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Crónicas orientalistas y autorrealizadas: entrevistas con Jorge Luis Borges, Carlos Fuentes, Juan Goytisolo, Elena Poniatowska, Severo Sarduy y Mario Vargas Llosa by Julia A. Kushigian (review)

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These fascinating collection of interviews with canonical Hispanic authors is guided by two main orientations: Hispanic Orientalism (Borges, Goytisolo, and Sarduy) and the Latin American *Bildungsroman* (Fuentes, Poniatowska, Vargas Llosa). Julia Kushigian addresses the presence of these topics in several works by the authors, all the while asking provocative questions about different literary and cultural theories, their literary influences, writing process, creative inspiration, and literary goals. Although the interviews to Sarduy and Vargas Llosa had been published in *Vuelta* and *Hispanamérica*, the others were previously unpublished. The last section of the volume includes photographs of the authors taken by Kushigian and of letters. In the introduction, the author points out the difference between Edward Said's idea of Orientalism and her own interpretation of a very different and more benevolent and intimate Hispanic Orientalism, as explained both in her seminal 1991 study *Orientalism in the Hispanic Literary Tradition: In Dialogue with Borges, Paz, and Sarduy*, and in Goytisolo's introduction to the Spanish edition of *Orientalism*. Indeed, Kushigian defends the enlightening and transformative potential of multiple types of orientalist analyses though which centers of peripheries, or south-to-south peripheries, can have a fruitful dialogue.

Kushigian also looks at aspects dealing with archetypes, rites of passage, self-fulfillment and self-discovery, as reflected in the Latin American *Bildungsroman*. In her view, the Latin American *Bildungsroman* veers away from the classic *Bildungsroman*,

dislocating the typical biological and psychological phenomena by reflecting the political voice of marginal groups (women, homosexuals, transvestites) and the collective or national consciousness. In his interview, Fuentes declares that somehow every novel, including *Don Quixote*, is a Bildungsroman, because there is usually a process of formation and education of the characters, even if it is not a chronological process from childhood to old age. Likewise, Poniatowska explains her selection of Jesusa Palancares in *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío*, thus reclaiming for the Bildungsroman a rare abnegated, working class feminine voice of ambiguous sexuality. In turn, Vargas Llosa, in *La ciudad y los perros* and *El hablador*, recreates the social and collective character of the Bildungsroman to reflect, through a collective hero, the self-fulfillment process as a common social experience. In the case of Severo Sarduy, this same goal is attempted indirectly: with the goal of addressing Cuban national issues, he sets his postmodern novels in Asian settings, thus providing a south-to-south dialogue of cultures.

The opening interview with Sarduy, perhaps the most interesting one, reveals his impressive knowledge of literary and critical theories by thinkers such as Bakhtin, Lacan and Althusser, as well as his deep knowledge of Eastern religions and philosophies. The interview sheds light on the Cuban author's use of parody (Cuban *choteo*) and pastiche in his novels, as well as on Octavio Paz's influence on his own interpretations of "the Orient." It is also interesting to read Sarduy's confessions about his sexual life and his habit of conceiving himself as a duality, which prevents him from being able to eat or sleep by himself. Equally original is Kushigian's questionnaire in which Sarduy has to react quickly to certain words with other words.

The interview with Borges reveals that his interest in the Orient was born through his readings of *The Arabian Nights*. Curiously, when Kushigian asks Borges if he considers himself an orientalist, he answers that he does not know any Oriental language. He also points out the differences among Asians from different countries, but claims that, in general, they think in different ways than Westerners. Borges also states, often using English words, that “Western culture” is not entirely Western because the Bible comes from the Middle East. Finally, we learn that Borges never read his own writings and owned none of his books, and, shockingly, he claims not to know who Severo Sarduy is.

The interview with Goytisolo reveals how he learned to understand Spanish culture, particularly that of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, through his study of Arab language and culture. He also considers himself closer to Fuentes, Lezama Lima, Sarduy, and Cabrera Infante than to Spanish authors such as Cela or Delibes, who were more localist and focused exclusively on Spanish topics. Goytisolo also shows, in his answers, his awareness of Karl Marx’s Eurocentrism in their support to European and US imperialism.

It is also somewhat surprising to read that in 1991, Poniatowska has not read Isabel Allende’s 1982 *La casa de los espíritus*, yet later in the interview she claims that Allende and Luisa Valenzuela are creating strong female characters. Her interview reveals her interpretation of her own characters in relation with the Bildungsroman. In the following interview, Carlos Fuentes defines his novels *Las buenas conciencias* and *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* as a Bildungsromans. Then, he explains the influence of Pérez Galdós in his writing and how, in order to become a writer, he had to break up with his family and their social world. Along the way, he criticizes the hypocrisy and vulgarity of

the Mexican nouveau riche and upper classes. Closing the book, Vargas Llosa, in his interview, shares his view of the novel as a social, collective experience in which the author shows the functioning of a community. Typically, he adds, we find an individual confronting his own community. The Peruvian also expresses his preference for novels that give the illusion of self-sufficient objectivity, which seem self-generated. He also defines literature as the expression of human dissatisfaction. Vargas Llosa adds that although his works take place in Peru, they respond to universal experiences. He closes the interview by arguing the responsibility for the horrors of the conquest of the Americas has to be shared today by both Spaniards and Latin Americans: “Muchas veces esta crítica feroz a los españoles y a los portugueses es una coartada, una Cortina de humo para disimular la responsabilidad que cabe al mundo latinoamericano oficial frente a los problemas que viven nuestros países” (110).

Overall, the reader will find in this book not only Kushigian’s insightful and useful analysis of both Hispanic Orientalism and Hispanic Bildungsroman, but also the sometimes surprising revelations of six canonical Latin American authors who interpret their own works in dialogue with the critic. If I had to point out one potential flaw of the book is that perhaps the version of the self-reflective and dialogical Orientalism presented in the high art works of canonical authors, such as Borges, Paz, and Sarduy, may not necessarily be representative of Orientalism in the Hispanic worlds, as there are also numerous classic examples in our literature of the Orientalism depicted in Said’s classic 1978 text *Orientalism*.

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