BOOK REVIEW

Monsiváis, Carlos. *Las esencias viajeras. Hacia una crónica cultural del Bicentenario de la Independencia.* Prólogo Antonio Saborit. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2012. 398 pp. Kindle file.

CARLOS Monsiváis's posthumously published *Las esencias viajeras*, a cultural history of the last two hundred years of Latin America, could be subtitled *Everything Monsiváis Knows,* or, *Cliffs Notes on the Author's Publishing Lifetime*. If one has read "All of Monsiváis," not far into this lengthy volume one will recognize the sum of this chronicler's career topics, and not a few of his previously published texts incorporated into the discourse. Carlos Monsiváis's latest book, written in the year before his death foretold of pulmonary fibrosis, will be most appreciated by readers wanting a (fairly) quick introduction to the whole of the author's works in a single volume. Those who have read *Aires de familia*, a 2000 essay on (mainly) Mexican and (sometimes) Latin American culture, may experience *déja vu* while reading *Esencias.*

That being said, few writers could produce in one book such an outpouring of knowledges on writers, their works, history, politics, society, culture, and trends, together with analysis. The last comes in spurts and is generally brief; exceptions are notable: extensive studies of Simón Bolívar, hero of Independence; Goethe, of great influence among Latin American authors; Buñuel's classic film *Los olvidados*; support for and refutation of Angel Ramas's *La ciudad letrada*. Toward the end of *Esencias*, an unexpected thought occurs (and I have been studying Monsiváis since 1990); authors, works, and transcendental events, those which command the writer's clearest signs of in-depth knowledge and nuanced understanding, do not pass the Seventies or, at most, the early Eighties, and, further, 80 percent of the analyses are of Mexican elements (just as with *Aires de familia*, which won the Anagrama Prize for Essay in 2000). Contemporary culture and politics are mentioned, named, perhaps briefly described; the same for most individuals and works outside of Mexico (there are exceptions).

The things Monsiváis *knows*, however, and, further, which ignite his passion, are among these: Juan Rulfo, Octavio Paz, César Vallejo, Pablo Neruda, Alfonso Reyes, Pedro Henríquez Ureña, José Carlos Mariátegui, Benito Juárez, Pancho Villa, José Martí, Augusto César Sandino, Salvador Allende, Gabriela Mistral, Rosario Castellanos. Representatives of the "sensibilidad feminina" (Monsiváis, ch. 25) include Alfonsina Storni, Juana de Ibarbourou, Delmira Agustini, Julia de Burgos, Victoria Ocampo, Gabriela Mistral, Rosario Castellanos, Alejandra Pizarnik (he mentions in one line Sor Juana as a humanist). One of the most in-depth –and compelling– analyses explains the importance to Latin America attitudes and practices derived from study of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, published a year before Rosario Castellanos completed her groundbreaking Master's thesis on women in Mexico (*Sobre cultura femenina*). Monsiváis mentions no theorists of feminism today, nor any of the qualifications that have successively redefined the concept and its praxis. He does say that of course many changes have taken place while the core of Beauvoir's pioneering work remains valid (ch. 25).

This work could fall under the rubric of "everything you ever wanted to know about Latin America: Just ask Monsiváis," but it is more helpful to think of it as organized around a number of important foci. The first I will say is secularization (laicization) and related themes: religion and anticlericalism. A principal concern of the Quaker chronicler throughout his 55-year career, the modern trait of a society evolving under a state separated from the Church (in the case of Mexico and Latin America, the Catholic Church) becomes the focus of many analyses. He stresses Juárez's anticlericalism, as well as that of José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi (early nineteenth century) and of Rubén Darío (late nineteenth, early twentieth). Much else about these authors and their works could be said; Monsiváis is compelled to emphasize their opposition to a state answering to the Church. He does this for many writers through his historical survey. Consider Ignacio Ramírez, beginning to make his impact on Mexican society in the mid-nineteenth century; as a publically avowed atheist, his poetry amid the vast production of poetry inspires the lay mentality by virtue of representing "el cultivo del Espíritu . . . *fuera* de los Templos" (ch. 7). Monsiváis briefly touches on other extra-Church pressures toward secularization: the sciences and the novel, steadily gaining popularity (readers) among the general populace.

A particular argument for laicism is his chapter 33, "De las variedades de la experiencia protestante." This discussion presents a stark view of the Mexican majority's condemnation of the religiously different and independent: the many Protestant sects who embrace the liberal point of view precisely because so many

of them are tortured, burned out of their homes, poisoned, driven from the country, hanged, and burned alive publically. Government officials, Church prelates, and Catholic citizens alike ignore what happens to non-Catholics; they certainly do not pursue those who kill, maim, and torture Protestants as criminals subject to state justice. "La marginalidad religiosa es todavía un continente inexplorado" (ch. 33). (See also chapter 3: "Iglesia y Estado: 'Entre Santa y Santo / pared de cal y canto'"), and chapter 7: "La secularización: de las ciudades de Dios a las aglomeraciones de hombres y, ampliación de género, de las mujeres").

Related to the issue of the Church and state is Monsiváis's fervid support of tolerance for difference, for independence of spirit and mind, for diversity of every kind. He speaks with a particular passion about the centuries-old racism practiced against Indians in Mexico. He includes a short demonstration of the same racist mentality displayed in Mexican movies of the twentieth century: "el indio no tiene remedio" (ch. 13).

There is method to his selection of topics. "El humanism en América Latina" (ch. 14) stresses the previously mentioned themes of laicism and social (in)equality and adds appreciation for classical languages and works, for a classical education and practicing of humanist values (what today is called the humanities). When he gets to Marxism, besides providing a bird's-eye view of organized socialism in Mexico and Cuba, he stresses the way public intellectuals throughout Latin America began to withdraw their support for Stalin and, later, Fidel Castro, because of the perceived inhumane treatment of populaces suffering under the dictates of a socialist tyrant (ch. 36). Under Marxism, humanism suffers a crisis; Monsiváis lists proofs of a society diminished, demoralized, and destroyed by the death of a humanistic outlook (ch. 16). The Latin language languishes and traditional studies are sidelined, replaced by evil (ch. 16).

Taken together, these and multiple other traits are collectively treated in chapter 2, at least part of which had been previously published under the same title: "¿Existe una cultura iberoamericana?" (*Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* 1994). There follows a disheartening litany of shared cultural traits in Latin America, among which figure internecine passions, ideologies, and wars that impede regional loyalty to a concept of América. Another list provides two centuries of national symbol creation in Mexico, Argentina, Peru, and Colombia. And there ends the book's explicit discussion of culture as a broad topic such as humanism, nationalism, and secularization.

This review is not complete without mention of *Esencias's* principal narrative mode. I refer to what I have always called the LIST, and which Severo Sarduy once called proliferation or enumeration. Theorists mention it as a

common feature of baroque and neobaroque discourse. Monsiváis's tendency to rely on the litany of elements to define an object, practice or attitude is documented. In the work before us now, the LIST, as well as innumerable series of three to five elements, is so ubiquitous as to provoke an impulse to count the number of them deployed. Some chapters have up to eleven; the average is five or six. I counted one hundred enumerations (not counting series). Their presence in the narrative is so overwhelming that one conclusion is inevitable: lists of words and phrases substitute in immense measure for reasoned analyses.

The lists are accurate, suggestive, at times inspired. But their extreme frequency disrupts reading, not least because items in the lists seldom follow a coherent order: They introduce a measure of chaos into the discourse. Nonetheless, this is the chief method of providing information about everything in the book. List: formative elements in the last two centuries—Catholicism, dependency, federalism, dictatorships, failed democracies. List: foreign influences and cultural borrowings, from U.S. political ideas to European literatures, to Western ideologies such as communism and feminism. List: negative attributes of the United States in the nineteenth century. List: ways the U.S. connects Latin America with the world. List: synthesis of unfortunate ties between Mexico, Cuba, the United States. List: characteristics of nineteenth-century Latin America: customs are "la primera legislación social al alcance" (ch. 2). Lists detailing characteristics of Marxism, humanism, Protestantism, authors who narrate the city, political liberalism, the evils Juárez overcame to secularize Mexico, ways to laicize Mexico, and so on for every single topic covered in the book's 40 chapters. (Forgive the lists; making them is contagious.)

The *Esencias* of the title are "*viajeras*" because they go back and forth in time and change as they travel. The volume's organization travels back and forth in time, as well. At times it is disconcerting to find oneself in the twentieth century while still contemplating Lizardi at the beginning of the nineteenth. And then to suddenly be wholly back in the nineteenth century. This time warp suggests an organization by idea rather than by chronological topic. The foci I have mentioned illustrate my point. Monsiváis's concern with the imperative of secularization, for example, causes him to speak of it with respect to people, works and events that pertain to that idea, no matter where they are placed on a time continuum. Monsiváis clearly had some messages to impart about Mexico and Latin America and, for him, principal historical figures and their cultural production were useful as symbols: symbols of heroism (essential), tyranny (all too long-lived in the region), etc. This is not an easy read; it requires considerable work on the part of the reader. But if that consumer is fairly new to Monsiváis, or

has experienced but a limited portion of his vast production until now, *Esencias viajeras* may be a solid introduction to Monsiváis's thinking and to an overview of Latin America.

I do not say Monsiváis's style of writing, for he is known as Mexico's foremost thinker and *chronicler*, and this book is decidedly not a chronicle. His characteristic humor is missing, but for one or two faint traces (he once throws in a quote from the Arcipreste de Hita, which I found hilarious—and impressive). His baroque, aphoristic discourse is watered down and all but erased by the plethora of lists. What *is* in evidence is a massive exercise in memory. During his life, Monsiváis was revered, almost, for the breadth and depth of his reading, his knowledge, his memory of names, titles, song lyrics, poetry . . . *Esencias* makes its many points in huge measure with the backing of poetry. The author constantly cites poems—often the entire poem over pages—to illustrate a point about humanism, secularization, nationalism, women's suffering, and *ad infinitum*. I've no doubt that much of the poetry he cites came straight from his prodigious memory. For Monsiváis, the poetic idiom is the truest indicator of humanism, of a secular cast of mind, of the individual weal celebrated with musical rhythm. If nothing else, *Esencias viajeras* is an anthology of 200 years of Latin American poetry.

Antonio Saborit, who wrote the prologue of this volume, calls it "el más trascendente de sus magisterios" (Prologue). He also mentions that Monsiváis wrote it as though with a sword hanging over his head, in a hurry to finish it because he knew he could not survive his illness much longer. Saborit stresses that Monsiváis always had trouble letting go of a text; he wanted to revise it, polish it, perfect it. Monsiváis himself said as much.

This is important to note in the context of this reading. *Esencias viajeras* is not polished, it is not perfect. Without providing a LIST of its little problems, ones that Monsiváis surely would have wanted to eliminate, I conclude simply that I find this to be a heartbreaking tour de force, a legacy Carlos Monsiváis was determined to bequeath his readers, his society, his world. We have it in our hands and appreciate the tremendous effort of mind, the great discipline of will, that it cost him to stay with it, day after day, as his death approached. Read it with this in mind. Cherish *Esencias viajeras* as the nomadic essence of Mexico's greatest chronicler and lover of humanistic thought.

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