

BOOK REVIEWS

Panorama literario de Cuba en nuestro siglo. By JUAN J. REMOS.
(La Habana: Cárdenas y Cía., 1942. Pp. 173.)

Well known in Cuba for his numerous didactic and oratorical works and for his studies in literary criticism, Professor Remos proposes to present in this little volume a panoramic view of Cuban literature in the twentieth century. In reality, a series of earlier studies by Dr. Remos has been collected to form a unified picture of literary production in Cuba during the last four decades.

In justice to the author, one must begin by recognizing the natural disadvantages inherent in works of this type: the requirements of synthesis and the difficulties implicit in any evaluation of the contemporary. Nonetheless—and allowing even for these difficulties—some critical observations about the work can be made. There is no need to exhaust the roster of authors in order to produce a panoramic study of a literary period. Enumeration always proves something of a hindrance in critical works, in which—even in the most concise accounts—there should always be a certain selectivity. But even though Dr. Remos delights in exhaustive enumerations of names and titles, he could have reduced his essentially critical and evaluative labors to the consideration of certain factors in the literary history of Cuba in the last forty years: the general historical development of the country, the literary tendencies, and the representative authors. Moreover, in this panorama proportional importance is not conceded to analysis of the interwoven circumstances which influence literary production: the historical evolution of the world, economics and culture, politics and social organization. And in the exposition as a whole, the representative authors frequently do not stand out in strong, clear relief, while secondary figures appear disproportionately important because of the use of adjectives which are too general and too benevolent. Even bearing in mind the fact that the historical development of oratory is being studied, it does not indicate a proper regard for relative proportions to dedicate extensive paragraphs to José Manuel Carbonell and José Manuel Cortina, and only a few lines to Enrique José Varona and Alfredo Zayas, who accordingly appear unduly overshadowed. Neither can authors of such diverse character and importance as Luis Felipe Rodríguez,

Ciro Espinosa, José Antonio Ramos, Carlos Montenegro or Enrique Labrador be accepted as equal in any strict appraisal. Authors so dissimilar require marked differentiation, which cannot be obtained with the use of analogous adjectives and with equal space in exposition. These and other examples prove a certain lack of proportion in the critical survey by Dr. Remos. This lack of proportion, if not justified, is at least explained in great measure by the author's generous concept of friendship and benevolence.

As for style, we can say that Juan J. Remos continues to be and to feel himself the son of his generation, that of the second decade of the century which was characterized by a certain pleasure in eloquence and lyricism. This frequently makes truly difficult the inescapable evaluative function of the critic. As any affirmation of this character must be founded on some concrete example—and of course only for this reason—we cite the following: some novelized narratives of Jesús Castellanos seem to the author to be “*jirones de una realidad desoladora; floraciones de la ciénaga inmunda, pestilente e insalubre*” (p. 14); Emilio Bobadilla is “*un satírico cauterizante*” (p. 71). The work would have gained much through the elimination of such vagueness and rhetoric, and through a better adjustment to critical method.

Finally it must be recognized that his panorama does not lead to generally unjust critical conclusions. Only occasionally does it approach such injustice, and by way of excessive benevolence, not through systematic intolerance and lack of conformity. There are very few cases of this sort, such as that of the excessively complimentary appreciation of the text on literature by Gayol Fernández. Purely didactic works of this type have their peculiar characteristics, difficulties, and public; they can be judged only by evaluating their clearness and the sober elegance of the exposition, the excellence of the method, and, above all, what might be called the “economy of words” which should be the essence of fine, clear, precise style—equidistant from poverty and extravagance—which is characteristic of these works of apparently so limited a critical and literary importance. But Dr. Remos appears to forget this orientation of criticism, and places the book of Gayol Fernández on a plane of outstanding and exclusive superiority which cannot be conceded to it without notable reservations. In short, it is a question of a case where benevolence for one leads to injustice for many, because, without failing to give due praise to Gayol's work, the author should have kept without serious unbalance the scale of values which comes from a serene study of that type of didactic literature in Cuba during recent years.

The future critical work of Dr. Remos would be greatly improved by acceptance of these suggestions, because they call attention to the only present obstacles to be surmounted before this well-known and productive author finally becomes the first great historian of Cuban literature in his generation.

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El paraíso en el Nuevo Mundo. Comentario apologético, historia natural y peregrina de las Indias Occidentales de Tierra Firme del Mar Océano. Por el Lic. DON ANTONIO DE LEÓN PINELO. Publícalo RAÚL PORRAS BARRENECHEA. (Lima: Comité del IV Centenario del Descubrimiento del Amazonas, 1943. 2 vols. Vol. I. Pp. xlv, 396. Vol. II. Pp. 532. 5 illus.)

The term *baroque* is usually associated with the art, architecture and creative literature of the seventeenth century, and in the popular mind its chief characteristics are an exaggerated preoccupation with form and an extravagance of detail sometimes bordering on absurdity which practically converted the word into a synonym of "bad taste." It is not widely realized that this rococo tendency was not limited to the various forms of artistic expression but extended also to contemporary scholarship. The plethora of citations, the ponderous Latin and Greek quotations, and the pompous, turgid prose with which most of the learned treatises of the period were afflicted were all manifestations of the same intellectual disease; the extraordinary elaboration of detail and ostentatious display of pedantry likewise associated with these vices further betray the current esthetic influences of the time from which no one was wholly free. A classic example of this spectacular and hollow erudition is the enormous, two-volume compilation under review by the celebrated bibliographer of Portuguese Jewish extraction, Antonio de León Pinelo (1596-1660), who spent some eighteen years of his life in various parts of the Spanish Indies.

The works that he left in print stand as monuments to the zeal of a tireless bibliophile and to the meticulous research to which he devoted so much of his life, but they do not tell the whole story of his herculean efforts in these activities. Those writings of his which have remained in manuscript offer even more amazing indications of his inexhaustible patience and remarkable familiarity with the learning of his age, but they are scarcely flattering as examples of the discrimination and judgment that he exercised in the selection of important themes. None, perhaps, reveals more eloquently the misdirection of energies and the futility of contemporary scholastic learn-