

**Corral, Wilfrido H. *Cartografía occidental de la novela hispanoamericana*.  
Quito: Centro Cultural Benjamín Carrión, 2010. Print. 387pp.**

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Best known as one of the editors of *Theory's Empire* (2005), the widely reviewed and discussed “anti-theory” anthology, Wilfrido H. Corral provides us, in *Cartografía occidental de la novela hispanoamericana*, with an analysis of the development of the novel in Spanish America in the 20th century and in what has transpired of the 21st. While it gives the Boom its due—of the five chapters which comprise the book, two are dedicated to well-known literary stars of the 1960s—Corral’s study is wide-ranging chronologically and geographically. *Cartografía occidental de la novela hispanoamericana*, therefore, complements and contradicts some of the best-known surveys of the region’s novel, such as Gerald Martin’s *Journeys through the Labyrinth* (1989), which frequently view Spanish American narrative through Boom-centric glasses. Corral’s cartography of the novel also decenters the study of the region’s literature since, by including several texts from the Andean region, it gainsays the tendency of critics in the United States to focus primarily on Cuba, Mexico, or, occasionally, Argentina.

*Cartografía occidental de la novela hispanoamericana* begins with a brief “Preámbulo” subtitled “El culto y el club de la novela.” Here, in addition to introducing the chapters of the study, Corral presents what he considers are the main goals of the monograph: “precisar cómo cada novela o teoría del género analizados autoriza la trascendencia de sus límites . . . contestar la pregunta que despierta sospechas inmediatas: cómo puede haberse creído en ‘una’ teoría de la novela cuando no hay algo como ‘la’ novela . . . y considerando sus muy establecidas contribuciones ‘autóctonas’, confirmar cómo la novela hispanoamericana en verdad nunca se ha distanciado de la práctica o teoría occidental” (10-11).

This emphasis on the Western character of the Spanish American novel, while, perhaps shocking to European and US readers enamored of the putative otherness of the magical realist texts produced in the region, is generally acknowledged throughout Latin America and clearly proven throughout the study. (However, this aspect of Corral’s argument would have been strengthened if he had tackled at greater length authors, like José María Arguedas or Luis de León, who wrote novels influenced by structures and myths of indigenous origins). Moreover, unlike foundational critics such as Roman Jakobson, who compared the possibility of a Vladimir Nabokov as a professor of literature to an elephant teaching zoology, Corral foregrounds throughout the study the opinions of writers as central to an understanding of the novel and its development. In fact, in the “Preámbulo” Corral notes: “Ya en un tercer siglo de la práctica hispanoamericana del género, los novelistas seguirán siendo el tribunal de primera instancia para entenderla, porque si en el diecinueve los novelistas ya eran capaces de saber lo que se podía hacer con la novela, ese no ha sido el caso con sus críticos” (13). Obviously, Corral’s privileging of practitioners over critics dovetails nicely with his well-known skepticism about the value of contemporary theory.

Given this stress on the relevance of criticism by practicing novelists—one must remember that Corral is also the co-editor of the anthology *Los novelistas como críticos* (1991)—it could come as a surprise that Corral’s first chapter is dedicated not to a writer but to a critic: Ángel Rama. However, according to Corral, “la novela fue el género en el que Rama

vació toda su pasión y conocimiento, dejando un legado que no se supera conceptualmente, aun ya entrado el siglo veintiuno” (31). In fact, for Corral, Rama’s centrality as a critic is due—in addition to the Uruguayan’s “passion and knowledge”—to his “preocupación . . . de volver inmediatamente a revalorizar la cultura literaria hispanoamericana (sin simplezas respecto a su 'dependencia' en Occidente)” (32). Rama was thus free of the “creciente dependencia de la crítica latinoamericanista en el ámbito estadounidense” (48). Unlike many of his Latin American contemporaries and successors, Rama was able to both evaluate and incorporate the latest theoretical innovations from Europe and the US into his interpretative enterprise without falling into the trap of uncritical dependence on intellectual fashions and whims. Although he does not analyze at length the relationship between Rama’s practice and his later studies, such as *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina* (1982)—Corral studies the relatively early text *Diez problemas para el novelista latinoamericano* (1964)—what is implicitly praised in the Uruguayan critic is his capacity to transculture into a Latin American context what today we would call “theory.” Corral makes this point clear, when, after surveying Georg Lukács’s analyses of the relationship between society and novel, and Rama’s takes on the topic, he notes that:

las teorizaciones posteriores de Bennett, Goldmann . . . , Macherey, Balibar, Vernier y Zima confieren al tratamiento del problema anterior una pátina reconocible al leerlo hoy, solo se lo puede ver así si uno concibe la teorización hispanoamericana como dependiente de la teoría occidental del género. Hemos observado que no es así para Rama, ya que había asimilado en su trabajo la teoría foránea anterior a 1964, y con ella logró crear un problema dentro de otro: ¿qué crítica copia o puede copiar a otra sin asimilarse? (78).

In the chapter on Rama, Corral provides us with a list of critics who have followed Rama’s example of dealing with theoretical issues from a Latin American perspective: “Carlos Rincón, [Alejandro] Losada, Antonio Cornejo Polar, Roberto Fernández Retamar, [Jorge] Ruffinelli y pocos otros” (47). For Corral, the only way for a Latin American to participate creatively in Western culture is by, at the same time, doing so from a regional cultural location. One must note here that if Rama is presented as the example of the Latin American critic capable of transculturating theory—and thus establishing regional and individual independence from “Theory’s Empire” without falling back into naïve or impressionistic readings—Corral’s own analyses achieve a similar balance. Thus, in addition to dealing with the critical writings of Latin American novelists and theorists, the list of Corral’s “First world” references is vast and frequently surprising: Foucault, Levinas, Barthes, Ahmad, Jameson, Etienne, Benjamin, Kristeva, Guattari and especially Said, whose writings are a significant influence on the reflections found in *Cartografía occidental de la novela hispanoamericana*, to mention perhaps those best known in the US academy.

The second chapter deals with the novels of two Ecuadorean modernists of the first half of the twentieth century: Pablo Palacio and Humberto Salvador. Although relatively little known outside his native country, Palacio has been rediscovered and incorporated into Ecuador’s canon, in part thanks to Corral (99). Salvador’s work, on the other hand, has remained marginalized, at least until very recently. (His most important novel, *En la ciudad he perdido una novela* [1930], was republished in Spain in 2009, with an epilogue by Corral). For Corral, the rediscovery of these (relatively) early novelists of the *vanguardia* is important because it raises the question of “¿Hasta cuándo consideraremos raros o precursores solo a

Macedonio, Felisberto Hernández, Julio Garmendia y tantos otros?” (100). Moreover, while Corral stresses the obvious fact that much of the critical establishment of the time resisted modernist innovations, he also uncovers a web of connections, for instance, linking Palacio with the *Boletín Titikaka*, the avant-garde journal published in Puno by Alejandro Peralta, another Andean *vanguardista*, which published a poetic review of the Ecuadorean’s novel, *Un hombre muerto a puntapiés* in 1927. The same year the better-known Cuban journal *Revista de Avance* also published a review of Palacio’s novel (119-20). Obviously, given the existence of this emergent *vanguardista* narrative, and of a network of little known but active and creative modernist writers and critics, the rise of the Boom in the 1960s no longer seems isolated. Instead, the Boom belongs to a continent-wide tradition that is both Western and Spanish American. As Corral notes: “La realidad de la novela de los años veinte a cuarenta en que enmarco a Palacio propone elementos de renovación que, con la concientización histórico-social, terminan por imponerse” (141).

Salvador shares many *vanguardista* traits with Palacio, best exemplified by *En la ciudad he perdido una novela* (1930), a work, again, misinterpreted and rejected by many of his contemporaries (103-07). But the author is also celebrated by Corral for his attempt to “abrir la cultura andina a su visión de la cultura freudiana” (143), to the point of writing a psychoanalytic study of human sexuality *Esquema sexual* (1934). Salvador’s combined concern with sexuality and psychoanalysis leads Corral to note that: “Salvador ofrece un modernismo accesible (sentido laxo) más cercano al de Manuel Puig y Pedro Lemebel que el de los afrancesados Sarduy y Copi, produciendo una visión americana más atractiva que la de sus colegas heterosexuales en un Occidente en el que se funciona con la lógica simple de que los novelistas ‘impuros’ producen creaciones insustanciales” (148). Novelists like Puig, who brought a Queer sensibility to the Boom in the 1960s, and Lemebel, who is doing the same in the context of contemporary narrative, are seen as belonging to a modern literary tradition which dates back at least to the 1930s and the writings of Salvador.

The following two chapters deal with three of the four writers generally acknowledged as constituting the core of the Boom (only Gabriel García Márquez is missing): Julio Cortázar, Mario Vargas Llosa and Carlos Fuentes. Corral describes Cortázar and Vargas Llosa as constituting “un binomio cultural parecido al de los novelistas Mailer y Vidal” (164). The intellectual opposition between both writers—which did not preclude personal sympathy—is heightened by their divergent political developments after the Padilla Affair (1971), in which, as is well-known, the Cuban poet Heberto Padilla was jailed by the island’s government for writing anti-revolutionary poetry. Cortázar continued supporting the Cuban Revolution and later the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, while Vargas Llosa evolved into a promoter of neoliberalism. Corral provides a lucid and exhaustive summary of their intellectual development and the manner in which their politics impinge in their fiction. (For instance, both Cortázar and Vargas Llosa would write novels explicitly dealing with would-be left-wing revolutionaries, *El libro de Manuel* [1973] and *Historia de Mayta* [1984], respectively). Given the novelists’ political coordinates, which, however, do not fully describe their political writings and actions, Corral notes that “siempre se lee a Vargas Llosa y Cortázar ‘desde’ su política, sin que a nadie se le ocurra comparar el valor de las teorías imperfectas pero factibles en literatura y política del argentino y el peruano” (181). Despite these political differences, manifested in their reception by Latin American readers as representatives of divergent and antagonistic political positions, “ambos intelectuales tuvieron que considerar que la presencia imprevisible y subjetiva del ‘pueblo’ en la historia es el mayor desafío confrontado por los prosistas en sus proyectos generalizadores” (191).

In this chapter, Corral compares Fuentes negatively with his Boom confreres:

“Fuentes sigue optando por clichés políticos y entusiasmos teóricos de ocasión” (181). However, in the following chapter, Corral presents a more sympathetic description of the Mexican writer’s continuous interest with theory and his need to participate in Mexican and international political debates, while still acknowledging the somewhat inconstant nature of his essayistic writing and public statements. After a lucid survey of Fuentes’s voluminous writing on the novel, Corral links the Mexican author’s appropriation of intellectual trends from structuralism to deconstruction to Said’s notion of “traveling theory.” According to Corral, Fuentes “globaliza de esa manera no solo los textos sino también lo que se podía o debía decir respecto a ellos desde una perspectiva claramente hispanoamericanizante” (249). Needless to say, despite his flirtation with whatever theory is fashionable in Europe and the US, this description of Fuentes reminds us of Rama and fulfills Corral’s belief in the necessity of simultaneous participation in Western and Spanish American culture, both seen as evolving rather than as essences. In particular, *Cartografía occidental de la novela hispanoamericana* celebrates Fuentes’s interest in the novelistic analyses of Mikhail Bakhtin, perhaps the most consistent theoretical influence on the Mexican novelist:

¿No es esto Bajtín para la historia de la crítica: un artefacto teórico empaquetado con cierto oportunismo para caminar sin rumbo alrededor del mundo? . . . El hecho es que la novela hispanoamericana que Fuentes siempre analiza es parte de una confluencia de voces paradójicas: la novela occidental (que coloniza) y la del «Tercer Mundo» (que jamás es unívoca, regionalista o monovalente). Este es el pasaporte o carné de identidad que le permite establecer su propio itinerario de viajes teóricos. (277)

In the final chapter of *Cartografía occidental de la novela hispanoamericana*, Corral presents a virtuoso reading of the history of the “total novel,” in its Vargas Llosian sense, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Due to its diachronic nature, this chapter is partly a recapitulation of the study, though now concentrating on a specific type of novel and the type of theory that corresponds to it. (One can remember that in an earlier passage quoted from *Cartografía occidental de la novela hispanoamericana*, Corral questioned the possibility of a general theory of the novel). Moreover, the issue of “totality,” so central to Lukács’s reflections on the novel and to the question of the relationship between the novel as representation and the society being represented, is a consistent thread through out Corral’s study. The great merit of this chapter is that it brings Vargas Llosa’s oft-dismissed concept of the “total novel” into contact with mainstream theories of the novel, and that it makes use of it to identify and classify a significant group of texts.

Following Robin William Fiddian, Corral defines “descriptiva y provisionalmente” the “total novel” as one that:

aspira a representar una realidad inagotable, y cultiva una gama de referencias enciclopédicas como medio para esa meta . . . se concibe como un sistema independiente o microcosmos de significación que acomoda la ambigüedad rutinariamente . . . se caracteriza por una fusión de perspectivas míticas e históricas, y por la transgresión de normas convencionales de economía narrativa. . . despliega una textura verbal que tiende a lo barroco y típicamente exhibe desbordes paradigmáticos del lenguaje. (311-12).

Among the total novels listed in the chapter are Salvador’s *En la ciudad he perdido una*

*novela*, José María Arguedas's *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* (1969), Ernesto Sábato's *Abbadón el exterminador* (1974), Juan Emar's *Umbral* (1996), Roberto Bolaño's *Los detectives salvajes* (1998) and *2666* (2004), and Miguel Gutiérrez's *La violencia del tiempo* (1991).

Frequently polemical—for instance, Ricardo Piglia is dismissed as providing “soluciones de los noventa para problemas novelísticos de los setenta” (348)—always lively and surprising, *Cartografía occidental de la novela hispanoamericana* is an invigorating read. Even if the study does not aim at presenting a broad survey of the region's novelistic production, the fact is that Corral exhibits an overwhelming erudition that gives the impression that he has read every Spanish American novel ever written. Moreover, this vast knowledge permits him to find connections not only among canonical and (not yet) canonical Latin American texts, or between an author's fictional and essayistic writings, but also among Latin American, US and European literary and cultural production. Furthermore, Corral exhibits an extraordinary equanimity when analyzing the region's political and literary polemics. Neither the radicalism of the 1960s and its defenders, such as Cortázar, Fernández Retamar or Mario Benedetti, nor the (economic) conservatism of the last two decades and its promoters, such as Vargas Llosa, are automatically dismissed or praised. On the contrary, their literary proposals and political contexts are evaluated and coolly analyzed. It is this combination of passion and erudition, of strongly held convictions and a clear analytical mind, that makes *Cartografía occidental de la novela hispanoamericana* into a major work and a pivotal contribution to our understanding of the Latin American novel of the last hundred years.