded, second hand, ready-made materials of their world and try to create with them moments of beauty" (15).

He contends that Puig's characters define themselves in terms of the images of their popular culture. Most damaging are the sex roles provided by film: rigid, stereotyped images of aggressive masculinity and passive femininity. Drama begins when characters experience dissonance between the roles they believe they must act out and they way they feel inside. A hero or heroine is able to transcend these images; the tragic character is doomed to act out the pop cult myth. Molina in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* is the tragic/heroic high-point of this exploration, a homosexual who identifies with the heroines in the movies he loves and who briefly achieves self-actualization.

As Puig's protagonists either transcend or are destroyed by popular culture, Puig's success as a writer, Lavers contends, comes from his ability to transcend the forms of popular culture through fictional innovation. Puig was trained as a scriptwriter before becoming a novelist and his books are filmic mazes of dialogue, interior monologue, and popular culture parody. In a particularly insightful passage, Lavers explains why Puig's seeming documentary objectivity is in actuality postmodern: "The result is a sort of 'superrealism,' a documentary objectivity so pronounced that in the end it calls attention to itself ..." (57).

At times Lavers's analysis of pop culture/sex roles becomes mechanical, superficial, and politicized. No single section of the book is more disappointing than his attempt to explain the ending of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. He claims

that the narrative is suggesting a synthesis of feminism and Marxism to replace patriarchal oppression. At the end of the book Valentin is able to see beyond his one-dimensional Marxism because, "Molina as artist shapes the materials of his culture to create significance for Valentin as his audience" (44). This reading neither accounts for the book's complexity nor the fact that both Molina and Valentin ultimately fail and are victimized by their own popular culture visions. Valentin's vision is in actuality a harkening back to the homoerotic Romanticism of Whitmanesque literary culture. The text expresses ambivalence toward the possibility of transcendence.

Regardless of its critical/interpretive flaws, *Pop Culture Into Art* is a firm beginning for Puig scholarship in English and should not be overlooked by anyone embarking on that path. Given the biographical/literary importance of popular culture that Lavers finds in Puig's novels, the notion of transcendence might actually be obsolete. Lavers suggests that in Puig we see popular culture made into art; more accurately, we might actually be seeing the passage of art into popular culture.

Sami Michael

*REFUGE*

Translated from Hebrew by Edward Grossman

Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1988. Pp. 382. \$19.95

Reviewed by Miriam Roshwald

In *Refuge* Sami Michael contrived to translate into a fictional medium Israel's glum reality: the conflict of two peoples claiming the same piece of land as their own. Cutting through the manifold layers of Israel's society, he zeroes in on its political fringe--the Communist Party. It is a tribute to Michael's artistry and psychological acumen that this peripheral segment of Israel's political landscape becomes a compelling reflection of one of the country's most complex and urgent dilemmas.

The book appeared in its original Hebrew in 1977, some four years after the Yom Kippur War. The story takes place on the eve of and during the first few days of this fateful conflict. The main characters are a Jewish couple, Shula and Marduch, of European and Iraqi origin respectively, and their retarded son; Shoshana, a rebellious kibbutznik, and Faud, her Christian Arab husband; and Fatkhi, a Moslem poet. The group is closely knit, bound by ties of Communist ideology as well as personal friendship. Then the war breaks out and everything changes. The alleged cohesion of the group comes under strain, and the diverse members are suddenly forced to confront themselves and each other as they really are--formed, nurtured, and ultimately committed to the origins from which they came. The war brings to the surface deeply buried loyalties, ostensibly renounced for the greater good of World Brotherhood.

Marduch, the Iraqi Jew, antinationalist and citizen of the world, is the first to break the ranks. He joins the army, impatient to play his part in fending off