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"God and Trujillo": Literary and Cultural Representations of the Dominican Dictator (review)

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Abstract

A large body of works on the Dominican dictator Rafael Leo´nidas Trujillo Molina (1891–1961) went largely unknown in its breadth and multiform complexity, at least outside certain literary circles, until the appearance of this significant 2005 study by Ignacio Lo´pez-Calvo. Lo´pez-Calvo describes the scope of his book in these terms: “Besides contributing to the rescue of the voices of numerous Dominican authors and testimonialists from oblivion, this study adds further insight into the lasting effects Trujillo’s ironclad rule had on the Dominican psyche, on the formation of the Dominican nation, and on the contemporary political arena” (xv). Such insights are substantiated by the book’s astounding catalog of atrocities committed under the aegis of the dictatorship, whose monstrous abuses were masked in general by the regime’s own “extreme style” but also justified, perhaps most notably, in the invocation of the providential principle “God and Trujillo” by “first courtesan” and heir to the Trujillist legacy, Joaquín Balaguer.

Disciplines

Latin American History | Latin American Languages and Societies | Latin American Literature

Comments

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oficiales y populares, que van en contra de los constantes intentos por parte de los estudiosos de representar la sociedad hispana de los siglos XVI y XVII como absolutamente represiva, en los que las relaciones sexuales y de otro tipo estaban completamente criminalizadas y en las que las mujeres sólo podían jugar el papel de víctimas pasivas.

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IGNACIO LÓPEZ-CALVO, *“God and Trujillo”: Literary and Cultural Representations of the Dominican Dictator*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2005. 256 pp.

A large body of works on the Dominican dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina (1891–1961) went largely unknown in its breadth and multiform complexity, at least outside certain literary circles, until the appearance of this significant 2005 study by Ignacio López-Calvo. López-Calvo describes the scope of his book in these terms: “Besides contributing to the rescue of the voices of numerous Dominican authors and testimonialists from oblivion, this study adds further insight into the lasting effects Trujillo’s ironclad rule had on the Dominican psyche, on the formation of the Dominican nation, and on the contemporary political arena” (xv). Such insights are substantiated by the book’s astounding catalog of atrocities committed under the aegis of the dictatorship, whose monstrous abuses were masked in general by the regime’s own “extreme style” but also justified, perhaps most notably, in the invocation of the providential principle “God and Trujillo” by “first courtesan” and heir to the Trujillist legacy, Joaquín Balaguer.

Indeed, what López-Calvo accomplishes here is a dynamic sort of x-ray (reminiscent in some ways of Martínez Estrada’s *Radiografía de la pampa*) of the authoritarian personality in and through the multiple dimensions of domination. Making this book a must-read for all concerned with the blight of dictatorship and its treatment in the *novela del dictador* is the thorough—one could say “horizontal”—approach taken by the author in his account of virtually every literary text having to do with the Trujillo dictatorship. As Gene H. Bell-Villada rightly notes in his foreword to the book, López-Calvo succeeds in providing necessary plot summaries “with skill and sensitivity” (xi). Not only plot summaries, but also an invaluable reconstruction of the contexts render understandable the sociopolitical critique that the author elaborates in masterful prose. The entire book constitutes a complex cautionary tale, grounded in a reading of some thirty-six narrative texts, which takes in the entire system of Trujillo’s hell and explains the ways in which

the dictator turned the whole Dominican Republic into his private corporation and the whole Dominican citizenry into his accomplices.

As the author states on the first page of his preface, he aims to fill a “surprising lacuna” in the critical study of the Trujillo narratives. In doing so, López-Calvo’s contribution not only supplies us with valuable insights into the mechanisms of the dictatorship but also validates the use of literature as a way of knowing and analyzing the inner workings of tyrannical rule and the wounded psyche of a people who most directly suffered its violence. Attentive to the conventions of the genre as well, López-Calvo appropriately places the narrative of the *trujillato* in the context of the Spanish American novel of the dictator, so as to elucidate the place of this body of works within a larger literary tradition.

This work of literary history is also a valuable political analysis: with recourse to the tools of criticism, it lays bare the monstrous Machiavellianism of Trujillo’s rule over all Dominicans in all its diabolical themes and variations. López-Calvo recalls the dictator’s ruse of ordering the execution of his adversaries but afterwards honoring the same victims and pledging justice against their assassins. He also tells of the corruption of the intellectuals, some of whom had long opposed the tyranny only to succumb finally to its blandishments or extortions. Additionally, he relates the dictator’s penchant for picking and choosing schoolgirls whom he forced or seduced into sexual submission, as in the well-known case of Lina Lovatón. López-Calvo’s study thus provides an etiology of subjugation under the shadow of Trujillo. Among the book’s signal achievements is an examination of the not widely read *The Era of Trujillo* (1956), written by the former Trujillo subordinate and later critic of the regime, Jesús Galíndez, who, working in self-imposed exile as a professor at Columbia University, was almost certainly abducted by Trujillo’s agents and returned to the Dominican Republic, where he was tortured and executed.

Serving as essential foundation to uninitiated readers and as valuable review for those more familiar with the subject matter, chapter 2 offers essential historical background to the Trujillo narratives, providing patient reconstructions of contexts that span from Trujillo’s beginnings as a member of the American-organized Guardia Civil to the dictator’s assassination, in 1961, by the disaffected officers who were his former followers. Broadening the context to render intelligible the literary dissections of dictatorship, chapter 3 makes comparisons between Gabriel García Márquez’s mythical treatment of the dictator, *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975), which draws in part from the profile of Trujillo in the creation of its composite archetypal dictator, and Mario Vargas Llosa’s more realist approach to the Dominican dictator in *The Feast of the Goat* (2000). Consideration of the despotic precedent of the conquistador and the workings of *continuismo* further develops the image of the tyrant in related reflections on Augusto Roa Bastos’s *I, the Supreme* (1974).

Chapter 4's treatment of "The Novel as History/Historical Documents as Fiction" goes far in answering key questions with regard to literary studies that address sociopolitical questions: to wit, what use is literature in a situation of crisis and urgency? Why study narrative fiction in a time when it is imperative to grasp the facts of the case? López-Calvo answers such questions in epistemological terms when he accounts for the at times imaginative treatment of Jesús Galíndez in Manuel Vázquez Montalbán's *Galíndez* (1990). This postmodern novel offers a referential narrative concerning Trujillo's victims, confronting the problematics of historiography through a foregrounding of narrative fragmentation (as collage and other "modalities of discourse" [63]) and the sometimes conflictive play of multiple perspectives while, at the same time, insisting upon an "ethics of political resistance" (61) that denounces the dictator's violations of human rights. It is, moreover, the "interplay of history and imagination" (138), and not history alone, that the text explores as it reveals the phenomenology of a life lived under tyranny. Imagination fills in the gaps left by historical documentation, supplementing their lacunae with its subjectivist element.

The author can thereby explore the literary psychopathology of the dictator's personality through imaginative reconstructions, explaining, through exegesis, how the dictator manifests the symptoms of one who is trapped in a destructive infantilism, an obsessive-compulsive compensating for feelings of inferiority or, possibly, covert homosexual tendencies. López-Calvo takes pains, at the same time, to make clear the distinction between authors' attempts at *understanding* the hidden demons of the dictator and the act of *sympathizing or identifying* with the same subject.

To López-Calvo's credit, too, is a close reading of Julia Álvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) in chapter 5, "Women, Class Resentments, and the Politics of Revenge." In treating together the themes of "the politics of revenge, the concept of 'private revolution,' and the struggle of the Dominican women against dictatorship" (xvii), the author evokes not only the masculinist violence of a regime that used rape and sexual humiliation as weapons of intimidation, but also the perhaps inadvertent complicity of the anti-Trujillist authors, who scarcely conceal a certain envy and admiration for the regime's assertion of male power, as evidenced in these authors' references to sexual conquests by Porifirio Rubirosa, Radamés Trujillo, and others. Of particular interest in this chapter are the discussion of the often personal, revenge-driven motivations of those who mount a resistance to the dictatorship, as well as the author's recognition of the limited feminist thinking on the part of the Mirabal Sisters even as they take active part in preparing an armed rebellion. While expressing such qualifications, however, López-Calvo's explication validates the feminine role in the revolution, as when the author quotes the

assertion of Álvarez's Minerva, uttered at the novel's beginning: "It's about time we women had a voice in running our country" (López-Calvo 91).

Admirable for its critical honesty, too, is the discussion of chapter 6, titled "The Ideologeme of the Leftist Militant and the Collapse of the Left." Here the author characterizes the formal deficiencies of the antihegemonic *testimonio* literature on the *trujillato* and the perhaps unreflectively racist overtones of statements embedded in such denunciations as that of Freddy Prestol Castillo's *El Masacre se pasa a pie* (1973). In another section of the chapter, one addressing the demythification of the militant in this genre, López-Calvo examines, through readings of novelistic and testimonial representations, the disorganization, and ideological naïveté, and just plain opportunism that characterized much of the revolutionary activity of the militants who participated in the anti-Trujillo struggle.

The book's seventh and concluding chapter deconstructs the grounding of the Trujillist discourse of power in "various nationalistic fabrications," in particular the regime's exploitation of a dominant interpretation of Dominican history that exalted the actions of Spanish and Indian forebears, recognizing them as members of the "national family" while in effect delegitimizing or altogether neutralizing the cultural presence of the African Dominican. Against this official version of national identity, an antihegemonic counterdiscourse has acknowledged the African dimension of the national patrimony, or, like the dominant discourse, recognized the Taíno as ancestor but practiced as well a sort of "strategic essentialism" that would view in the Spanish conquistador, the US Marines, and the dictator embodiments of an imperialistic other opposed to that which can be authentically construed as "Dominican."

López-Calvo's application of critical theory is as sparing as it is judicious. The author refers us to Antonio Gramsci's concept of the "organic intellectual" when discussing the complicity of the dictator's own stable of allied thinkers and writers, who included Manuel Arturo "Chilo" Peña Batlle and the literary critics Tartufo Martín Aybar and Pedro René Contín. López-Calvo invokes Harold Bloom's "revisionary ratios" in accounting for the way in which Mario Vargas Llosa "misreads" his predecessor, García Márquez, by supplying what the "strong novelist" has left out of the picture and thus performing a creative act of *Tessera*. Also invoked to good purpose are the insights of Plato, Harold Bloom, Ariel Dorfman, Paulo Freire, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Hélène Cixous, and Walter Benjamin, all of whose insights help to frame the informed exegeses of López-Calvo's study of literary and cultural representations. With theoretical sophistication combined with good attention to textual detail, López-Calvo renders intelligible the specific ways in which the fictional construct presents a simulacrum of reality while at the same time, by its distance and difference from that reality, producing an aesthetico-critical means of analyzing and interpreting it.

Having twice read the book, I remain impressed by the authority and knowledge with which the author handles his subject matter: there is no better study of the literary treatments of the *trujillato*. I also remain convinced that López-Calvo's account of "representations" of the dictator summons forth the best that literary criticism has to offer: namely, a careful explicative reading of texts that plays up their connection to sociohistorical realities while bringing to bear the critical truth-potential of fiction. López-Calvo's intertextual weaving of references to novel, testimonial, and historical reportage demonstrates the power of the literary simulacrum to deliver the form of a lived truth, of tyranny as experienced—inasmuch as this experience can be conveyed/reconstructed/evoked in and through the fact-based creations of verbal art. As a work of literary history and criticism, "*God and Trujillo*" delivers what no single novel or even historical account can render: a synoptic, analytical, and above all powerfully rememorative study of the Dominican dictator from the diverse perspectives of multiple representations. The deliverable outcome of this comprehensive yet detailed study of the representation of power, I would adduce, is to be found in the exposure of what López-Calvo calls the "hegemonic tactics" of authoritarian regimes and the strategies of global capitalism: such tactics have been laid bare, asserts the author, in the sinister apparatus of the Trujillo dictatorship. As López-Calvo remarks in his conclusion, the lessons to be learned in the case of Trujillo can be applied to the process of critiquing current and future despotisms and even the heartless predations of transnational corporations. *Sic semper tyrannis*, but also *Écrasez l'infame!*

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RAFAEL ALARCÓN SIERRA. *Juan Ramón Jiménez. Pasión perfecta*. Madrid. Espasa-Calpe, 2003. 305 pp.

Escribir sobre la vida de otra persona es tarea muy difícil, especialmente cuando se trata de compaginar el mundo exterior de los hechos con el interior de las motivaciones, deseos, frustraciones y logros. Si a esto se le añaden otros componentes, como son el hecho de que se trata de la vida de alguien muy conocido y excelso y de que esa persona no sólo dejó escritas varias autobiografías, sino que cuenta con otras tantas buenas biografías, la tarea es verdaderamente complicada. No obstante, Rafael Alarcón ha logrado lo increíble: escribir a estas alturas una biografía de Juan Ramón Jiménez que, tomando en cuenta la información habida y añadiendo otros datos nuevos que se conocen hoy sobre el poeta, formula la vida de éste partiendo ya de estos presupuestos. Por ende consigue darnos una visión