

travesía crítica

Central America at the Forefront of the Avant-garde

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Méndez, Francisco Alejandro. *Hacia un nuevo canon de la vanguardia en América Central: Urdimbre de textos acromegálicos, invisibilizados por los discursos críticos*. Guatemala: Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes, Editorial Cultura, 2006. 146 pp.

While the difficulties of establishing Central American writers and works within the greater canon of Latin American literature is well-pronounced within the isthmus and largely overlooked outside of it, Francisco Alejandro Méndez's 2006 publication *Hacia un nuevo canon de la vanguardia en América Central* successfully demonstrates the value of revisionism with respect to the *vanguardia* in Latin America. As one of the leading critics writing from Central America today, and who has also published several works of narrative fiction and edited the volume *América Central en el ojo de sus propios críticos* (also published in 2006), Méndez's book explores the works of five Central American authors writing in the 1910s, 20s and 30s to establish three main points: that the *vanguardia* began at least a decade earlier than is indicated in most critical accounts, in 1915; that its origins are in fact to be located in Guatemala, and not in Nicaragua with the writings of José Coronel Urtecho; and, in a welcomed turn, that the movement is as strongly characterized in its prose production as in its poetry.

Méndez's choice of representative authors of the movement, Rubén Darío, Rafael Arévalo Martínez, Rogelio Sinán, Luis Cardoza y Aragón and Max Jiménez, does require some qualification, in particular in the case of Darío, though the works of both Arévalo Martínez and Jiménez potentially

work against his thesis depending upon where one's establishment of the canon is based. Méndez indicates, for example, that Arévalo Martínez's "El hombre que parecía un caballo," what he claims as the first vanguardist work in Central America, featured prominently in anthologies and critical studies during the first half of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, it has since suffered the same "invisibilization" as the remaining texts studied in the work, though the 1997 publication of the story in the "Colección Archivos," edited by renowned Guatemalan novelist and critic Dante Liano (who also writes the prologue to Méndez's work) might hopefully cement its status in the Latin American canon. Similarly, the exceptionally *avant-garde* works of Max Jiménez, though largely dismissed during the 1930s in Costa Rica, are now well-established in that country, yet still largely unknown outside of the isthmus.

Darío's inclusion in this study is qualified by Méndez both in terms of the insistence upon narrative works, and through the fact that the three stories interpreted here, "La larva," "Huitzilopochtli" and "Curiosidades literarias," in fact form "un puente entre el modernismo y la vanguardia," though this inevitably opens the book to the critique that it might derive additional benefit from a more consistent focus upon purely vanguardist works, as the establishment of the *vanguardia* from the tendencies of *modernismo* is well-understood (49). Méndez's focus upon the psycho-zoomorphism found in "La larva," for example, is likewise prominent in Arévalo Martínez's "El hombre que parecía un caballo," as well as in Max Jiménez's *El domador de pulgas*, and ultimately the inclusion of Darío's writings lends itself to somewhat of a tedium of repetition which characterizes the work's methodology. As Méndez indicates in his conclusion, "encontramos obras representativas que demuestran la presencia vanguardista en la mayoría de países de América Central," yet this cannot but lead to the question as to why so much focus was spent on an already canonized writer like Darío, whose writing does not fit into the canon of the *vanguardia*, when authors such as Salarrué, Flavio Herrera or Pablo Antonio Cuadra pass unnoticed in the Latin American canon despite their status in Central America (135).

Méndez's study does effectively draw points of comparison between the various works which his text illuminates, but opening the study to a larger body of work, even if only as a means of further opening the canon, would enable the book's thesis to further assert itself. The focus on Jiménez's work, for example, highlights the innovation found in *El domador de pulgas*, yet considering the limited quantity of Jiménez's literary production, anything more than passing reference to *El jaíl*, or "Unos fantoches," which Adrian Kane has recently demonstrated fits entirely within the canon of the *vanguardia* in Central America,¹ would provide the means through which Méndez's

study could enable greater access to such pioneering works in the context of Latin America. Curiously, this section of the book is spent largely drawing connections with British and German Romanticism and their connection to *Neue Sachlichkeit*, at which point factual inaccuracies and orthographic errors emerge throughout a discourse which adds little to the ultimate appraisal of Jiménez's work. Likewise, with Arévalo Martínez's exceptionally varied corpus, parallels between "El hombre que parecía un caballo" and his early autobiographical novel *Una vida* and the theater piece *Manuel Aldano*, which are largely contemporary with the short story and provide a larger foundation for the political which characterizes both the *vanguardia* and the "Generación del 20," would create a beneficial connection between the already canonical Miguel Ángel Asturias, and thus might open discussion to the disparities inherent in canon formation.

These critiques are not intended to draw undue attention from the book's merits, which are many, and Méndez is entirely correct in asserting that writers such as Rogelio Sinán, described by contemporary Panamanian novelist Gloria Guardia as "la figura más importante de la literatura de [Panamá]," or Luis Cardoza y Aragón (both of whose highly intertextual works "el sueño de serafín del carmen" and *Pequeña sinfonía del nuevo mundo*, respectively) fully merit inclusion in the canon of the *vanguardia* (74). Though the work's methodology is overly positivist, and thus lends itself to redundancy, Méndez maintains a critical focus throughout, and provides a very effective foundation of the nature of the *vanguardia* in Latin America as a whole and in Central America in particular. Despite the work's desire to further open the canon, his writing is never alarmist or overly insistent on the injustice of canonical exclusion (except, perhaps, in its subtitle), and should be recognized as one of the most significant works of Central American literary studies concerning the first half of the twentieth century.

NOTES

1. Kane, Adrian. "La estética subversiva de *Unos fantoches* de Max Jiménez." *XVI Congreso Internacional de Literatura Centroamericana*./Nicoya, Costa Rica. April 2008. Presentation.