Review

CATALÁ, RAFAEL. *Para una lectura americana del barroco mexicano: Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz & Sigüenza y Góngora*. Minneapolis: The Prisma Institute, 1987. 217 Pages.

When *Para una lectura americana* begins by discussing the Black Legend in order to show that Spanish as well as Latin American history is not told honestly as a result of Northern European control over encyclopedic information and to prejudicial beliefs about the Hispanic character in general, we expect to be taken into new territory. Like Américo Castro, whose proposal is that Juan Luis Vives, Spanish Renaissance philosopher, contemporary and friend of Erasmus and More, has not gained the fame he merits due to the obscurity reserved for non-Aryans by Western European bigotry, Rafael Catalá proposes to show what bigotry against Hispanics has meant for our understanding of Colonial Literature in Mexico. He suggests that Baroque authors in New Spain consciously suppressed the indigenous and syncretic value of their mythological symbols, first, under the accepted European mask of Greek and Roman gods described in, for example, Vincenzo Cartari's catalogue of classical gods, *The Fountain of Ancient of Fiction*, and, second, within the confines of Judeo-Christian figures delineated in the Bible. Although a thoroughly fascinating possibility, still unexplained is whether changes occurred in the meaning of, for example, *Faetón* or *Neptuno* so carefully tailored after the language and form of Luis de Góngora and other Western models in whose work the classical paradigm of mythological gods and their stories formed such an organic part.

This is disappointing because the author's aim is not only to investigate the process of syncretization during the tremendous and sudden confrontation of the Mexican and Spanish cultures—an investigation extensively undertaken by Octavio Paz in *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz o las trampas de la fe*, Mexico, 1982—but also to prove that, despite the fact that it was either consciously/unconsciously destroyed or suppressed and hidden within European codes, the mythological meaning belonging to indigenous

religious culture remains present and operative in Mexican Colonial poetry and prose under the cloak of Western symbolic systems.

> Así ídolos como el Crucifijo, la Dolorosa, la Virgen de la Caridad, la de las Mercedes, se adoran bajo nombres africanos. La de las Mercedes, se llamará ahora Ovatalá y la de la Caridad Ochún. En México Tonantinzin se convierte en la Guadalupe, y va evolucionando este símbolo hasta convertirse en el símbolo nacional de México." (149–50)

African and native gods are worshiped under new, Western names but the identity of those gods is depicted in equivalent terms leaving us to ponder the profounder, minute adjustments that may have been caused by their superficial re-naming.

A scholar of the period will not find new information in this book and it may be frustrating even to the general reader that it takes almost 80 pages, more than half of which are quotes, to say that the early and late chroniclers of Mexico all associate the Greek and Roman pagan divinities with the indigenous gods of Mexico and that it was universally believed that the existence of both the Classical and the American religion was due to the direct influence of the devil who had led them astray invidiously keeping them away from the truth of the Catholic Church. On the other hand, a succinct, interesting and essential summary of contemporary authors is thereby provided, and the quotes themselves offer an immediate vision of the period. The vast chronicle of material we have, especially the luminous volumes of Fray Juan de Torquemada, are condensed in this short and readable book so that the symbolic religious network of the indigenous people living in and around the City of Mexico that linked the individual to nature and nature to God becomes vividly immediate. Further, the bibliographical information is invaluable for anyone interested in the history or literature of the periods.

The single quote directly relevant to Sor Juana's thought, is that made by Lorenzo Benaducci Boturnini, who came to Mexico in 1736, 11 years after Sor Juana's death:

> El profesor de matemáticas que, fue en la Universidad de México don Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, y la célebre madre Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, noble prenda de la nación indiana, fueron de parecer que descendían de *Neptehuim*, o Neptuim, hijo de Mesraim y nieto de *Cham*, aunque yo me inclino a creer que también desciendan de los demás hermanos *Ludim, Amanim, Phetusim* y *Capthorim* (From *Idea de una Nueva Historia General de la América Septentrional*)

The implications suggested by this statement are, indeed, impressive. However, although it is clear that Sigüenza y Góngora was convinced that Christian, Classical and American deities formed a syncretic network, the textual analysis of Sor Juana's work to prove that she too was convinced

is inadequate. Further, the critical link between what Sor Juana believed and what can be logically deduced, or even *ab*duced—to borrow a term that Charles Pierce created for his *intuitive* theory of logic—from, for example, *First Dream*, is not achieved, weakening Mr. Catalá's conclusions. Also missing is the mention of María Esther Pérez's primordial work, also based to a large extent on the works of Torquemada and other chroniclers, dedicated to giving us concrete examples of the indigenous presence in Sor Juana's theatrical works where the nun's religious thought remains consistent with Western tradition and native religious meanings remain unchanged in the Indian population.

Mr. Catalá's book is part of a promising series, "Towards a Social History of Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Literatures," and perhaps was not meant to be a critical literary analysis in which case it might have been better to have presented the information without attempting to apply it to the texts themselves. The information is valuable in itself and also provokes a recognition of the influence of early Mexican writers on each other and this would seem to be contribution enough.

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