

## TWO GENERATIONS OF RIVER PLATE WOMEN WRITERS

- REUNIÓN DE DIRECTORIO*. By SILVINA BULLRICH. (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1977.)  
*PIEDRA LIBRE*. By BEATRIZ GUIDO. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Galerna, 1976.)  
*LOS DEDOS DE LA MANO*. By MARTA LYNCH. (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1976.)  
*MONTE DE VENUS*. By REINA ROFFÉ. (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1976.)  
*FEIGUELE Y OTRAS MUJERES*. By CECELIA ABSATZ. (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Flor, 1976.)  
*EL PAÍS SECRETO*. By MARÍA DE MONTSERRAT. (Caracas: Monte Avila, 1977.)

The case of the River Plate woman writer deserves a chapter apart in the evolution of Latin American feminine prose. It is doubtful that any other Latin American countries can boast of such a large number of women writers who over the last two decades have produced an average of five novels or volumes of short stories each. The complete list would be extremely long, ranging from María Angélica Bosco and Eugenia Calny to María Esther Vázquez and Luisa Valenzuela; and a special place would have to be found for Victoria Ocampo whose famous literary magazine and publishing house, Sur, has created a focal point for the River Plate writer since its beginning in 1931.

Sociologically, we must situate the River Plate woman writer within her proper context. With the exception of the recently deceased Carmen Gándara and the Ocampo sisters, who are descendants of upper-class *criollo viejo* families, the bulk of these writers belongs to the upper middle and middle class and lives within the confines of greater Buenos Aires or Montevideo. For most of them this means a condominium apartment, a fairly comfortable way of living, intense participation in cultural events that are usually taking place in the capital, journalistic activities, conferences, travels, interviews by the mass media, and an independent private life due to their *métier* and the anonymity of the metropolis. In many ways their material and personal existence is akin to that of countless thousands of Argentine and Uruguayan women who are pursuing a professional career that gives them an increasing measure of social and economic independence.

Chronologically, however, one might well divide the River Plate women writers into at least two basic groups: one, a clear majority of writers, now in their forties and fifties, who started out rebelling against the roles assigned to them by a male-dominated society and who later ventured intermittently into the political struggle that threatened to polarize their society; and two, a younger generation that takes social upheaval, sex, and alienation for granted and forges a reality based on an open acceptance of a culture in transition.

Without doubt the most prolific and commercially most successful Argentine woman writer is Silvina Bullrich. Her work spans three decades and many of her novels and short stories are centered around male-female relationships,

usually within the confines of the *alta burguesía* that the author knows so well. In her faithful portrayal of a dynamic urban society her books reflect changing attitudes of Argentine women with the passage of time. What still happens to be a basically submissive attitude on the part of the wife in *Bodas de cristal* (1951) becomes a rebellious outcry by a middle-aged female in *Mañana digo basta* (1965) and finally a harsh clash between mother and daughter over a woman's right to control her own mind and body in a Latin society in *Te acordarás de Taormina* (1975). Essentially a "realistic" writer, she could hardly escape the sociopolitical happenings that have shaken her country in the first post-Perón era. Thus she wrote a political satire, *Los salvadores de la patria*, *Mal don*, a fairly unsuccessful account of urban guerrilla activities, and *La creciente*, a truly underrated allegorical novel that depicts the destruction of a huge metropolis by floodwaters, reminiscent of Albert Camus' *The Plague*.

Her newest work, *Reunión de directorio*, follows in the footsteps of *La creciente* although the tone is highly satirical. The novel takes place in a fictitious Latin American country, the tropical island of La Enjoyada, an underdeveloped nation with an autocratic government, a typically oligarchic upper class, and a poor but apparently carefree population at large. Cecilia, the narrator, belongs to the ruling class and is a member of the all-important Directorio del Centro de Planificación that seriously entertains such ambitious projects as the construction of a subway around the island, an Olympic stadium, a national art gallery, and rocket launchers while the elevator, the telephones, and the refrigerator are continually out of order and the Directorio cannot even afford to pay repair bills. But nobody worries about the government's inefficiency, the inertia of the populace, the next *golpe de estado*, or the fact that La Enjoyada is hardly being taken seriously as an existing nation. Cecilia's worries concerning national, social, or cultural problems go unheeded and she makes a poor prophet in La Enjoyada as well as abroad.

While the allegorical level is well sustained throughout the whole novel, Silvina Bullrich manages to inject another thematic level: a self-parody of the narrator who is considered to be a not too bright and fairly helpless female by her colleagues in the Directorio and members of her own family. It is precisely this parody that allows the author to *castigare ridendi* the cultural prejudices against the resources and capabilities of women that continue to exist in her native Argentina and, by extension, in the Latin world.

As a contemporary of Silvina Bullrich, her compatriot Beatriz Guido shares certain experiences with her: a Europe-oriented education, prolonged periods of living abroad, the Perón era, the unstable decades of the sixties and seventies in Argentina, and an intimate knowledge of a woman's role in a man's world. Some of her best writing has been produced by an interest in the female adolescent's fascination with a forbidden adult world and in sex as an instrument of liberation as well as punishment. This was the case in her early efforts, *La casa del ángel* and *La caída*. Her novel, *El incendio y las visperas*, remains the most outstanding literary portrait of the Perón era. Married to Leopoldo Torre Nilsson, possibly Latin America's most prestigious film director, Beatriz Guido made several of her novels and stories into scripts filmed by her husband. In the

process she became influenced by cinematic techniques to the point of concentrating on the purely visual element and the careful composition required by that medium.

She is really at her best when creating a story like "Diez vueltas a la manzana" that forms part of the volume *La mano en la trampa*, in which she combines male-female confrontations with symbolic ritual in order to show the need of a young woman to graphically escape the pitfalls of sordid sex and big-city alienation.

Her latest collection of short stories, *Piedra libre*, is a compilation of pieces that date from different periods and represent a variety of styles and thematic patterns. Next to an old anthology piece, "Ocupación," that belongs to the category of *realismo magico* and symbolizes the triumph of the eternal female, we find "El bobo," also published earlier, that deals with police brutality and the gang rape of a young girl who is a guerrilla fighter, and "El ojo de la cerradura" which treats the absurd political activities of some right-wing youth in a most cinematic manner. The title story, "Piedra libre," reveals the author bridging once more the elusive confines of appearance and reality, as well as the past and the present, with her accustomed economy of style and characterization as she focuses on the male and female protagonists who come together on an *estancia*. The book also features a script outline of the same story, which should be of interest to all who wish to witness the transition of a literary piece through adaptation to the cinema, in this case filmed by Torre Nilsson.

On the Eastern shore of the River Plate, Montevideo houses over half of the Uruguayan population. Like its Argentine counterpart, the Uruguayan *cabeza de Goliath* has always been the nation's cultural and political center, one that saw the birth of the socioeconomic reforms of Batlle y Ordóñez' liberalism early in the century. Curiously enough, Montevideo represented at mid-century a paradoxical situation: slightly provincial and peninsular when compared with its giant neighbor across the estuary, its society was still traditional enough to have its mores infringe upon the freedom granted to the woman by the Constitution. María de Montserrat, today the country's most prominent woman writer, has repeatedly taken up this paradox in her fiction: *Los lugares*, a collection of short stories, the novel *Los habitantes*, and now *El país secreto*.

The novel is basically experienced by the narrator, Angelina, but the author uses largely the third person point of view, which creates a more objective kind of air. Born into a well-to-do family, Angelina finds herself surrounded by such household figures as a few blacks, the servant Natacha, her twin brother, a passive mother, the nuns at the convent school, and a society at large that creates the illusion of stability and order. This multiple existence is held together by señor Manent, a truly patriarchal father figure whose opinions or whims are not to be questioned. The family fortune declines as the master of the house refuses to be transferred by the American firm which he represents and spends his money fruitlessly suing the company for indemnization. Finally reduced to living in a miserable makeshift hut, the whole family watches helplessly as señor Manent writes a theatrical trilogy and departs for Buenos Aires. The final scene takes place in the harbor of Montevideo where the patriarch frowningly

meets his now homeless family on the ship bound for Spain where he hopes to sell his manuscript.

Throughout the novel the author manages to create a picture of a bourgeois Uruguayan family and its total dependency on the all-dominating male provider whose hand is to be kissed and whose caprices must be accepted as a proof of male wisdom or individualism. No such role was permitted to the female in María de Montserrat's portrait of her society, and the sole dissenting voice comes from another male, a professor Reyes, who demands professional and psychological independence for the women of Uruguay. While the narrator's vision of male-female relations is confined to a traditional outlook due to deterministic forces of her education and home life, the irony of the final scene is mordant enough to allow the reader to capture a rising spirit of feminine anguish and rebellion.

Marta Lynch earned her first literary laurels with two novels that gave an intelligent and perceptive account of Argentine society in the first post-Perón era with *La alfombra roja* and *Al vencedor*. The second work in particular amounts to a masterpiece of interpreting the disintegrative elements that were undermining the stability of Argentina, a process that continues with the present socio-political malaise afflicting this country. A third work, *La señora Ordóñez*, shocked quite a few bourgeois souls with its frank treatment of marital relations as seen through the eyes of the female protagonist who experiences degradation and self-pity in her obligatory sexual submission. Here the author echoes the existence of the middle-aged, middle-class married woman who is psychologically and economically unprepared to lead an independent life and must therefore continue to play the distasteful role of the kept woman with a wedding ring on her finger. By contrast, in *Cuentos de colores*, it is the new generation that competes openly in a man's world by using sex to the utmost in order to get ahead in the elusive world of beauty contests, television, and movies. Thereafter came *Un árbol lleno de manzanas* in which Marta Lynch explores the almost obligatory scene of a nation torn by political strife and terrorism.

Now, in a volume of stories entitled *Los dedos de la mano*, she feels the urge to treat several of her favorite topics: love, alienation, violence, and sexual fulfillment. A number of her characters are women in their thirties and forties who in their fantasies or real-life situations pursue an idealized maleness that will give meaning to their otherwise empty existence. It might be an aging actress humbly waiting for a date with an anonymous young man, a lonely psychologist inventing the perfect male companion, or a resident of an exclusive apartment dwelling who tempts a boyish figure away from the clutches of a homosexual male at their private swimming pool. Perhaps her most successful story in this group is "Latin Lover" in which a city woman, presumably from Buenos Aires, accepts the traditional role of a concubine placed in a *casa chica* in Lima. Humor and irony actually permeate the story as the author makes it clear that the sophisticated protagonist only "plays" at this role for a limited time because she accepts the man, not the circumstances. The "Latin Lover" appears in a pathetic light as he remains blind to her patient independence, her compassionate understanding of his conditioned male attitudes, and her foreseeable

rebellion as she closes a final door. Most of Marta Lynch's latest female characters dare to look for overt eroticism and sexual fulfillment, shedding their assigned passivity; and the merit of the author lies partially in an honest portrayal of this search.

While the foregoing women writers belong to a generation that was busy extricating itself from the prejudices and taboos of a patriarchal society, and a younger group of female fiction writers such as Luisa Valenzuela, Sara Gallardo, and Amalia Jamilis, now in their late thirties and early forties, began to treat male-female relationships with a tolerant and often amusing detachment, the *nueva ola* of Argentine women writers is ready to allow the female character a spirit of candid self-revelation and a freedom of action that were only insinuated in the fantasies and deeds of the older River Plate women writers.

Most of Cecilia Absatz' female protagonists in *Feigüele y otras mujeres* approach human relations with a healthy dose of self-respect and treat sex with a most casual indifference. In the story "El aborto," a lonely young girl wanders through a nighttime Buenos Aires, browsing through old volumes in one of the many bookstores open late on Corrientes Street, and later gazes pensively at a spiderweb in a cheap hotel room where she shares her loneliness with a stranger. "Un ballet de bailarinas" features a modern professional woman who attends a cocktail party to hear the obligatory chatter and meets the host with whom she will spend the day's most boring five minutes having perfunctory sex. In "Lisa" a married woman whose husband is absent over the weekend finds herself playing the prostitute out of boredom. On Monday she confides to her girlfriend at the office, "It was better than going to the movies."

Nowhere does the author's pessimism about human relationships show stronger than in the title story. Feigüele is an adolescent who lives within the social context of a Polish-Jewish family in Buenos Aires, a city that holds the only large Jewish population (over half a million) in Latin America. She is intelligent, analytical, very fat, and extremely defensive about that condition. The interplay of her emotional and sexual needs, the lack of understanding of her parents, and the rejection on the part of her peers is handled with superb craftsmanship. In this slender volume of short stories, Cecilia Absatz has succeeded in depicting above all a new morality based on the need to overcome alienation and hostility in the world of the modern *porteña*.

Reina Roffé's second novel, *Monte de Venus*, came out in late 1976 and was soon to be banned by the new military junta that overthrew the regime of Isabel Perón. The generals apparently seemed to be afraid that the twenty-three-year-old author was going to corrupt the Argentine reader by presenting the history of a lesbian; but one suspects that the overly realistic portrayal of the emancipating Argentine woman and the exposure of an inept educational system under previous military governments are at the root of the censors' discomfort.

Structurally the novel alternates between two levels: one, the picaresque story of Julia Grande, a young and aggressive lesbian; and two, the *liceo nocturno* in Buenos Aires where women of all ages come to receive a high-school education of uncertain merit. Julia Grande discovers early in life what her sexual inclinations are. She is forced to leave home and seek refuge in the anonymity of

greater Buenos Aires where she begins to assume the role of a lover and provider for a number of girls who leave or betray her. In her continuing odyssey she is forced by hard times to become the mistress of several older men and even must resort to prostitution. Physically ill and mentally exhausted she kills the man who supports her and flees with her illegitimate daughter to her home town. Her destiny now merges with that of a group of girls at the evening school. Attracted to an older woman teacher, Julia records her life story on tape and entrusts her child to her, only to find out that the older woman wanted to appropriate the child for herself.

The world of the evening school is as chaotic as it is absurd. Most of the teachers are lazy or incompetent; the principal is an old-fashioned tyrant. Most of the students try to rebel against the system, create confusion in class, make the teachers tell stories, petition to wear pants to class, smoke, and meet at the corner cafe after classes. A few even try to seduce some of the male teachers. As C ampora gets elected and Per on's return becomes a certainty, the activists occupy the school, throw out the principal, and petition the new minister of education to make reforms and respect student power, but they only find that the old order is slowly being restored.

Thus both plots end on a negative note, but the novel embodies a number of affirmative elements. The dynamics of Argentine urban culture have allowed the woman to seek and enjoy economic and psychological independence on a level that seemed to alarm the conventional male censors. However, one can sense that Reina Roff e's realistic account is largely a fictionalized progress report of the changing status of the Argentine woman as we move into the last two decades of a century filled with social upheaval that has finally reached the inner core of sexism and macho mentality. Always sensitive to male-female relationships, the Argentine and River Plate woman writer will continue to produce a witness account of the change in one of the most fundamental interactions in her society.

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