

preceding essay, he would retain the notion of history and society as discursive practices which generate others, he would insist on internal contradiction and dialectic as a structuring and meaning-producing principle, and he would insist equally on the notion of polyphony, restored to its full Bakhtinian meaning. The emphasis on multiplicity of voices and points of origin, he concludes, privileges the notions of critique and text over those of consciousness and authorial intention.

D'un sujet à l'autre demonstrates the breadth of Cros' reading, especially of literary texts; he moves with admirable facility from Nebrija to Buñuel. I applaud the effort to enrich socio-cultural analyses by incorporating the Lacanian *jeu de miroirs* and the contradictory constitution of the subject. Unfortunately, the closing essay's tendency to telegraphic abstraction does not do justice to the rigor and richness of analyses Cros has conducted elsewhere using the techniques he only hints at here. For a nuts-and-bolts demonstration of how the social enters and functions in a literary text, and how the attentive study of a literary text enriches our historical knowledge, Cros' 1975 study of the *Buscón* (or its 1980 Spanish version) remains exemplary.

—Carroll B. Johnson
University of California, Los Angeles

PERELLI, CARMEN. *Las ratas en la torre de Babel: La novela argentina entre 1982 y 1992*. Santos Dumont: Letra Buena, 1994.

The enterprise of establishing a critical discourse on recent literary history — that is, on living authors, and works about which little has

been written — is one of the hardest challenges a critic can face. Particularly in times of transition such as the end of the millennium, when the collapse of military dictatorships in Latin America has produced a new artistic climate and ambiguous new fictional forms, the attempt to make a first sketch, a first map of the territory, is fraught with risk for the critic. The other option calls seductively: that of treating a canonical author; nothing easier, for instance, than electing to write a new book on Cortázar if one is a student of Argentine literature. Yet that is not the route that Carmen Perilli chooses in *Las ratas en la torre de Babel: La novela argentina entre 1982 y 1992*.

Perhaps it is because of the risks involved that Ms. Perilli approaches her subject with such a forbidding array of critical theory. She often refers to the works in question only obliquely, preferring to speak of them theoretically in terms of the themes and patterns they exemplify as a group. It is as though, by presenting her observations in a salad of irreproachable theoretical concepts, she can forestall the rebuttals that an early critical assessment inevitably generates. In the first section of the book especially, in which she places the work of Andrés Rivera, Osvaldo Soriano, Tomás Eloy Martínez, Juan Martini, Tununa Mercado, Antonio Marimón, Ricardo Piglia, Jorge Asís and a whole gamut of others within Argentine literary history, and then goes on to identify the main postmodern characteristics of their collective project, Perilli expounds her theoretical framework almost to the exclusion of any mention of works or authors. She remedies this to some extent in the two remaining sections where she address the novels of Juan Martini and Andrés Rivera, two literary practitioners who “nos servirán para ilustrar dos extremos de un amplio arco de novelistas” (58).

The first part of the book contains valuable observations despite its

overly general quality. In Perilli's hands, for instance, the literary history of Argentina (presented in chapters one and two) takes on a new vitality and a conceptual unity sure to prove useful to future scholars. Then too, among quotidian critical concepts like the dichotomy between *letra* and *cuero* — basic equivalents to *civilización* and *barbarie* — we find a chapter naming *lo siniestro* as “el efecto central del discurso narrativo de la última década” (47). This intriguing notion, which derives from Kant and from Freud, finds fertile ground in contemporary Argentina with its heritage of the Dirty War — a society in which, the author insists, politics takes on the tinge of irreality. *Lo siniestro* exists on the frontier between reality and irreality, life and death. It comprises that part of the familiar which is strange or other. Our reaction is one of revulsion. Through *lo siniestro*, fiction can express all that which is or has been officially repressed — “las imágenes nucleares del discurso cultural son las de la degradación y la muerte. Lo excremental está omnipresente...” (51). *Lo siniestro* constitutes a key technique through which contemporary fiction gives voice to the forced silences of recent history.

Perilli deserves applause for the honesty and the objectivity with which she treats her themes. Though an academic at an Argentine university, she never falls into literary patriotism. For example, she admits with utter objectivity, neither condemning nor praising but simply identifying a truth, that Argentine literary discourse “niega cualquier parecido con el resto de la producción literaria de América, negación que es una marca nítida de nuestra cultura. Se trata de una producción enclavada en el sistema central que ignora la periferia” (37).

In the remaining two sections of the book she applies her theoretical and historical constructions to *La vida entera*, *Composición de lugar*, *El*

fantasma imperfecto, *La construcción del héroe*, and *El enigma de la realidad* of Juan Martini, and to *En esta dulce tierra, La revolución es un sueño eterno*, *El amigo de Baudelaire*, and *La Sierva* of Andrés Rivera. These chapters contain textual analyses bound to be of interest to anyone studying the works in question. Perilli's arguments tend at once to draw heavily on the ideas she outlines at the beginning of her study and to support these ideas through example. Within a single work, as within the body of novels in general, she concentrates on broad thematic questions, leaving aside more local considerations of language, character, and plot. Unfortunately her prose style here does not become less abstract than in the first part, and the references she makes to the texts themselves, while perfectly suited to her arguments, are more scarce than one would like.

In the novel of the eighties, as opposed to that of the boom, "no existe el gran relato, las totalidades se han fracturado" (31). In a certain sense *Las ratas* is a "gran relato" of exactly the kind that, according to Perilli, Argentine novelists have ceased to produce. In it she draws the characteristics of the novel in Argentina as the military dictatorship was ending with broad theoretical strokes. She constructs, a scant few years later, an overarching structure into which we can place any fiction of the period. We must admire her for this despite the book's faults. It is a courageous sally into untrodden territory, and in the end a useful initial attempt to map the literary landscape of the 80s and early 90s.

—Kent Dickson
University of California, Los Angeles