

Domínguez Michael A Defiant Voice In Mexican Literary Criticism

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Critics are like horseflies that prevent the horse from ploughing. The horse works, all its muscles drawn tight like the strings on a double bass and a fly settles on its flanks and tickles and buzzes... he has to twitch his skin and swish his tail. And what does the fly buzz about? It scarcely knows itself; simply because it is restless and wants to proclaim, "Look I am living on the Earth. See, I can buzz, too, buzz about anything."

Anton Chekhov in a letter to Maxim Gorky

This year, Christopher Domínguez Michael has won one of the most prestigious literary prizes in Mexico: the Xavier Villaurrutia Prize. Voted best book published in Mexico in 2004, Domínguez Michael's *Vida de Fray Servando* (The Life of Friar Servando) (Ediciones Era 2004) tells the story of Servando Teresa de Mier (1763-1827), a Mexican priest persecuted because of a sermon he delivered December 12, 1794, the day of the Virgin of Guadalupe. In this sermon, Servando expressed his doubts concerning the apparition of Mexico's patron saint. (According to tradition, she appeared before a Mexican Indian, Juan Diego, and told him to build a church dedicated to her on that very spot.) Servando's alternative version of the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe scandalized the Mexican Church after which he had to take refuge overseas, an experience that would change the destiny of the Mexican revolutionary independence process.

Christopher Domínguez Michael was born in Mexico City in 1962. He has published several books, including *Antología de la narrativa mexicana del siglo XX* (Anthology of Twentieth-Century Mexican Narrative) (1989 and 1991); *La utopía de la hospitalidad* (The Utopia of Hospitality) (1993); *Tiros en el concierto. Literatura mexicana del siglo V* (Shots at the Concert. Mexican Literature of the Fifth Century) (1997); *Servidumbre y grandeza de la vida literaria* (Servitude and Greatness in Literary Life) (1998); *La sabiduría sin promesa. Vida y letras del siglo XX* (Unpromising Wisdom. Life and Letters in the Twentieth Century) (2001); *Toda suerte de libros paganos* (All Kinds of Pagan Books) (2001); and, more recently, *Vida de Fray Servando* (The Life of Friar Servando) (2004).

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He is a columnist of the literary supplement *El Ángel* (The Angel) and of the literary magazine *Letras Libres* (Free Letters) His book *La sabiduría sin promesa* (Unpromising Wisdom) won the Guillermo Rousset Banda National Prize for Literary Essay and Political Criticism.

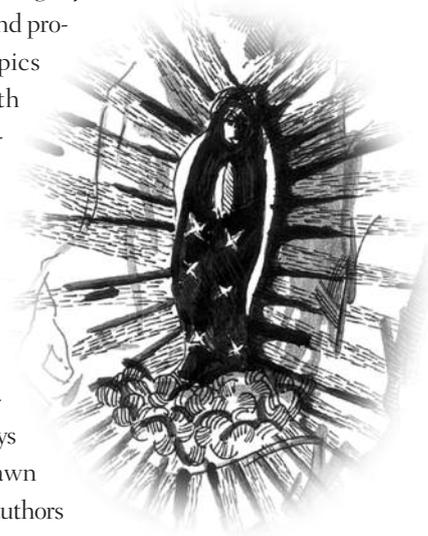
The fact that Domínguez Michael has won this year's Xavier Villaurrutia Prize should come as no surprise to those who have read his books and his columns in newspapers and magazines. He is an attentive reader, a critic with a pungent, biting style.

He writes extensively and profusely about many topics and authors, from both Western and Eastern traditions (something not that many of today's critics are wont to do).

His criticism moves swiftly from Beckett and Nabokov to Lukács and Walter Benjamin. Through his essays and articles he has drawn attention to important authors

not often read in Mexico (e.g. Rafael Cansinos-Asséns, Hermann Broch or Yasunari Kawabata). In recent years, when "terrorism" became a recurrent topic in the news and in politics, he was perhaps the only critic in Mexico who reminded us to read or re-read Dostoevsky's *The Devils*, a novel that skillfully explores that theme.

Often identified as a right-wing author, Domínguez Michael is not afraid to reaffirm his position as a critic of literature rather than politics. In one of his finest essays, *Hesse o la desaparición de los oráculos* (Hesse or the Disappearance of the Oracles) he explores the theme of "adolescence" as a poetical metaphor in the works of authors like Hermann Hesse or Goethe. His analysis of the "Bildungsroman" is refreshing and noteworthy. However, after discussing the great qualities of Goethe's



Drawings by
Héctor Ponce
de León

and Hesse's novels, he does not hesitate to declare that:

Goethe's endings are uncomfortable: Werther's narratively unconvincing suicide is the whim of an idiot (as Stendhal said) that stupefied thousands of young people; Faust's salvation, forgiven by God after making a pact with the Devil, has been interpreted as a metaphor for Nazism; and the conclusion of *The Apprenticeship of Wilhelm Meister* has a provincial, petit bourgeois reek.¹

On Harold Bloom's *Western Canon of Literature*, he remarked:

Bloom calls the Spanish critics who protested against the Black Legend that clouds the *Western Canon* a "pack of idiots". It is sad that Bloom, like so many British professors before him, believes that Cervantes is the be-all and end-all. I happily join the line of idiots: if Bloom can do without Quevedo and Góngora, Calderón and Lope, too bad for him. A canon is inconceivable without the Golden Century. And Shakespeare, whom Bloom sees as the one true God, is inconceivable without seventeenth-century Spain.²

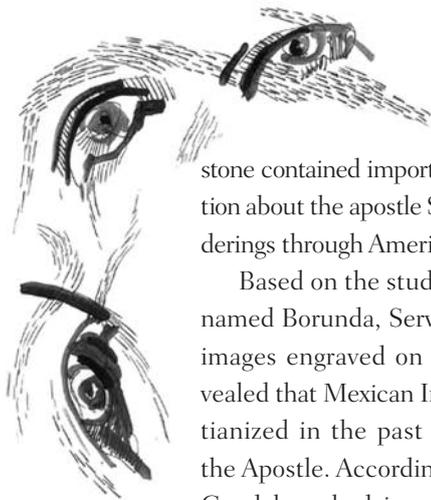
With all its passion and defiance, Domínguez Michael's style does not always steer clear of poetical exuberance: "I venerate Kafka as the Law and Proust as Literature, and all my intimate chorus of novelists as the music that sweetens (or dramatizes) my Sundays."³ Nevertheless, he is an author of admirable analogies. In his book *Tiros en el concierto* (Shots at the Concert), he follows the figures of Aeneas in the works of Alfonso Reyes, and of Ulysses in those of José Vasconcelos, with remarkable clarity. After identifying specific symbols in the works of different Mexican authors (e.g. José Vasconcelos, Alfonso Reyes and Martín Luis Guzmán), he plays with them using images that are both polysemic and accurate:

The Mexican Revolution brought a masterless, schoolroom classicism up against the firey test of historic violence. Vasconcelos, Reyes and Guzmán were already intellectually formed by 1910. Without the upheaval, it is possible to believe that they would have become petrified in academicism. But the fiesta of bullets and exile tempered them. The wrath of Mars turned them into Vulcan's goldsmiths. Prophetic exaggeration like Vasconcelos's can only be carried off by someone who, having freed himself from a storm, believes himself capable of provoking one and the other.⁴

As for Friar Servando, the main character of his most recent book, Domínguez Michael adopts a concise and beautiful style to remind us that "[he] believed in the wanderings of Saint Thomas the Apostle and, like him was incredulous, a traveler and prisoner. With a broken arm, he used his pen as his staff and preached the world over, learning to exorcise demons."⁵

In the 1790's, archaeologists digging under Mexico City's Plaza Mayor discovered the *Piedra del Sol* (better known as the Aztec Calendar). Friar Servando declared that this





stone contained important encrypted information about the apostle St. Thomas and his wanderings through America in the sixth century.

Based on the studies of an archaeologist named Borunda, Servando thought that the images engraved on the *Piedra del Sol* revealed that Mexican Indians had been Christianized in the past by the Saint Thomas the Apostle. According to him, the Virgin of Guadalupe had impressed her own image on St. Thomas's mantle. He had been worshipped as Quetzalcoatl (the Aztec divinity represented as a plumed serpent), while the Virgin of Guadalupe had been known as Tonantzin. That is what Servando said in his sermon of 1794. Why did it scandalize the prelates and particularly Archbishop Núñez de Haro?

Núñez de Haro read the December 12 sermon better than anyone. His was a prophetic reading, that of the genius of an imperial politician; he understood that the story of Thomas, the old criollo complaint, should be treated as a pernicious novelty because it came at the same time as the French Revolution. If the apostle had brought Christianity to the Indians, the archbishop reasoned, the Spanish presence would be unnecessary....The archbishop perceived the threat of independence and warned that history did not favor the Spaniards. On September 15, 1810, Father Hidalgo proved him right in the town of Dolores.⁶

In *Vida de Fray Servando* (The Life of Friar Servando), Domínguez Michael describes the history of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Mexico as seen by Servando Teresa de Mier. He follows the priest during his time in prison, and from Veracruz to London and Paris. He unmasks a Servando who tried to hide from posterity through his contradictory writings. He seems to have a conversation with Friar Servando and the reader at the same time and lets us witness those crucial moments of Mexican history when the

war of independence against Spain was inevitable.

Friar Servando is a polemical figure. He was one of the most influential men of nineteenth-century New Spain. Perhaps that is why Domínguez Michael, an agnostic who, paraphrasing Borges, has declared that he sees religion as fantastic literature, chose to write a book of 700 pages about him.

Vida de Fray Servando is an important work for various reasons. It is a great book for those who want to know more about nineteenth-century Mexican history. It is impressively well documented and written with such clarity and precision that it reminds us that any theme can be interesting when it is well presented. Finally, it is an important book within Domínguez Michael's own bibliography, because it reaffirms his universality, which rests not only on the diversity of the themes he writes about but also on the way he approaches those themes. Always looking at past and present, at Eastern and Western traditions as far as his eyes allow him, he does not care about borders in the vast world of literature. I like to think of him not as one of those horseflies Chekhov complained about, but as a plough horse, clearing his own path on solid ground. ■■

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NOTES

¹ Christopher Domínguez Michael, *La sabiduría sin promesa. Vidas y letras del siglo XX* (Mexico City: Joaquín Mortiz, 2001), pp. 97-98.

² *Ibid.*, p. 158.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁴ Christopher Domínguez Michael, *Tiros en el concierto. Literatura mexicana del siglo V* (Mexico City: Era, 1997), p. 440.

⁵ Christopher Domínguez Michael, *Vida de Fray Servando* (Mexico City: Era, 2004), p. 25.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 106.