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Editores



Capítulo 20

LOS MUNDOS DE ALFREDO BRYCE ECHENIQUE

Nuevos textos críticos



PONTIFICIA UNIVERSIDAD CATÓLICA DEL PERÚ / FONDO EDITORIAL 2004

Los mundos de Alfredo Bryce Echenique (nuevos textos críticos)

Primera edición: setiembre 1994

Segunda edición: enero 2004

Tiraje: 500 ejemplares

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ISBN: 9972-42-579-7
Hecho el Depósito Legal N° 1501052003-3008

Impreso en el Perú - Printed in Peru

Roll Over, Vargas Llosa

Ilán Stavans

Thirty years after its original explosion, the Latin American literary boom can now be seen in full scope, its legacy assessed. This most commercial phenomenon, in part the result of the hugely capable Spanish literary agent Carmen Balcells, has had far-reaching but sometimes troublesome echoes. While writers from countries like Argentina, Mexico and Colombia were for the first time read seriously and widely in Europe and the United States (Rubén Darío, the most celebrated late-nineteenth-century *Modernista* poet, remained applauded only in the Iberian Peninsula), the refreshingly baroque style and thirst for stereotypes that emerged south of the Rio Grande also reduced the region to a theater of exoticism and magic—a surreal Banana Republic. Tourists traveled deep into the Hispanic hemisphere in search of mythical coastal towns where beautiful women eat earth, a rain of butterflies descends at winter's end and every Gypsy is a prophet. What is really to be found, of course, is a tense present and a painful collective past.

In the years following World War II, the Old Continent was displaced as the center of highbrow culture and small, peripheral nations of the so-called Third World slowly became fountains of sparkling novelistic talent. If Musil, Kafka, Proust and Joyce had driven European literature in one direction to a claustrophobic dead end, the clique from Latin America, heavily influenced by Faulkner, Dos Passos and Hemingway, injected narrative with a new breath of life. Stationed in Paris, the capital of Hispanic art during the sixties, the boom bunch was then a male club (Isabel Allende crashed the gates with *The House of the Spirits*, but not until the early 1980s) enamored of Fidel Castro, who understood the role of literature as brother to politics: the writer as spokesman for the forgotten side of reality, as

rebel and entertainer. Decades later, little is left of that feverish spirit. Cortázar and Puig are dead; Fuentes and García Márquez have turned repetitive; Donoso is no longer in the spotlight; and Vargas Llosa is stewing after his short-lived career in presidential politics. Even masterful precursors such as Juan Rulfo and Miguel Angel Asturias are now sheer vapors. (Borges, of course, is an exception: He has been turned into a god).

The United States has limited patience for Hispanic letters, compared with its French, Italian and German counterparts, which emerge from geographically smaller habitats. There's a kind of literary I.N.S. that seems to establish quotas on how many south-of-the-border novels can be translated into English annually: around five at most, the vast majority of which have been secured by «boom» authors for the last three decades. (And with a new U.S.-Hispanic literature in the making, that number is likely to be reduced). A few exceptions aside, writers born in the fifties and sixties remain largely unattended, as if the region were artistically fixed in the amber of the golden generation that came before. What's worse, a handful of first-rate narrators, marginalized by the boom's ideological stand and lacking a showman's personality, were left behind. Such was the case with Fernando del Paso, a Mexican of Rabelaisian lineage whose 1975 masterpiece *Palinuro de México* awaits publication north of the Río Grande; Alvaro Mutis, a Colombian who, according to García Márquez, is «one of the greatest writers of our time» and whose tantalizing *Maqroll*, three novellas in a single volume, was finally made available last year; and Alfredo Bryce Echenique, a Peruvian whose heart most palpitate whenever somebody invokes the name of Vargas Llosa.

With a total of six novels to his credit, Alfredo Bryce Echenique is a master storyteller born in Lima in 1939 into an oligarchic family of Scottish descent. Hoping to become a prominent *littérateur*, he left Peru by steamer in 1964 after simultaneously receiving law and letters degrees (his thesis was on the function of Hemingway's dialogues), first enrolling in the Sorbonne, then moving to Italy, Greece and Germany before returning to France and settling in Montpellier, where for years he taught Latin American literature and civilization at the University Paul Valéry. Thus he shared the Parisian stage with the boom bunch without ever becoming a club member. While Vargas Llosa, immensely talented and energetic and only three years his senior, made his novelistic debut at the age of 27 with *La ciudad y los perros*, awarded the prestigious *Premio Biblioteca Breve* in Barcelona and translated into English in 1966 as *The Time of the Hero*, Bryce Echeni-

que was 31 when his first novel, *A World for Julius*, was published and became the recipient of Peru's top literary honor, the *Premio Nacional de Literatura*. But it has taken almost two dozen years for it to become available in the United States—too long for such an extraordinary book. Perhaps the delay can be explained by understanding the personalities of the writers: Bryce Echenique has little avowed interest in politics—he is an aesthete, not a polemicist.

The first novels of Vargas Llosa and Bryce Echenique, set in opposite neighborhoods; one aristocratic and the other lower-middle-class, are both about schooling and patriotism, about loss of innocence and the shaping of identity during childhood and adolescence. But an abyss lies between them: Vargas Llosa's deals with *machismo* in the now-infamous Leoncio Prado Military Academy, whereas Bryce Echenique's, seen through the eyes of an innocent boy, is about frivolity and excess among the very rich (a topic, by the way, dealt with in passing by Vargas Llosa in *Conversation in the Cathedral* and in more detail in *In Praise of the Stepmother*). Read together, they offer a fascinating mosaic of the tension in rigid Peruvian society.

An amalgam of featherbrained viewpoints, *A World for Julius*, in the tradition of Evelyn Waugh, is a semiautobiographical account of the inevitable decline of Lima's aristocracy in the forties and beyond, a bit over a decade after Augusto Bernardino Leguía's dictatorship promoted economic development by securing the interests of a wealthy minority and ignoring the Indian population. Indeed, this Proustian narrative is memorable less for its sophisticated structure and delicate sensibility—although at that level it is also enjoyable—than for what it chooses to ignore: Virtually no historical data are offered. Happiness inhabits a vacuum. Bryce Echenique's characters live in an oasis— isolated, uninvolved, unembarrassed and obnoxiously unaware of the tragic implications of their silence. Julius, the child protagonist whom we accompany from age 2 to his eleventh birthday party, is left behind with *cholo* servants in a huge mansion while his mother, Susan, and his stepfather, Juan Lucas, play golf and travel to Europe. The silhouette of a suffering Peru haunts the background: Dissatisfaction among *mestizos* is high; a radical reform party, founded in 1924, is gaining influence; the ground for the Maoist guerrilla movement Shining Path is laid down. Not coincidentally, the 1970 publication of *A World for Julius* took place just after a crucial *coup d'état* in which a military junta, after deposing Fernando Belaúnde Terry, a moderate reformer, instituted a program of social reconstruction and seized U.S.-owned companies as well as huge landholdings belonging to the oligarchy.

Divided into five chapters of about eighty-five pages each, Bryce Echenique's novel, wonderfully translated by Dick Gerdes, a specialist in Peruvian letters at the University of New Mexico, has affection, in short supply in Julius's universe, as its unifying *leitmotif*. Since Julius receives love only from the servants in charge of his education (nannies, gardeners, cooks, maids, etc.), he grows up angry and irritated at the way his parents mistreat the lower class and confused about what is expected of him.

The people around Julius are preoccupied solely with leisure and the possession of foreign goods. (Items from the United States are seen as enviable treasure, an unfortunate ailment afflicting the entire Latin American bourgeoisie.) When Cinthia, Julius's beloved sister, dies in a Boston hospital at the beginning of the novel, the family mourns her with yacht cruises and spending rampages. Later on, in a touching scene in the book's powerful second chapter, a group of construction workers ridicule, abuse and even put the protagonist's life in danger, a sign of barely repressed animosity among the poor—and a harbinger of the kind of hate that triggered Abimael Guzmán's Shining Path. At the center of *A World for Julius* is a mansion on luxurious Salaverry Avenue, right across from an old hippodrome. Houses, haunted and treacherous, are very much at the heart of modern Hispanic fiction, and while this one is meant to symbolize comfort and security, it is actually a cold, impersonal cell. To make matters worse, as the narrative develops and Julius becomes increasingly entangled in a labyrinthine universe of appearances and superficiality, leading toward psychological disaster, his parents (to whom money equals redemption) hire an architect to build an even more ostentatious palace.

Bryce Echenique doesn't see himself as a vociferous antigovernment activist, a flamboyant speaker of the truth. Unlike Vargas Llosa, his reading list would not include Sartre and Camus at the top, simply because in his eyes the writer should live in seclusion—a *voyeur* away from the mundane. Nevertheless, the impact of French culture on him has been tremendous. His complete baptized name is Alfredo Marcelo, after Marcel Proust, one of his mother's idols, whose influence is unquestionably felt throughout his work: The first chapter of *A World for Julius*, for instance, reads like an homage to Marcel's insatiable desire for his mother's goodnight kiss. The Proustian component is attenuated, though not erased, in the author's subsequent work. In more than one way, the character of Julius, reflecting Bryce Echenique's own difficult childhood, is a seed for his future protago-

nists, wealthy and disoriented architects and glitterati, alcoholic womanizers who waste their time wandering the globe—Peruvians who end up tourists in their native land.

Beyond the national borders, the current Peruvian novel is reduced to five names: The three other than Vargas Llosa and Bryce Echenique are the indigenists Manuel Scorza and José María Arguedas, both dead now, and Julio Ramón Ribeyro, whose *oeuvre* includes an interesting narrative about a native dictator. But Vargas Llosa, the only one with a huge following abroad, eclipses them all. Immortality in literature, of course, is a game of dice: Fortunes are turned upside down and artists once obscure become role models (the cases of Kafka and Zora Neale Hurston). Interestingly enough, Gregory Rabassa, the legendary translator of Cortázar's *Hopscotch* and other masterpieces and a professor at Queens College, not long ago referred to Bryce Echenique as «the best writer in Peru». Although the statement is obviously a personal attack against Vargas Llosa's merchandising ethos, he might be right (or at least, the other best). In any event, those interested in Latin American literature have before them a chance to open another window, one unfairly shut to U.S. readers until now.

[*The Nation*, February 22, 1993]